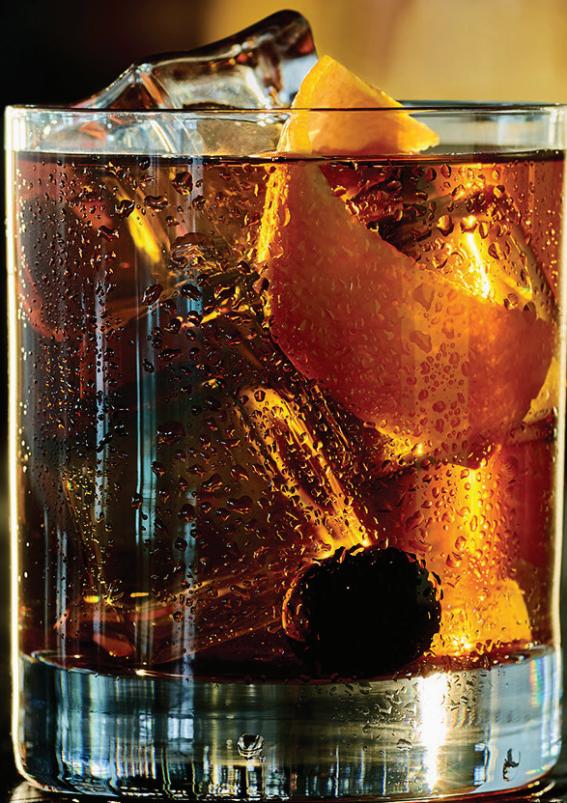


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## CLYDE MAY'S ALABAMA WHISKEY KEEPING IT REAL



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## GROWING CONECUH RIDGE WHISKEY CLYDE MAY'S FROM THE STILL UP

By Amanda Schuster

Since the American whiskey boom of the early 2000s, it can be tough to keep a brand afloat. Labels from the stalwarts compete for shelf space with renegade crafters, and the only way to distinguish a quality whiskey portfolio is with a good backstory attached to it. Not only must that tale be entertaining, but consumers have become awfully picky about these things - the story also must be based on the truth. In 2015 Roy Danis was brought on by Conecuh Ridge Whiskey to revive a struggling whiskey brand from Alabama -- Clyde May's.



Roy Danis, President and CEO

Years of experience and industry relationships through working with premium brands had prepared him for the job, yet there is still a considerable challenge in elevating a lesser known whiskey brand amongst so much competition. Now Clyde May's Original Alabama Style Whiskey, born of an illicit moonshining operation, is considered the fastest growing brand in the U.S. Nielsen top 100 American Whiskey brands, and there's more to come to delight existing fans and entice new ones.

Building a brand like Clyde May's is second nature to an entrepreneur like Danis who has been involved in the spirits business his entire adult life. "I started my career with Seagram and advanced through various sales, marketing and general management roles." From there, he earned his stripes at some of the top companies in the biz, eventually promoted to senior leadership positions - not only at Seagram, but also Diageo, Pernod, José Cuervo and Campari.

Like learning a new language, the best way to learn the business and gain fluency in brand management is by doing. "Through these experiences I have been intimately involved in numerous world class brands," says Danis. "You learn over the years what it takes to make a brand great and enduring." Taking the helm at Clyde May's brings all of this experience full circle. "I am trying to bring all my learning and experiences to my role as



Jay Liddell, VP, Sales - U.S.

CEO of Conecuh Brands to build an enduring brand in Clyde May's and to build a unique and exciting company."

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He has worked with some of the world's most famous and prestigious labels - one would wonder if taking on a little whiskey from Alabama is akin to "slumming it." Danis begs to differ, and says that the legacy behind the Clyde May's brand is what makes it such an attractive prospect. "I've always been interested in the stories behind brands. What is it that makes a brand unique? What is it that makes a brand authentic? I can't recall working on a brand with greater authenticity than Clyde May's."

### CLYDE MAY: THE MAN

To correctly tie the whiskey to the legend requires the right facts. Information about May's life took some digging to find, but his family was willing to share the story. Danis reveals, "We have learned so much about the man, through public records and through conversation with direct family members. I have personally spoken with several of his children, his grandchild [with the same name, Lewis Clyde May] currently works for us as the U.S. Brand Ambassador for Clyde May's." Luck would have it there are still people alive who can share first hand accounts and attest to May's character. "I even had an opportunity to meet and speak with their family attorney, who represented Clyde during some of his 'run-ins' with the law."

Another integral member of the Clyde May's brand building team is Jay Liddell, V.P of Sales. He is one of the founding Sales Leadership members and has seen the evolution of Clyde May's since starting with the company in 2013. Being eloquent in storytelling and having worked in previous marketing roles at Spirit companies including Remy Cointreau and Macallan, Liddell is passionate in bringing the Clyde May's story to life and engaging the trade on the brand's heritage and "Alabama Style" twist. "Clyde May's continues to grow at a tremendous pace not only due to the brand story, but also due to our ability to innovate and grow with the American whiskey category," says Liddell.



According to records and accounts, Clyde May was born in 1925 and raised by a single mother during the Great Depression, and there is no doubt his early experiences and hardships had a profound effect on his strength of character. He was a young man by the time World War II broke out, and he went on to serve in the Army's 77th Infantry Division. While commanding a 12-man rifle squad, he earned a Bronze Star and Purple Heart on the front line. "My colleagues and I so enjoy telling the story of Clyde May, his life, his experience of serving our country in WWII," Danis says.

Just after the War, May began producing moonshine in Alabama, for which it is said he used the best equipment he could get his hands on. He was apparently a stickler for purity, and was known for taking extra steps to ensure quality. The product was sold as unaged corn liquor, though some was also aged in charred oak for up to a year. He claimed the hot seasonal temperatures accelerated the aging process, comparing his younger whiskey to straight bourbon. The climate and its effects might well have had something to do with how much moonshine was produced in the state at the time.

Even though his whiskey was a success, May chose to operate outside the state whiskey laws, and eventually ended up serving an 8-month sentence at Maxwell Air Force Base. But the next still was set up soon after his release, and he kept at it until his death in 1990.

### CLYDE MAY'S GOES LEGIT

His son Kenny decided that the best way to honor his father would be to produce Clyde May's whiskey legally. The first batches were made at Kentucky Bourbon Distillers, using water from Conecuh Ridge Springs in Alabama, which, according to Danis, makes all the difference. "I know whiskey producers from certain states often talk about how their water makes better whiskey," he states. "If you ask the great people of Alabama, they will tell you their limestone fed streams are the best water for making whiskey."

In April of 2004, as a further celebration of his legacy, the Alabama Legislature named Conecuh Ridge Alabama Fine Whiskey as the official state spirit. "I guess in many ways, you can say the story of Clyde May is a uniquely American story," claims Danis. "It's the story about a man, who grew up in relative poverty and obscurity. He goes off to serve his country in WWII. He returns from the South Pacific with a Purple Heart and a Medal of Valor and starts moonshining to provide for his growing family. He builds a reputation in the South for producing the best whiskey in the entire area."

It's just a shame May passed without seeing the happy conclusion to his own story. "In the end he finally received the recognition he deserved. I know this makes his family quite proud," says Danis.

### A UNIQUE RECIPE

Aside from his coveted moonshine, May created his own widely popular recipe

for flavored whiskey. Danis explains what inspired the brand's Alabama Style Whiskey, which has a hint of apple flavor: "He literally pioneered infusing his whiskey with flavor by aging it in vats with baked apples in the bottom. According to his youngest son, Bill May, we learned that this process had as much to do with imbuing a certain color to his whiskey, as it did for adding some flavor - mellowing it out for a smoother taste."

It wasn't merely about tossing in some apples to cover up rough hooch, which was the case with most flavored whiskey back in the day. "His whiskey-making skills had gotten so good, that people were driving from all over to sample his product." By the time of his release from prison, there was no doubt what May's would go on to do. "His reputation for making the best whiskey had become legendary," says Danis. "So, he had little choice but to continue to moonshine to provide for his family. He did this right up to his death in 1990."

Liddell mentions bartenders are drawn to the brand story too. "Over the last four years that we have been positioning and presenting Clyde May's to bartenders the response always starts with 'what an incredible story!'" More importantly, the liquid becomes a draw. "As they discover May family photos and Clyde quotes on the bottles, most bartenders start to taste the pride of authorship and love the subtle hint of apple made famous in Clyde's proprietary finish. That grin on bartender's faces after they taste Clyde May's never gets old for us."

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Clyde May's Old Fashioned



Alabama Sour



Conecuh Ridge Cocktail



The Shandyman Cocktail

## CLYDE MAY STRAIGHT RYE

As a new extension for the brand portfolio, Clyde May's Straight Rye Whiskey was released on September 1. The latest innovation to the Clyde May's lineup is aged a minimum of 3 years, non-chill filtered and bottled at 47% ABV. Rye is all the rage in American whiskey, but it also has an authentic connection. "When Clyde was arrested for possession of moonshine, not only did he have barrels of moonshine in his truck, but he had several bushels of rye seed," reveals Danis. "We know through court documents, when asked what he was doing with all this rye in his truck, he raised the point that he was a 'farmer'. Well, we know now that he was making straight rye before it was even fashionable." Apparently rye was the only whiskey May produced for his own consumption.

Tying it all together, the bottle also pays tribute to May in its design, with a green and white label, which are apparently reminiscent of the colors used in his prison cell. Images of May and the Alabama courthouse where he was tried for bootlegging are also on the label.

## KEEPING IT REAL

While the whiskey is sourced for the

foreseeable future, there is a distillery in the works. At the end of the year, the company will break ground on the Clyde May Consumer Experiential Center in Troy, Alabama. "We picked Troy, due to its proximity to where Clyde lived and pursued his whiskey making craft," says Danis. For a brand born out of a moonshining business, the legitimate operation sounds quite modern and sophisticated, and there will be plenty of attractions to delight serious Clyde-heads. "This consumer experience center housed along the Conecuh Ridge of Alabama, will include a distillery, bottling facility, several rack houses, a retail store and café, along with a museum dedicated to all things 'Clyde'. We even intend to house the 'Clyde 240' - his original still, so named because it cost him \$240 to make."

## HERE TO STAY

The Clyde May's Alabama Whiskey line will continue its progression with various new offerings. For the holiday season, Danis reveals they will add a Cask Strength Straight Bourbon. It will be a 10-year- "young" Straight Bourbon bottled at a cask strength of 117 proof. "We are very excited to bring this product out, which will pair up nicely with our Cask Strength 'Alabama Style' Whiskey

product," he says. Of course the product will also be packaged to fit aspects of the Clyde May legend. "As you might be able to tell and in the spirit of Clyde, we are meticulous about our packaging. Our new Cask Bourbon is featured with a wood label, symbolic of Clyde's hiding of his whiskey in wood chips in the forests of Alabama."

So much American whiskey is based on thin origin stories, typically involving a crusty old grandpappy and the continuation of a "secret" family recipe. In most instances, it really is just that - a story. However, Danis feels a real connection to the Clyde May legend. "The making of any great brand must be based on truth," he says. Although he's moved around the block, he feels committed to continuing his work with the Clyde May brand. "It is sometimes an overwhelming responsibility I feel towards the May family to manage his legacy for what I hope will be generations to come." [www.clydemays.com](http://www.clydemays.com)

