



Joe Riggs Episode Transcript

Intro music plays.

Rashaun: Shot Caller is for mature audiences only. 21 and over. Please drink responsibly.

Welcome to Shot Caller, the premium podcast, with two parts booze, one part pop culture. Every other week we'll be bringing you a spirited conversation with bartenders, artists, influencers, and anyone else who loves a good cocktail. I'm your host Rashawn Hall, pop culture expert and cocktail connoisseur. Thanks to growing up in a dive bar in Jersey.

Lucinda: And I'm Lucinda Sterling. I'm a bartender and managing partner of Middle Branch in NYC. I'll be mixing it up with our guests and creating original cocktails for our Shot Caller fam. Stay tuned to the end of the episode for a one-of-a-kind recipe inspired by our guest.

R&L: Cheers!

Musical interlude

Rashaun: Lucinda, I feel like the one of the big trends, and it's ironic that I'm saying this as a person who has been drinking whiskey for years, is the love of American whiskey. Like after like everyone is into bourbons and ryes, and....

Lucinda: You know, this is really interesting actually when people come in, I first started working at Little Branch back in 2005 and this is before I knew anything about whiskeys and the various types, um, at the time it was about five different types of whiskey that we were serving and people would still come in and they'd say, well, I like, I like whiskey or I like bourbon. And I'm like wow, those are the same thing. Bourbon and whiskey are still whiskey, but they would separate the category of Scotch from Bourbon completely.

Rashaun: Right. Well, yeah. Again, I think it's just that misconception, even for me, I learned the difference between single malts and blends and I still, I feel like every time I talked to someone who's either a whiskey distiller, whether it's American whiskey or if it's Scotch or you know, an Irish whiskey distiller, there are so many complexities within each of those, their own categories that the information is just out there more. It seems endless and every distiller kind of

puts his or her own touch on it. Even you know, where they store barrels at a distillery can change the complexity of the exact same spirit that was put into two different barrels at the exact same time.

Lucinda: Yeah.

Rashaun: It is a nerdification of the highest level, which brings us to our, our, our guest today, who will, can talk far more intelligently than I can about all types of whiskey as he is a Kentucky native. He's a cocktail artist and he is an enthusiast of whiskey. He reps Redemption Whiskey, which we're going to try some of today and he's been one of the early supporters of our little show. So welcome to Shot Caller, Joe Riggs. Thank you for being here.

Joe: Thank you for having me.

Rashaun: So Joe, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Joe: Born and raised native Kentuckian, a member of the Kentucky Colonels Organization. Grandfather was a moonshiner bootlegger mom was a bartender, started working in bars and restaurants when I was 11. Rolling silverware for ten cents a roll. And, uh, pretty much never left hospitality, you know, I was born with that passion for whiskey and American whiskey and the culture behind it. So when I was bartending to go through school or pay my way through school, I was always a little more interested in the history and like what I was actually doing than the people around me. And I was able to grow into a position as the senior brand ambassador for a Deutsch Family Whiskeys with Redemption, Bib & Tucker and Masterson's Rye.

Rashaun: So let's talk a little bit more about what it was like having, you know, multi-generations in hospitality and in the bartending industry, um, obviously you had a real respect for the spirits. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Joe: Um, I mean, we'll, so every Christmas the tree was in front of a framed article from the *Springfield Gazette* about my grandfather's "discovery" by the local authority. So that story was always kind of brought up during Christmas or you know, and then there was always a bottle of whiskey, you know, around within reason and responsibly. But, um, it was always a part of holidays. And then, you know, mom worked three jobs so we could go to private schools. So we would have to go to the restaurant to see her and then I found a side hustle making ten cents a roll making silverware rolls for the servers. And uh, then my, you know, I just kinda stayed around just so I can be with mom. And then, um, I got to play with her recipe cards and I thought that was like the coolest rebellion little thing to do as a teenager and just like learn all these recipes. And then I had a head start when I started bartending so it took off pretty quick from there.

Rashaun: And growing up in Kentucky, obviously, that is American whiskey country. Tell us a little bit about what that kind of upbringing was like and how that influenced your, your drinking.

Joe: The influencing my drinking part is pretty obvious. American whiskey and bourbon particularly, but then also in Kentucky you have access to the smaller releases or production whiskeys that the big bourbon producers make, but they don't distribute as widely. So I actually got into some of the ryes and things very early in my drinking "career"

Rashaun: If it's a passion, it's a career. I like it.

Joe: Yeah, no, for sure. I definitely get paid to do stuff that I love. So it's, it's a great job.

Rashaun: So you started kind of working with your mom's recipes, tell me, what was the first cocktail that you made or perfected?

Joe: Perfected? I don't know that I've perfected any yet. Obviously the Old Fashioned, I've made more than any. You know, I worked in bars in downtown Louisville, so that was always a first order, you know, I want a bourbon Old Fashioned so I've probably spent the most time on that.

Rashaun: But you actually got your current role in a moment that your talk of whiskey and your love of whiskey is what landed you this role?

Joe: Yeah. So I was, I was at the Manhattan Cocktail Classic actually. And um, I was talking with the bartender and the bartender asked me what my favorite cocktail was and I said Whiskey neat. And he didn't care for that answer. I think he wanted a obscure classic of some sort or you know, paper plane or something like that. But, you know, whiskey neat is the most efficient way that I can sell something to my guests and then also have a story to tell and you know, there's history behind the bottle and you know, what it goes into it and the flavor profile. So you can create an experience without having the create a cocktail. But I also really do love cocktails as well. So the founder of Redemption heard me say that and recognized if I can make cocktails at the level that are needed for Manhattan Cocktail Classic but still advocate whiskey neat that I was the kind of person he would like to represent this brand of whiskey. So I started with Redemption in 2012.

Rashaun: So tell us a little bit about the cocktail competition circuit. You know, I've been to several cocktail competitions. It always amazes me the speed and accuracy that that goes into an experience like that.

Joe: It's been fun because I still am old enough that, well I guess I am old enough that I came from the world where bars didn't automatically have fresh juice to be a good bar. Like I was still advocating for fresh lemons when I started

bartending. So cocktail contests in general have come a long way from where I started and then you have stuff with speed rack and things like that that are a little more involved than they were when I started. You know, it used to be just the most flashy, colorful, whatever crowd pleaser cocktail, you know, egg whites always won sort of thing.

And now it's, you know, the judging is better. The people that are brought into judge and the structure of them is more thought out. So that has come a long way from when I was competing. But honestly the best advice I ever got about cocktail contests is that they don't. And I'll leave part of that out, but they don't matter. And not that they don't. And I know a lot of bartenders are gonna throw their hands in the air when they hear that. But it was actually Jimmy Meehan who told me that the most important thing in this industry is relationships and your relationship with your customer, but as well as your suppliers and distributors. And then if I nurtured those, I could grow in this industry and he's been right to this point.

Rashaun: So tell us a little bit more about or about Redemption and how it got started.

Joe: Uh, so it's actually a really fun story. I'm Dave Schmier and Michael Kanbar were in the industry already in different roles. Dave owned a naturally flavored vodka brand and had done marketing for some other large suppliers, and Michael owned a bottling facility and some brands of his own. And his bottling facility was in Kentucky. So David would meet him in Kentucky regularly and they wanted to start a whiskey brand. So they went to all of the distilleries in the area. And at first we were looking for single barrels or fun things that they could bring to market and they found this cache of rye whiskey at then LDI, Lawrenceburg Distillery Incorporated, and it was excellent whiskey. And so they created a blend of younger and older rye, started with three barrels and went to WSWA, a trade show in Vegas, but they couldn't afford a booth.

So they found a restaurant that wasn't open for lunch and they had distributors meet them at that restaurant. But the quality of the whiskey shined through. And I mean they started with a label they printed at Kinko's, like this was two guys who loved whiskey that wanted to bring it to market. And they did it. And as people were tasting the whiskey, I mean it was whiskey shots and handshakes. That's how they built the spring. But as people started tasting the whiskey, I'm. The demand grew. They started creating more and then they grew into bourbons and 2015 Deutsch Family bought it. And they have the resources to really get behind this whiskey and partner with MGP in a way that can be a much more significant presence and it's super exciting to be a part of.

Rashaun: You mentioned, you started with rye, which almost seems to be the opposite of what most small distilleries or most craft distilleries start with. They typically start with bourbon and go in the opposite direction. Why did the discovery of this rye that was the impetus or were they looking for rye?

Joe:

Well, there there's a, there's a couple reasons, A, to your point, it would be counterproductive to sales data to have started a rye brand at the time. It was a very small category. It was usually the dusty bottle in the back of a shelf somewhere that people knew about it, but they didn't really use it. Fortunately, Dave and Mike saw the evolution of the original recipe cocktail bar or a prohibition-era speakeasy style bars that were using original recipes and kind of inspired by what Dale did at Rainbow Room and they knew the history of rye was that it was the base for all these classic cocktails, that it was the No. 1 selling whiskey in America before prohibition, that George Washington made rye, but nobody was really advocating it. So they wanted to redeem the category. So thus Redemption Rye became what Redemption Rye is. They wanted to highlight the category and the flavor profile of a true rye with a high rye content. So they started with that and they started sharing the history of rye and sharing rye whiskey. And then it's grown exponentially every year and the category is now the fastest growing category in whiskey on percentage of base.

Musical intro.

Lucinda: So you're ready to make one of Shot Caller signature cocktails. But you don't have all of your ingredients.

Rashaun: Hmm, that reminds me I need a bottle of bourbon. Can I get a bottle from you?

Lucinda: No, I can't lend you one. I don't have any to spare, but you can get your own from our friends at Saucey. They'll deliver whatever spirits, beer, wine, or mixers you need directly to your door.

Rashaun: Well, that's rude. But you can go to Saucey.com. That's s-a-u-c-e-y, or download the Saucey app today in the app store on Google play.

Lucinda: Remember to use our special code ShotCaller. All one word.

R&L: Cheers.

Music fades.

Rashaun:

And uh, we're gonna be tasting some Redemption right here. And I know this is a podcast and you guys are listening so I'm, you know, I'm sorry, but you can hear us drink it and it's going to be delicious. So that will happen very shortly. Or you know, right now actually as is, Joe starts to pour.

So you know, there you go, we are tops are off. Bottle tops to be specific. You know, I think one of the unique things for me, and I think this is true in general with American whiskey, but I am a huge fan of, of Redemption, is that it has the ability to both, you know, you can drink it neat, you can drink it with ice or a little water or you can just go ahead and put it in a cocktail. Tell me a little bit

about the many different ways in which you can use it. Like the fact that you can put it in a great classic cocktail or you can just drink it.

Joe: So one of the great things about rye whiskey is that not only do you have that baking spice that everyone's really accustomed to, but you also have really bright fruit notes. So that's how it works in the Sazerac as a substitute for Cognac because you have that fruit in addition to the herbaceous. And so it pairs with the Peychaud's, but it also has its own inherent brightness that can complement those flavor profiles as well. So you have a very diverse range of notes that you can play with in rye whiskey and I would say even more complex than other styles of whiskey.

My favorite thing about Redemption as we say it, plays well with others. So you can do really refreshing, bright citrus sours. You can do bitter and stirred, you can do, you know, highballs and really come up with any kind of flavor combination you really want. So, um, I mean, my favorite cocktails are probably the Final Word which is a Green Chartreuse, Maraschino, lemon, rye cocktail. You know, in the summertime I want something bright and refreshing. Uh, obviously I have thing for Mint Juleps. Um, all of our whiskeys come off the still with the natural mint note. I think that the rye particular tastes like cherries and mint. But then the Old Fashioned is probably, at least in my opinion, the most important cocktail because it's one of the earliest cocktails. It's super simple, but it also is something that you can make your own very easily. So...

Rashaun: I not have not made it with rye. I think that is an interesting. We're going to taste a little bit of a Redemption Rye right here, so cheers.

Joe: Cheers.

This is what built the ship for Redemption. This is the rye whiskey. It's a blend of whiskies from two to six years old. Uh, they are about 150 barrels per batch. It's made from 95 percent rye, five percent barley. It's 92 proof. And um, flavor profile wise you're going to get a lot of cardamom, definitely mint and anise on the finish. I get a lot of cinnamon, nutmeg, traditional baking spices. But then you also get these nice red fruits, cherry and like a slight bit of raspberry and some things. So it makes it a great Blinker.

Rashaun: How does the average whiskey drinker, how do they, how do they get to a point where they just as eloquently as you did explain what they're tasting be? Beyond just saying, "It's good. I'll have another."

Joe: Drink often and responsibly in for 20-plus years. I didn't say how old I am here. So, no, I mean it's a combination of things. You know, I have an extensive library on cocktails and whiskey as well as personal experience. And then um, trial and error in a bar for 12 years of bartending will definitely make you become assimilated. But for the average person, I think, you know, just go drink with someone who knows more than you. It really depends on where they're coming from. Experience was like. Wine drinkers, I might have them start with cocktails,

with vermouth in it or other fortified wines and Amari so that they have familiarity with what they had had before. A chef is going to have obviously an advantage because every descriptor I said was food, you know, which is, you know, it's like, it's a good descriptor because that's the most common thing that we've all had his food. So yeah, I mean, it depends if a, obviously cocktails are a good place to start, particularly highballs and things of that nature because there's more dilution. So with dilution it's easier to identify flavor. Typically, when you're tasting whiskeys for quality, you'll actually prove them down to 40 proof, um, because it allows you to focus on the flavors and not necessarily the ethanol. Cocktails are going to be a better place to start to come into the category. And then when your palate has adjusted, you can start drinking higher proof things and you'll be able to speak to them more about their flavor and not just that it's hot, you know, because some whiskey drinkers that have been in my position can drink a higher proof whiskey than another and think that the lower proof whiskey is hotter because they're identifying different things. So it's um, trial and error.

Musical intro.

- Rashaun: Hey, are you listening to us on your commute, at the office or at the gym?
- Lucinda: Wherever you are, all this talk about cocktails probably has you thinking about having one.
- Rashaun: Well we've got you covered, thanks to our friends at Hooch, the app that gets you access to hundreds of bars and let you have a drink on them every day.
- Lucinda: And all of that for less than \$10 a month.
- Rashaun: That's right! Download Hooch today in the App Store or Google Play.
- Lucinda: And use our special code "ShotCaller" -- All one word.
- R&L: Cheers.

Music fades.

- Rashaun: So I know you are a big music fan. What do you, what are you listening to? Who do you listen to? What, you know, tell, tell us a little bit about what you do outside of all things whiskey.
- Joe: Pretty much all genres. The acts that I've seen the most. Umphrey's McGee out of Chicago, Indiana. It's like progressive rock jam metal sort of thing. I've seen them over 100 times.
- Rashaun: You were like a, almost a Phishhead for them.

Joe: Well I've, I've seen Phish several times too.

Rashaun: So, so, uh, any, any collaborations given your love of music? Have you looked to bring music into the Redemption family?

Joe: We have a house band in New Orleans for our Tales of the Cocktail events. So we've had the same Louisiana funk band that is from Baton Rouge every year. So that's probably the closest thing to a collaboration we have right now.

Rashaun: Do you ever get up, pick up the bass and jam out with them?

Joe: And the only time that I've sung at a whiskey thing, I sang Johnny Cash with the jug band at Maker's Mark distillery once, but... I was no official role or capacity at that time. *[laughs]*

Rashaun: Let's move on to another. What do we want to pour next?

Joe: So let's move up in proof. So we're actually go to a wheated bourbon. We're tasting a four-year bourbon made from 51% corn 45% wheat 4% barley at 96 proof. And for me, I get a lot of like candied spice, like candied ginger is probably the most prominent thing for me on this. Um, and then you do get some sweetness. But this is a big bold, spicy bourbon. Really Nice.

Rashaun: Oh yeah, that is... Yeah, you definitely get... You've seen the proof step up.

Joe: Yeah.

Rashaun: And I mean in the best possible way, but that is very bold flavor.

Joe: Yeah. I just, I love the, like really high spike in spice at the back of the palate. Like it comes in really clean and nice and elegant and then it wakes up and tells you it's there. *[laughs]* I mean the popularity of wheated whiskey right now, and wheated bourbon particularly, is higher than it's ever been I think or at least people were even paying attention.

Rashaun: And why do you, why do you think that is that you think it's just a matter of people looking for the next new unique thing or you know...

Joe: Um, there's a particular allocated whiskey with wheat in the mash bill that everyone is really after... *[laughs]*

Rashaun: Got it!

Joe: And the price on that has gone up significantly.

Rashaun: Yes, it has!

Joe: So, the hype around that brand has brought people to awareness that bourbon with wheat as a secondary grain is also excellent and should be sought out.

Rashaun: So to that end, let's start our third and our final

Joe: So this is the same rye mash bill – 95% 5% -- but this is at 10 years old. This is a nine barrel batch, so this one sits at 116.2 proof. So watch out for the .2. That's what will get you.

Rashaun: Understood.

Joe: So, we, we're fortunate to get some more mature barrels than what we typically use for the Redemption Rye blend. Or we had some barrels that we felt were special and decided that we should highlight them. Any of our barrel-proof or limited-run expressions are nine barrels or less per batch. Do you really have to pick individual barrels that can shine because it's such a small batch. Each one is more than 10% of the end product so you have to use really good barrels. And that doesn't mean that there are bad barrels, that just means that some just shine. Because if you put two barrels on the same shelf, in the same warehouse, filled on the same day from the same distillate, they're still not going to end up tasting the same because they're made of wood of different trees or they just aged differently. So the sugar content in each tree is not exactly the same, things like that. We've won six straight double golds in San Francisco with our barrel-proof series. But, uh yeah, we've had an incredible run with competitions so we've done that six times in a row which is really exciting.

Rashaun: And on that note, cheers to Redemption. Yeah, it's .2, got it. I mean it's lovely. I was ready for because you warned me.

Joe: You're welcome to take water with it. Um, these whiskeys come off the still at 135 proof. So they are fairly approachable even at high proof because they do have natural fats and oils congeners from the initial distill that make it through the process because we come off the still at a lower proof. So they were a little rounder than they would be if they were distilled higher and still at this, at this proof. Most people don't ask for water when they drink these. Even in 100, we have some that are 124 proof, but they're still quite approachable.

Rashaun: What do you think is next for rye? Where do you see rye going into next year?

Joe: I definitely think that Canada is going to have more of a presence and the perception of Canadian whiskey is changing. There's a lot of really good whiskey, Masterson's being one of them. So I think you'll see more Canadian ryes in a positive light, whereas some of the blends and things have earned a different reputation. American rye is going to continue to grow. I think you're just going to see more and more of it on cocktail menus. And then just mainstream placements, you know, it's not for cocktail bars anymore. Now the bar down the

street needs to have a rye. I've always told my, my superiors that I'll know I made it where I have a cocktail on a Chili's.

Rashaun: Goals.

Joe: Obviously we love cocktail bars and that's where we grew, you know, that's where we got our first footing was in bars that wanted to use high integrity spirits that it might not be the cheapest mark, but it's the best mark for price or the integrity of the brand was something that you wanted to bring into their concept. Now it's time for rye as a category to be in every bar on the street. So that's what I hope to see. Maybe not this year, but very soon.

Rashaun: And, and what's up next for Redemption?

Joe: The latest thing was the Ancients Collection, which were the 18 year rye, the 36 year old bourbon. The wheated line is going to continue and be a larger production in the future. Uh, we also have Tyler's Mistake which is going to be called that.

Rashaun: I don't even know what it is, it's just an amazing name.

Joe: Tyler was a forklift operator who moved barrels around particularly to places where we blended whiskey. [laughs]

Rashaun: Damn it, Tyler.

Joe: Well actually, no, thank you, Tyler, because the whiskey that came out, it was actually really good. It is a blend of rye and bourbon. I love that we're giving credence or like infamy to one of our guys who really helped make this happen and don't get a lot of public facing time. And it tastes good too.

Rashaun: Well Joe, thank you so much for coming out.

Joe: Thanks for having me.

Lucinda: I was thinking in the car about calling it Road to Redemption, but it seems like now that you've told me the story about the, the, uh, singing on stage, it's Redemption Song.

Joe: Yeah. I'm happy to be a part of a Bob Marley tribute. [laughs]

Lucinda: Okay. So we're going to start out with a couple of dashes of Angostura bitters and then half an ounce of Giffard Raspberry Liqueur, and then I'm adding a quarter of an ounce of Fernet. Fernet is pretty potent when you add it to cocktails. It goes a long way so you don't want to kill the Redemption – soft Redemption at that. And finally, two ounces of Redemption. And then I've got

some nice clear ice here for you and I'm stirring this with a Fernet stirring spoon. So this is an Old Fashioned-style kind of drink or some would argue..

Joe: Manhattan elevated?

Lucinda: Manhattan on the rocks just because it's rye. *[laughs]*

Joe: Or an Old Hat, that's an elevated Old Hat.

Lucinda: What'd you call me? *[laughs]* And then the final element here is a lemon twist. Just add a little brightness and a little oil for the aroma. And there you have it.

Joe: Awesome. Thank you.

Lucinda: Cheers. I didn't even try yet. So crossing my fingers and walking away.

Joe: That's blind faith right there. That is confidence in your craft. I like it. It's going to be perfect. I'm sure.

Lucinda: Better be.

Joe: Oh, that's very good. I was telling him in the interview is, you know, rye has these inherent like bright fruit notes and these herbaceous components too, so it's literally everything and baking spice. So it's literally everything we talked about in the interview in a glass. So very good.

CLOSING CRED:

Rashaun: Last call, everybody.

Lucinda: I'm Lucinda Sterling

Rashaun: And I'm Rashaun Hall. In the mortal words of Kanye West, "He's a toast to the assholes."

Lucinda: Thanks for listening! Our theme song is "You Know You Want To" by Dan Phillipson in our producer is Samira Tazari, the podcast is produced and distributed by Lantigua Williams & Co.

Rashaun: Big thanks to Middle Branch in New York City for letting us hang today and thank you for listening. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at @shotcallerpod and use #shotcallerpod to let us know what you want to hear coming up, what's shaking, what's stirred, what's twisted, anything and everything we want to hear about it. And make sure you subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes or Google Play.