

# The Man Comes Around

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It's Valentine's Day, 1990. Dick Stoll, last master distiller at Michter's distillery near Schaefferstown, Pa., protege of C. Everett Beam, and distiller of the now-vaunted A.H. Hirsch bourbon, receives a call from the bank that holds the note to the once-proud property. After years of mismanagement and financial impropriety under multiple owners, he is told to lock the doors for the last time...it's over, for good. On that cold February day, Dick Stoll is the last man standing at the last distillery in Pennsylvania. He is 57 years old.

With a family to provide for and not a lot to show for more than 25 years of hard work, Dick takes a construction job and later finds steady employment with the Lebanon County school district as a maintenance man. He eventually retires and takes pleasure in visiting other American distilleries with his wife Elaine, whom he'd met when she was a tour guide at Michter's.

There remain people who remember his accomplishments, and one of them eventually unites Dick with a young couple, Erik Wolfe and Avianna Ponzi Wolfe, who have their own vision: bringing whiskey distilling back to the Lebanon-Lancaster area. Together they set up a partnership, source and blend bourbon and rye whiskeys from other distilleries under their Stoll & Wolfe label, and put together plans to open a distillery in historic Lititz, Pa. with Dick at the controls.

In the meantime, in order to get their own product into the pipeline, they work with Thomas McKenzie of Craft Distillery Resources to identify a craft distiller with a column still (what they'll be installing in their own location) who is willing to do contract work for them.



After a bit of searching, Silverback distillery in Afton, Virginia, opened less than two years earlier by Christine and Denver Riggelman, is chosen and things begin to fall into place. Silverback is state-of-the-art for a craft

column operation and turns out to be the perfect partner for this endeavor. A mashbill of 60% rye, 30% corn, and 10% malt is formulated, cooperage is sourced, a date is set, and the deal is done. Just one more thing to do: make some whiskey.

About 1500 gallons of mash are cooked up a few days in advance, the yeast is pitched, and on March 21, 2016 the Stoll & Wolfe team heads to the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains to help their dream move one step closer to reality. Along with Silverback distiller Christine Riggelman and her able crew, Dick Stoll, now a vibrant and active 82 years young, is on hand to oversee distillation of the first batch of whiskey he's made in more than 30 years.

Around 9:30 a.m. the steam valve is opened, the pump is engaged, and the still is started. As the column fills with cascading rye whiskey mash, the thumper soon begins to bang away as it warms to the task at hand. Not long after, Dick is looking at new make of his own design pouring into the receiver at 140 proof. Samples are taken, proofed down, and passed around, and everyone is pleased with the result: a creamy, soft, rye-forward spirit that should, in time, age to meet expectations. Despite Stoll's extensive experience with the sour mash process, Stoll & Wolfe whiskey is being made entirely using sweet mash, a nod to eastern U.S. distilling tradition.

Though the shiny 12-inch diameter, 27-foot high Vendome still can't compare in size to the 60-inch, 72-foot tall copper behemoth Dick ran back in the day, he's obviously excited by what's going on all around him and asks and answers questions throughout the run. "We got 50 barrels in an eight-hour day back then," he says when he's told that today's run should net six or seven.

The limitations of the 12-inch column become apparent as the day progresses and everyone realizes that this batch will take at least ten hours to complete. The last of the run is left in the capable hands of Silverback operations manager Brad Bridge. The Stolls and Wolfes will return in the morning to barrel the whiskey.



At 10 a.m. on Tuesday everything is in place. The white dog has been proofed down to 109 for barrel entry (109 was the entry proof at his last distillery job, before cost cutting measures forced it to 115) and cooperage is lined up to be filled. Dick takes the faucet and fills the first barrel. He is asked how much head space he's used to leaving. "Just enough so that the end of your finger touches the whiskey," is his seat-of-the-pants reply.

He's then handed a dead-blow hammer and drives the bung home with the same solid delivery he'd applied as a much younger man. Satisfied, he poses with the first filled barrel of Stoll & Wolfe rye whiskey and smiles.

Life can be truly unpredictable, even unfathomable. When Dick locked up that now-demolished Pennsylvania distillery all those years ago, the whiskey business was in the doldrums worldwide, and at the time there was no end in sight. Distillers like Jimmy Russell and Parker Beam felt the hard times too, but working for well managed companies with deeper pockets they were able to weather the storm and stay in the business.



Life dealt Dick Stoll a different hand, but with the renaissance of American whiskey came new opportunities, and one of those just happened to have Dick's name engraved on it. Now, more than a quarter-century later, Dick Stoll is back in the whiskey business and happy as all hell to be part of it again. Welcome back, Dick. It's been a long time coming.

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## One Response to “The Man Comes Around”

1. *Ethan Smith* says:

[March 25, 2016 at 6:17 pm](#)

This is great to see. Erik, Avi, Dick, and Elaine are some of the nicest folks you'll meet. With the Stoll's expertise and the want to make a great product from the Wolfe's, I promise you that you'll see stellar whiskies flowing from them in a few short years.