

## BRIAN DIMARCO'S HARLEM STANDARD WHISKEY

BY LEXI WOLF



**“We’re trying to bring more than just, ‘Drink my whiskey.’ To me, it’s a lifestyle about contemplation. Maybe having a cigar or just sitting back and having a conversation, rather than just getting drunk.”**

### 100 YEARS AFTER THE START OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

“Imagine if *Ocean’s Eleven* and *American Gangster* had a baby.” That’s how Brian DiMarco conceptualizes Harlem Standard, his own whiskey brand and personal legacy project. Founded in 2020, Harlem Standard is shaking up the whiskey shelf at

your local liquor store with its high-quality ingredients, keen attention to detail, and homage to the rich history of Northern Manhattan. This endeavor started after almost 25 years in the food and beverage industry.

Growing up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., DiMarco always felt drawn to Manhattan when as a child he rode the train to Penn Station to meet his dad, who always used to tell his son that he’d be moving here someday. And in 1992 he did.

### FRENCH CULINARY INSTITUTE

During the period post 9/11, like many people, he began to reevaluate his life. He decided to leave behind his career in advertising, where he managed brands such as Panasonic and Canon. He enrolled at the French Culinary Institute (FCI) in Soho. There, he was mentored by titans of the industry, including Jacques Pépin. He even received a master’s certificate in bread making; however, DiMarco claims he hasn’t baked a single loaf since. Nonetheless, this experience sparked his passion for food.

### MOUNT OLYMPUS

After a year at the FCI, DiMarco went on to work at the pinnacle of the industry, or what he refers to as “the Mount Olympus of cooking.” At the time this was the Food Network, and he started with Emeril Lagasse as a chef for his various programs. “Everyone thought they were getting their own show, including me.” Although, technically, DiMarco did. “I pitched a show to a producer, and they ended up giving it to Tyler Florence. The premise was you would go into someone’s refrigerator and pantry and [make a meal] with whatever they had.” His once meager pitch, turned into two years and 65 episodes. “It was a good run,” he says.

### THE WINE BUG

During a break from his demanding taping schedule, DiMarco received a call from an old culinary-school friend who was the general manager at Sherry-Lehmann, a high-end wine shop on Park Avenue. “He said, ‘Come work at the shop, learn about wine, and be a salesperson.’ It didn’t pay very well, but I said, ‘Look, it’s not about the money. I just want to stay in the food and wine business. It’s in my blood now.’” During this period was when he truly caught the wine bug and reached the point of no return. “I went crazy. I became a bit of a savant on fine and rare wines,” he says.



From there, he started his own company, Barterhouse, an importer of wine and spirits, which he stuck with for 15 years. “I was traveling, doing exactly what I wanted. Going to Provence, finding someone who makes amazing rosé, importing it to the US, and trying to sell it,” he recalls. The only downside was his lack of ownership of the actual product. Cue Harlem Standard.

### STEEPED IN JAZZ

The idea came in 2018 and became a full-fledged business in early 2020. The launch conveniently landed a hundred years after the Harlem Renaissance era began. “We started the brand with this idea of steeping it in music, specifically in jazz. That music is really what inspires the brand,” he says. To reinforce this ideal, DiMarco even created a public Spotify playlist with over 24 hours’ worth of music featuring artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Bill Withers. “We’re trying to bring more than just, ‘Drink my whiskey,’” he explains. “To me, it’s a lifestyle about contemplation. Maybe having a cigar or just sitting back and having a conversation, rather than just getting drunk.”

Although the whiskey itself has the excellence to stand on its own, without any in-depth backstory or lifestyle concepts.

Over-proofed, unfiltered, and made with non-GMO corn from Indiana, Harlem Standard’s products “appeal to the whiskey nerd,” says DiMarco. DiMarco currently offers four spirits for both novices and expert whiskey lovers, and each is barreled in Kentucky, the home of bourbon and other whiskeys.

### THE HARLEM NAME

DiMarco is also conscious of the cultural implications of the Harlem name. “I think you need to be responsible and respectful. You need to show up, and not just appropriate a name.” Therefore, he made it his mission to have his brand become part of the neighborhood it is named after, which he achieved through community partnerships with institutions such as The Boys and Girls Club of Harlem, the National Jazz Museum, and The Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce. Some of the proceeds from their sales supported musicians who were unable to work. “I’m 50 going on 35,” he says. “We’ve done a lot, but I want to be able to say I did something good for the community.”

**Harlem Standard Whiskey**  
[harlemstandard.com](http://harlemstandard.com)