

BOURBON: THE NEW INTERNATIONAL STYLE



My father was a whiskey drinker. Dewar's. Once, when he came over to my house, he asked if I had any whiskey. I shrugged and told him I had some bourbon. He grimaced and said OK. I poured him a glass with some ice. I handed it to him and he took a tentative sip. He then winced as if he was in pain.

“This shit is so sweet,” he said, making a face that resembled a pained Lucille Ball. And that’s always been the complaint whiskey drinkers have about bourbon. Especially scotch guys. Bourbon is too sweet. A quintessential, American sugar bomb.

That is, until now.

THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE

In architecture, The International Style emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, and emphasized form and aesthetics more than the social aspects of the modern movement. The most common characteristics of International Style buildings are: rectilinear forms, light, taut plane surfaces that have been completely stripped of applied ornamentation and

decoration, open interior spaces, and a visually weightless quality engendered by the use of cantilever construction. Glass and steel, in combination with reinforced concrete, are the characteristic materials of construction.

Famous buildings exhibiting The International Style include New York's Seagram Tower, the United Nations, and Lever House; Boston's Prudential Tower; The Willis Tower (formerly The Sears Tower) in Chicago; and Westmount Square in Quebec.

By prioritizing form over function, the belief was that these buildings could fit any skyline, spreading sophistication and elegance all over the world

THE NEW BOURBON INTERNATIONAL STYLE

During a recent trip to Kentucky and Tennessee, I noticed that several phrases and words kept reoccurring when talking to master distillers. Words like brandy, cognac, stone fruit, and French oak.

These new bourbons tend to be finished (after they are first aged in charred, new American white oak barrels) in various toasts of French oak. This new style of bourbon tastes more like whiskey, brandy, or cognac, and eschews, however slightly, the sweeter profile bourbon is famous for. These bourbons play down the sweet caramel, brown sugar notes in popular American bourbon, and provide a dryer, more sophisticated finish.

Others are choosing port barrels to age their whiskeys. These barrels, as well as sherry barrels, also serve to dampen the famed sweetness.

Nino Marchetti, editor-in-chief of *The Whiskey Wash*, highlighted a number of bourbons made by small craft distilleries: Breckenridge Port Cask Finish, Litchfield Batchers Port Cask Finish, Big Bottom Distilling, Traverse City Distilling, and Luxco Blood Oak, to name a few. Jefferson's Reserve Groth Cask Finish is another solid member of this group.

"Wine cask finished whiskeys, as we've explored before, most commonly take the form of sherry cask aging. Beyond

sherry, one sees other fortified wine types as barrel choices, including Madeira and port. Regardless of the wine type, however, the barrels chosen for either exclusive or additional maturation retain elements of their former inhabitant, which can then be carried over to the new resident in smell, taste, and color,” wrote Marchetti.

That’s a nice, quirky trend when it’s in the craft distilling business. But what I observed goes far beyond that.

THE GREAT BRASS RING

For many whiskey makers, the great brass ring has always been the single malt whiskies of Scotland, those whiskies that are sought after by deep-pocketed collectors and aficionados. They command huge prices, and their availability is scarce in many cases.

Bourbon’s Achilles’ heel is that outside of a few major brands, it does not translate in foreign markets. Jack Daniel’s, which in truth is a Tennessee whiskey, and Jim Beam are the two most distributed American whiskeys, with a reach of approximately 160 countries. But bourbon is still a curiosity

outside the United States, and JD and JB are seen as iconic brands, rather than a category in a portfolio destined for other nations.

Stephen Kaufman wrote in *Dispatches Europe* magazine in 2016, “The United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria were the biggest markets [for bourbon]. France, Spain, and the Netherlands were significant. But, by-and-large, bourbon’s stratospheric growth remains an American phenomenon.” He later continued, “According to industry research firm IWSR, US sales of super-premium bourbons rose 28.8 percent from 2011 to 2015. Super-premium cognac sales increased only 9.5 percent during that same period. For some perspective, Euromonitor International found 2015 domestic retail bourbon sales were worth \$3.8 billion compared to \$1.3 billion worth of cognac. Bourbon sales rose 19.1 percent vs. 8.5 percent for cognac year-over-year growth.”

So, it would seem that the bourbon gods have it in their heads to create premium bourbons that can make the jump

to the international market, manufacturing a product that resembles the great Scottish whiskies



WHAT ARE THE TENETS OF THESE WHISKEYS?

1. They are a super premium expression/label and meant to be the equal of Johnnie Walker Blue, for example.
2. They tend to be older bourbons, aged a minimum of six to eight years.
3. They are not as sweet, possessing a muted caramel/ brown sugar palate and a less sweet finish.
4. They feature more wine wood: red wine, port wine, and sherry cask finishing.
5. They exhibit similar characteristics to scotch, brandy, or cognac.
6. They are perfectly positioned for an international market.
7. They feature more sophisticated and internationally appealing packaging.

8. They come from big producers, not small craft ones. Craft doesn't make it out of the country, and, in most cases, is ignored outside of its respective market.



WHAT ARE THE NEW INTERNATIONAL BOURBONS?

Maker's Mark 46, Angel's Envy, and Woodford Reserve Master's Collection are crafted to woo scotch drinkers and reflect a more international palate.

I am not suggesting that this is a coordinated effort. Nor has this been sudden. But it has gathered a noticeable momentum of its own.

Several of these taste like a cross between good cognac and a Scottish Highlands single malt. They are made to appeal to an export market. And they are intended to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the highest expressions of single malt and cognac.

In extensive meetings with master distillers Chris Morris of Woodford Reserve and Greg Davis of Maker's Mark, it was clear that the flavor profile of these bourbons was absolutely intentional. Though their designs on the international market were never made explicit, both men emphasized less

brown sugar, while playing up the cognac, brandy, and stone fruit notes.

The only reason I include Angel's Envy in this category is that their bourbons were made specifically for this purpose. Legendary master distiller Lincoln Henderson (whose shadow still looms large over the industry) established these criteria as the hallmarks of Angel's Envy when he came out of retirement and created the new brand with his son and grandsons. It may just prove to be his most lasting contribution.

Henderson and Morris worked together for many years at Woodford and experimented with various finishing techniques. Morris slyly hinted at the numerous single malt whiskey-like expressions that will come out of Woodford Reserve in the next two to three years, an insinuation sure to pique the interest of writers and enthusiasts.

There is no question that Woodford and Maker's Mark are the two bourbons best positioned to seize this brass ring. Morris is one of the legends of the bourbon industry, both the grand Southern man of manners (with a general's steely

gaze) and someone who presides over what can only be called the Augusta National of the Kentucky bourbon world.

Davis is more like a champion college football coach. He's a big man with a hardy laugh, a firm handshake, and a determined eye. Both men are not to be trifled with, and yet, both are incredibly friendly, as well as shrewd.

The most recent release from Morris's Woodford Reserve Master's Collection was finished in brandy barrels. And, as its own tasting notes reflect, "Finishing fully matured Woodford Reserve in these barrels does not add any new flavors to the whiskey, but instead accentuates Woodford Reserve's rich dried fruit and nut characteristics that come from our grain recipe and long fermentation process."

Maker's Mark 46 is an incredible dram that takes older bourbon and finishes it at cooler temperatures with French oak staves, so the whiskey only picks up the top char and not the notes from deep inside the wood. The barrel selecting program at Maker's Mark is a story for another time, but it's safe to say that Maker's is positioning itself for a big run at the premium shelf.



GINGERSNAP VERSUS NILLA WAFER

Most bourbon is made with a portion of rye. Many feel that the rye makes bourbon taste more like whiskey and balances out the sweetness of the corn. Others prefer wheated bourbon. It has a softer, smoother finish. When you're shopping or thinking of tasting the different kinds, think of rye as gingersnap and wheat as a Nilla Wafer.





WHEATED BOURBON

The largest portion of Kentucky's bourbon is made with the traditional mash of corn, barley, and rye. The barley acts as a natural enzyme that breaks down the corn and the rye, and lends its own whiskey notes, of course. Rye adds the ginger/black pepper finish that balances out the sweetness of the corn.

But there is another group known as wheated bourbons. The mash bill in these recipes is not unlike other bourbons. The proportions of corn and barley remain the same. But the rye is replaced with wheat. The wheat adds a softness to the whiskey, and the classic gingersnap finish is replaced with a smooth, vanilla ending. It is similar to the sensation one gets while eating a Nilla Wafer.

The most notable of the wheated bourbons are Pappy Van Winkle, Old Forester, and W.L. Weller. Larceny is another well-known wheated bourbon. Others include 1792 Sweet Wheat, Old Fitzgerald, and Rebel Yell 100. Fans of these whiskeys call these them “wheaters”.



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Interestingly, Maker's Mark is also a member of this group. Yet Maker's Mark uses a red winter wheat in its mash bill. As a result, the Maker's Mark is not as soft as the Weller. But it also does not have the bite of other bourbons. The red winter wheat allows Maker's Mark to find a middle ground, and separate itself from the pack.



DISTILLER IN THE RYE

Rye whiskey is currently undergoing a very solid revival in the United States. A small segment of the liquor market, it nevertheless is seeing rapid and significant growth. The revival actually started in the Northeast, where young craft distilleries such as Tuthilltown released a few small-batch ryes that were an instant hit with young mixologists and spirits writers. It even brought the classic Manhattan cocktail back into fashion. This new wave was not lost on the folks in Kentucky and Tennessee, where classic ryes had been made for generations. Rye whiskey production began to swell, and demand somehow remained ahead of it.

Rye whiskey traces its roots in America back to Pennsylvania and Maryland, where rye was one of the predominantly grown grains. In the late 1700s and early 1800s Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was the largest distiller of rye whiskey in the United States. Even George Washington made rye whiskey on his estate at Mount Vernon.

Rye went out of fashion during Prohibition and became scarce at the end of that period, and drinks like gin and

vodka and the martini had become popular. When American production resumed, a new generation of American drinkers fell in love with the only whiskies available – Canadian and Scotch. Rye was made, but was no longer in demand. A few labels hung on for dear life, like Overholt and Pikesville.

Sazerac Rye Whiskey symbolizes the tradition and history of New Orleans and America's obsession with the spirit. Sazerac dates back to the 1800s, around the time when saloons, veiled as coffeehouses, began lining the streets of New Orleans. It was at the Sazerac Coffee House on Royal Street where local patrons were served toddies made with rye whiskey and Peychaud's Bitters. The libation became known as the "Sazerac" and America's first branded cocktail was born.

Traditionally, rye has always been a part of the mash bills of some of Kentucky's and Tennessee's most popular brands. But of late, it's been a rising star on its own. Tennessee and Kentucky distillers cannot seem to keep rye whiskey on the shelves of America's liquor stores—or behind their own tasting bars.

To be labeled rye whiskey, the mash bill must be at least 51 percent rye. Supporting characters normally include corn and malted barley.

Dave Pickerell, former master distiller of Maker's Mark, and one of the best makers of rye in the world, said that there are two styles of rye whiskey: Monongahela and Baltimore. Monongahela-styled rye whiskey is made from a mash bill of 95 percent rye grain. Baltimore-styled rye whiskey is 51 percent rye (minimum) and a blend of other grains. The straight, 95 percent rye is a big, big whiskey with bold flavor and lots of spice. The Baltimore-styled ryes tend to be a bit smoother, but still have that pop of spice and pepper that rye drinkers look for.

Today, rye content is another marker of quality or flavor or both. Some distillers will stress the point that theirs is a high-rye bourbon (usually around 20 to 25 percent, though Old Dominic in Tennessee has a high-rye bourbon of 40 percent). Or that theirs is a high rye, usually meaning 80-95 percent.

From 2010 to 2015 rye demand grew slowly. However, rye went from zero-to-sixty in about a second flat between 2015 and 2020. And distillers raced to meet the demand. Bourbon drinkers who wanted a less sweet, punchier flavor embraced the gingersnap essence of the whiskey. Another harbinger was the rise of the Manhattan, which also came back into vogue in high-end cocktail lounges across the country. Suddenly, rye was everywhere.

There are several excellent eye-opening expressions that have been exotically finished. Woodford Reserve Barrel Finished Rye has been oaked with new barrels twice (the second being lightly charred and heavily toasted). Angel's Envy finishes their rye in rum casks. Kentucky Peerless did a collaboration project with Copper & Kings, finishing their high rye in C&K's absinthe barrels. Rabbit Hole finishes their rye in PX Sherry Casks. Minor Case Rye Whiskey also produces a Sherry Cask Finish that is notable.

For those that like their expressions pure, Russell's Reserve Single Barrel and Russel's Reserve Small Batch score high with most reviewers, Michter's Single Barrel Rye and

Jack Daniel's Single Barrel Rye are also popular. New Riff Kentucky Straight Rye with a mash bill of 95 percent rye is another list topper, as is Willett Estate Cask Stength 3YO.





GREAT RYES FROM KENTUCKY AND TENNESSEE:

Willet Straight Rye Whiskey

Woodford Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey

Michter's Barrel Strength Rye Whiskey

Kentucky Peerless Small Batch Rye Whiskey

Jack Daniel's Single Barrel Special Reserve Tennessee Rye Whiskey

Davidson Reserve Tennessee Straight Rye Whiskey

Russell's Reserve Kentucky Straight Rye Single Barrel

Thomas H. Handy Sazerac Rye Whiskey

Rabbit Hole Straight Rye Whiskey

Basil Hayden Dark Rye

George Dickel Chill Filtered Rye Whiskey

Leiper's Fork Straight Rye Whiskey

THREE GREAT WHITE RYE WHISKEYS

LEIPER'S FORK NATCHEZ TRACE WHITE RYE

WHISKEY Leiper's Fork Distillery makes a white rye whiskey. Suspicious at first? No kidding. But wow!

Something really, really different! Made from a mash bill of 70 percent rye, 22 percent corn, and 8 percent malted barley, this white whiskey features big notes of white pepper and spice, with a terrific nuttiness, and a hint of anise in its traditional gingersnap ending. This is a white rye to drink neat or with one ice cube. There is a lovely hint of petrol when you add a single ice cube, and the flavor is just so much more lovely. Terrific product!

JACK DANIEL'S UNAGED TENNESSEE RYE WHISKEY

This was a limited-edition whiskey — the first unaged whiskey in Jack Daniel's history, if recent memory is to be trusted. Spirits writer Gregg Jarahian said this on Eat.Drink.Repeat: "Jack Daniel's explains the Unaged Tennessee Rye as Jeff Arnett's exploration into the intriguing flavor drawn from premium rye. It's the first time since before Prohibition the Jack Daniel's Distillery has used a new grain recipe . . . The Unaged Rye grain bill is 70 percent rye, 18 percent corn, and 12 percent barley malt." The result? An incredibly well-rounded dram of unaged whiskey with huge

hints of spice, gingersnap, and white pepper, but with that classic Jack Daniel's smoothness. Amazing!

CORSAIR WRY MOON Corsair Distilling in Nashville is one of the most forward thinking craft distilleries in America. It makes its Wry Moon unaged Kentucky whiskey pot distilled with malted rye. And, of course, it makes it in very small batches. It uses its antique whiskey wash still to do it. This truly handmade whiskey starts off with lovely cereal notes, then features bursts of spice, and finishes with a classic pepper twang. Another incredible whiskey from some of the distilling world's most brilliant minds.





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HOW TO TASTE WHISKEY



You taste all whiskey the same way—bourbon, rye, Tennessee whiskey, moonshine, or just generic whiskey. It makes no difference. You might experience, smell, or taste different things. But the process is the same.

The first thing you need is the proper glass. If you ever see a real whiskey tasting glass, you'll think it has more in common with a champagne flute than the rocks glass you associate with whiskey. That's because to appreciate the nuance in a whiskey, you need a tasting vessel that focuses or funnels the bouquet, or aromas, in a manner that allows them to be appreciated. Is it necessary to have one of these glasses? No. But you might want to try using a smaller wine glass for tasting if you don't have one of these, instead of the lovely rocks glasses you have in your home bar or cupboard.

First, to taste whiskey, you only pour a small amount. It's not a drinking contest. We're savoring. One finger of whiskey—sideways, not downward!—is all you need.

SEE

Why do we look at whiskey? I'll tell you the same thing I tell

wine people. Have you ever eaten anything—a hamburger, a steak, or a lobster—without looking at it first? Isn't that an absolutely crucial part of the dining experience? When you are in a restaurant, and the waiter sets down a dish at a neighboring table, haven't you asked, "Hey, what's that?" with envy? How about when you watch your favorite food show on television and you start getting hungry? That's how important sight is when you are eating.

What are you looking for in whiskey? Color, clarity, and legs. Color can range anywhere from pale straw or pale gold to a burnt amber or brown sherry (especially in bourbon). Usually the older the whiskey, the darker the color, but that isn't always true. Bourbons tend to be the darkest. One also has to remember that caramel coloring is allowed to be added to whiskey to improve desirability. The younger ones usually have that to make them look like their older counterparts.

SWIRL

Adding oxygen to whiskey allows it to reach its full potential,

so you'll want to air it out a bit. You do this to accentuate the nose of the whiskey. This means you'll have to give your glass a swirl.

OK, next thing: don't spill the whiskey. If you try to fill the glass, you won't be able to swirl. It's a gentle swirl, not an Olympic event. The best way to learn to swirl is to leave the glass on the table and gently move the base of the glass in a small circular motion. The liquid will swirl easily. Two or three times usually does it. The idea is to coat the sides of the glass with whiskey. This does two things—it aerates the whiskey and it allows you to see the viscosity.

When the whiskey settles back down into the bowl of the glass, the sides of the glass will be coated with liquid. You will notice rivulets descending downward. These are known as legs. Legs are nothing more than a gauge of the whiskey's viscosity. Viscosity usually indicates glycine, sugar, and alcohol. The more pronounced the legs are, the bigger and chewier the whiskey you are about to sample.



SMELL

Ever walk into a house where someone has been cooking a pot roast for about an hour? Or making a big batch of spaghetti sauce (or gravy, whichever term you use)? Or baking brownies? Doesn't it just absolutely make you drool? How about when you walk into a barbecue joint? Or smell a sizzling steak? That's why we smell whiskey. Like any other tasting experience, smell is an important part.

The whiskey glasses of today intensify the sensation of smell by spiraling the aromas of the liquid up to the rim of the glass. What are we hoping to find when we smell? Good and bad things. For example, scents like ripe apples and pears, cereal, grass, wood, florals, smoke, and maple syrup are excellent smells to find in whiskeys. Mushrooms, dank basements, and dirty sweat socks are not good smells in any whiskey.

The vocabulary comes later, but don't be intimidated. It should be fun. It should be enjoyable.

Here's another way to understand how the whiskey glass

intensifies smell. Get a nice aromatic cheese and cut a cube. Throw it into an empty whiskey or wine glass. Put one hand over the top of the glass and keep it there while you swirl the glass with the other hand. Shake it up and down. Knock that cube around. Stop. Lift your hand off and smell what's in the glass. It's an amazing sensation. That will help you understand what the proper glass can do. That's the difference it can make.

SIP

When we say "sip," we mean sip. No gulps. The idea is to really try to taste the whiskey. What are we tasting for? There are several characteristics. The foremost among them is whether the whiskey is sweet or dry? Bourbons tend to be on the sweeter side. Single malts tend to be on the drier side. But there's no hard-and-fast rule. Is it harsh or smooth as you roll it around your mouth?

How intense is this whiskey experience? Soft, smooth, hard, harsh? Since whiskey is usually at 80 proof or higher, the finished product is about the alcohol as much as the



production and handling of the liquid. Did the distiller coddle the product? Nurture it? Or has it been pushed out the door way too early?

Some people like a bracing shot of whiskey. Others prefer a smoother experience.

What is the mouthfeel you are experiencing? What's the finish like? Is it spicy? Are you getting spices like pepper or fennel or clove or allspice at the end? Are you getting fruitcake or leather? Shortbread cookies or rubber? These are all flavors you might run into.

SAVOR

What do you taste?

Let the experience linger. Don't gulp and get ready for the next swig. Slow down. What are the flavors remaining in your mouth 15 to 30 seconds later? How about after 45 seconds? Does the flavor last? Does it disappear quickly? Is the lingering flavor attractive to you or not?

Just Add Water

Once your tasting experience is complete, now you need to repeat it. But this time you are going to add water. Yes! Just a little bit. This is what will open up the whiskey. It is akin to letting wine breathe, but even more so. With whiskey, we add water. Look, swirl, smell, sip, savor all over again now that there's a little water in it. In some cases it may remain very similar. Sometimes water makes a world of difference. What has it done to yours?

HOW MASTER DISTILLER DAVE PICKERELL NOSED A WHISKEY

I sat trying bourbons and whiskeys from around the world

with the late Dave Pickerell, master distiller and industry icon who passed away in 2018. Pickerell was the master distiller at Maker's Mark for 14 years, and skyrocketed to even greater fame with several craft distilleries—most notably Hillrock Estate and Whistle Pig. We were in a tasting room with a small group of people, and Dave had time to explain a great many things.

I watched intensely, to understand how such an accomplished master distiller noses a glass of whiskey.

“Never stick your nose directly into a glass of whiskey. The alcohol will burn your olfactory system,” he said. “First, hold the glass slightly away and breathe in through your mouth. You’ll be able to pick up a lot more.”

The former West Point chemistry professor (and graduate, who played offensive tackle back in the day) has nosed thousands of drams in his time and created some of the world’s best whiskeys. Here is how he explains the second crucial part of nosing: “Next, put the glass all the way to one side of your nose, and ‘roll’ or wave it slowly and completely to the other side of your nose. Slowly. Your

olfactory glands are not equal. They work differently, pick up or sense different things. So roll the glass from one side to the other. That way you have the best chance of picking up the nuances of the whiskey.”

SECRETS OF SIPPING WITH FREDDIE JOHNSON OF BUFFALO TRACE

There is nothing any whiskey aficionado would like more than to tour the Buffalo Trace Distillery with the distinguished Freddie Johnson. He is easily one of the most famous of the distillery’s employees, comes from one of bourbon’s most accomplished families, and is tour guide extraordinaire.

To Johnson, bourbon is not just a tug on a bottle of whiskey. He once told whiskey journalist Melissa Alexander, “For every day that we walk this earth, there will always be more barrels of bourbon being made. But friends and family will not always be nearby. So when you bring the bottle out, enjoy the moment, because that’s what bourbon is made for.”

Johnson explains that there are several secrets to tasting bourbon, especially high-proof, cask-strength bourbon.

“First, make sure you jostle a bottle of cask-strength bourbon before you pour it. There may be some sediment in the bottle. You want your guests to have some of that sediment. It is part of the whiskey, and should be something they experience. It is slight, and hard to see, but,” he insists, “it is often there. Especially expensive bourbons, which tend to sit for a long time on people’s bars without being touched. Just a gentle turn of the bottle, maybe tilting it sideways gently.

“First, take a very, very small sip of the whiskey. Let it sit on your tongue. Swish it around a touch. Now swallow. When you swallow the whiskey, do not inhale! Calmly

exhale. Let all that alcohol out before you breathe in. This does not only reduce the burn of whiskey, especially high-proof whiskey, but allows more air to get at the whiskey so you can taste it better.

“Now, take a small sip of water. Very small. Hold just the slightest bit of water on your tongue for a second. Just a good enough coating on your tongue to know it’s still wet. Then take another small sip of whiskey. Let that blend with the water on your tongue and swish it around. Swallow and exhale again.

“Now, you will truly taste the whiskey.”

This is how he tastes bourbon at Buffalo Trace.



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KENTUCKY CRAFT DISTILLING IN THE SHADOW OF BOURBON

By Richard Thomas

Despite Kentucky's standing as the home of bourbon, "America's native spirit," craft distilling, was not only born elsewhere, it took a long time to set down roots in the Bluegrass. The Barrel House Distillery and Corsair Artisan both started operations in 2008, with Corsair quickly carving out a place for itself with its wide-ranging experiments with smoked grains. Yet Corsair soon shifted most of its operation from Bowling Green to Nashville, Tennessee. In Lexington, The Barrel House went largely unnoticed, even among locals, overshadowed by Kentucky's

big distilleries.

Compared to states like Colorado, New York, and Texas, where the pioneering efforts of one or two startups led to plenty of media attention and a statewide explosion of small distilleries, Kentucky's follow-on starts in making spirits came much later. However late in coming, though, the state now has a vibrant craft sector, one in which each distillery has had to find its way in a state dominated by many of the country's largest whiskey makers.

Even today, with well over a thousand craft distilleries in operation in America, a new, small distillery often fires up its equipment in a place where lawmakers, regulators, and taxmen are still trying to figure out how to handle them, and local drinkers and tourists view them as at least a minor novelty. In Kentucky, a new distiller gets started in a setting that has hosted a spirits industry continuously since before Kentucky was a state, operating even during Prohibition. Conditions in the Bluegrass create a unique playing field for the craft sector, with circumstances that help, hinder, and

even exploit the business of making liquor in distinctively local ways.

The Dries Shall Tax Your Liquor

One of the peculiar contradictions of life in Kentucky is that it is home to most of America's big whiskey distilleries, an \$8.5 billion industry that employs 17,500 people, according to the Kentucky Distillers Association (KDA). Yet it is also a state that is full of people who believe that drinking booze is a sin and a source of yet more sin, and these people have made it a point to exploit the liquor business wherever they can't simply stamp it out.

Although only 20 counties in the Commonwealth are absolutely bone-dry, with old-school Prohibition in full effect, dozens of others have varying degrees of restriction on the sale of alcohol, to say nothing of its production. Even Louisville, the state's largest city and a town long associated with the triple vices of drinking, smoking, and betting on horses, had a dry district right up until January 2017.

Counties that ban or tightly restrict alcohol still benefit from the state taxes raised from their production and sale elsewhere, however, as most of those go into the state's General Fund. And with such a keen, some would say retributive, interest from so many across the state, those taxes are manifold.

If you make whiskey, as almost all craft distilleries in Bourbon Country do, there is the ad valorem tax, assessed on each and every full barrel of aged spirits kept in inventory, year after year. That tax is unique not just in America, but the world. Scotland, Ireland, Japan, and Canada don't have anything like it, nor does Tennessee. Only Kentucky has adopted this peculiar tax, and it makes aging a stock of brown spirits more expensive.

Many craft distilleries, such as Three Boys Farm Distillery outside Frankfort, count on retail sales out their door as a key source of revenue, and Kentucky levies an 11 percent alcohol tax on that, well above the general sales tax. Then there are excise taxes, fees, and all manner of devices designed to pry

cash out of those in the business of making and/ or selling liquor.

“Kentucky taxes are terrible,” says Jay Erisman, an executive at New Riff Distilling in Northern Kentucky and one-time writer for *Whisky Advocate*. “They are the second-highest in the nation. Only Alaska is worse. Alcohol is taxed at every level.”



University of Louisville economist Paul Coomes concurs; at least as far as distilled spirits are concerned, ranking Kentucky taxes as the second highest in America. While every small distiller in the nation faces the same federal tax burden, Kentucky craft distillers face a particularly odious situation. At 34.4 cents per dollar of output, the bourbon industry is the most taxed of all 536 officially defined industries in the state, according to the KDA.

After including federal taxes, “nearly 60 percent of every bottle goes to taxes and fees, with seven different taxes on bourbon,” says John Pogue, distiller at Old Pogue.

The best contrast is America’s other major whiskey state, Tennessee, which has lower taxes than Kentucky. It’s an ironic state of affairs when you consider that Tennessee passed statewide Prohibition in 1909, something Kentucky never did, and a decade before Prohibition went national. Yet Darek Bell, founder of Corsair Distillery (which to this day has a foot in both Kentucky and Tennessee), describes his

aggregate taxes as slightly below the national average of 54 percent of the value of the bottle.

Fire Safety

In most places, it is a novel experience to have a distillery cranking out high-proof alcohol, let alone put it in oak barrels and store it in a warehouse. Kentucky is one of the few states in the Union where that practice has been the norm for all of living memory. While your typical micro-distillery faces few, or even no, regulatory hurdles for storing its barrels full of brown liquor as it ages, Kentucky has plenty of them.

Fire safety is serious business, of course. One only needs to look at the inferno that consumed much of Heaven Hill's original Bardstown plant in 1996 to understand that. However, that infamous event also highlights what Kentucky's regulations regarding the safe storage of whiskey and other spirits in barrels are designed around: big distillers with hundreds of thousands of barrels stored in several

multistory rickhouses on a large piece of property.

Even among those Kentucky craft distilleries making whiskey, not all need to build rickhouses, and those that do are not erecting the seven-floor structures so familiar to the Kentucky landscape. Even so, requirements for fire suppression, spacing between buildings, spillage and run-off control, and a host of other issues are basically the same for one small rickhouse as for a collection of big ones.

Josh Quinn, co-founder of Boone County Distilling Co., regards rickhouse regulations as the single largest barrier to entry he encountered in starting his distillery. "It's all in the name of safety, so we support it 100 percent, but it's just really, really expensive."



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Elsewhere in the country, where there hasn't been a distilling industry sitting on top of a million-plus barrels going back decades, there isn't as much regulation. When asked of Texas requirements for warehousing his bourbon, Dan Garrison of Garrison Brothers said, "Those rules all relate to [federal] TTB issues. The state has no regs relating to warehousing."

Shelves And Sign Space

Distribution is a decidedly mixed bag for Kentucky's small distillers. Although some have had positive experiences and gotten their products into big chains and mom-and-pop shops alike, others have not been so fortunate.

"Distribution," says Ross Caldwell of Three Boys Farm Distillery "is a high volume game. If you can't have a tractor-trailer pull up around back and fill it, those guys don't want to talk to you."

"One of the most frustrating challenges is distribution, in and out of state," says Peg Hays of Casey Jones, a western

Kentucky legal moonshine distillery. “It should not be so hard to get a distributor.”

Distribution is not the only headache for Kentucky micro-distillers, especially those not situated in Louisville, where “urban bourbon” tourism puts visitors on the doorstep. Getting on-site retail sales means drawing in visitors, and a key aid in doing this is having an official sign on a nearby interstate or highway. Getting that signage is a common source of complaint if you aren’t a big distiller.

“This process has been interesting, to put it mildly,” says Hays. After being told about a Kentucky Transportation Cabinet program to speed up the placement of those brown road signs at a KDA meeting in January, Hays was eager to get started. “We were quickly roadblocked, and then were told that the sign program we were applying for had been discontinued. We are now working on another sign program, wayfinding, that is a completely different and more expensive and difficult project. Kentucky Transportation seems to be consistent in that anytime you deal with them it

is long, arduous, and difficult.”

This Old Kentucky Home

Even with these difficulties, being a distillery in Kentucky has a big upside, and no small distillery in the state wishes it had started its enterprise somewhere else. After all, Kentucky is synonymous with bourbon.

“If you have a farm in Idaho and want to open a distillery, sell the farm and move to Kentucky. People want Kentucky bourbon,” says Erisman.

If the Dries want to squeeze the liquor business of tax dollars and much else is geared for big producers, the presence of those big producers means a lot of necessary infrastructure is already in the state, ready to meet the needs of a craft distillery. The famous Vendome Copper & Brassworks (see page [38](#)) is located in Louisville, and plenty of distilleries great and small have equipment bearing the Vendome plaque on it, testifying to the handiwork of a firm that has been building stills for more than a century. For nano-

distilleries and those who want to avoid Vendome's nine-month waiting list, there are Hillbilly Stills and Rockypoint Stills in western Kentucky. The value of having the guys who built your copper pot or column literally down the highway cannot be overstated when it comes to installations and repairs.

Being in Kentucky also means you are in the right place for barrels. Independent Stave Company has one of its major cooperages in Bardstown, Kelvin Cooperage is in Louisville, Speyside Cooperage is in Shepherdsville, and Robinson Stave Company is in East Bernstadt.

While not every distillery gets both its still and its barrels in-state, it's rare for a company to go out of state for both, and copper and wood aren't the end of the local distilling infrastructure. If a custom strain of yeast is required, Ferm Solutions (the elder sister company of Wilderness Trace Distillery) is on hand in Danville. Finally, companies like Big Ass Fans (see page [43](#)) and Sellers Manufacturing (who make boilers) furnish other types of equipment frequently seen in

distilleries big and small around the state.

Another aspect of Kentucky's bourbon infrastructure that helps small distillers is the KDA. Although this well-established trade organization was founded by and for the big distillers, the KDA has embraced the craft category in its membership and created a craft subsection for the Kentucky Bourbon Trail.

Through the KDA and on their own, the big distillers also help create a conducive environment for small operators in other ways. When Silver Trail Distillery suffered its tragic still explosion in 2015, it could have been the beginning of a period of overreaction, putting a well-intentioned but ill-informed burden on small distillers. New Riff's Erisman, among others, pointed to the role of the big distillers at that juncture in calming things down at the state capitol. The big guys were protecting their own interests, of course, but in doing so they saved the little guys from potentially worse hurt.



Those trickle-down effects are not universal, or distributed evenly. Small moonshine distillers, like Casey Jones, or Kentucky Mist in eastern Kentucky, are far removed from the heart of “Bourbon Country” in central Kentucky, and thus sometimes don’t get the same level of traffic as, say, Peerless Distillery in Louisville or Bluegrass Distillers in Lexington. Even a place like Limestone Branch in Lebanon is better situated, because of its proximity to Maker’s Mark. Being in Kentucky does not guarantee steady walk-in traffic.

Despite this, the very real interest in craft spirits seems to ensure that everyone in the state catches at least a little of the boom times, even in the remote reaches of the Land Between the Lakes area and coal country. In recent years, over 1,000,000 visitors have come to Kentucky for bourbon, year in and year out, and of those, hundreds of thousands of people have visited the eleven distilleries that are part of the KDA’s craft trail.



Hitting The Trail

Perhaps the biggest boon is the impact that the Bourbon Boom has had on interest in whiskey on the population at large. In a direct sense, that translates into more tourism and the aforementioned in-house retail sales, both of bottles and (in most cases) at the bar. While it is true that most people touring the state and visiting its distilleries are there to see how their favorite big brand whiskey is made, there is a genuine interest in craft whiskey, too. That pulls people in through the doors of the small distilleries.





Sell Me Kentucky Bourbon

A less obvious effect of the Bourbon Boom is how some of Kentucky's larger craft outfits have found a revenue stream in becoming contract distillers. New Riff Distilling contracts out 55 percent of its current production capacity, while Bardstown Bourbon Company (a craft member of the KDA, although admittedly larger than what most people think of when they think "craft distillery") is based in large part on the model of being a contract distiller.

Both Three Boys Farm and Boone County Distilling report having received plenty of contract distilling inquiries, and, Quinn added, "I was talking to a guy in New York with a 12-inch column still, but they can't contract out their extra time because no one wants New York bourbon."

Contract distilling has become a common feature for many small distillers in the state, although few who are engaged in it are willing to admit to it openly, and almost none are free to identify a client. Confidentiality has long been a characteristic of contract distilling in Kentucky. But the



The Bourbon Boom has even helped one distillery with the distribution hurdle. "One of the things that has helped us from the start is the idea of bourbon from Bourbon County," says Andrew Buchanan of Hartfield & Co., a nano-distillery in Paris. "It got our white rum and vodka in the door at Liquor Barn."



demand for bourbon that can be identified on the label as being “Made in Kentucky” has created an almost “if you build it, they will come” scenario for the state’s craft distillers. As the big distillers have their hands full meeting their own skyrocketing demands, plenty of room exists for others to move into this market.

As America’s leading whiskey-making state, Kentucky presents its own particular mix of challenges, benefits, and opportunities for craft distillers. While companies like Jim Beam and Brown-Forman certainly cast long shadows, they don’t crowd out the field so much as deny a place in the sun for the little guy. Despite the unique difficulties, stories of small distillers achieving their ten-year business plan in three years or less and working on expansion are not uncommon, as the Bourbon Boom lifts all boats.





BOURBON LIQUEURS AND CREAM

Traditionally in Bourbon Country, bourbon liqueurs were a popular subset. Often brought out for hunting and the holidays, these sweet potions, made with a base of bourbon, and their slightly lower ABV, were the perfect offering of Southern hospitality. But in the last decade, they seem to have come out of grandma's cupboard and found a whole new fan base.

The most commercially famous of all the liqueurs was Southern Comfort. Bartender Martin Wilkes Heron (1850–1920) was working at McCauley's Tavern in the Lower Garden District, not far from the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana, when he created Southern Comfort in 1874. The original name of the cocktail was called Cuffs and Buttons. In 1889, Heron patented his elixir and set up shop in Memphis, Tennessee. Southern Comfort won the gold medal at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri.

Spirits historian Chris Morris noted that the original whiskey began with good-quality bourbon that was mixed



with “an inch of vanilla bean, about a quarter of a lemon, half of a cinnamon stick, four cloves, a few cherries, and an orange bit or two.” Heron let the mixture steep for days. After separating the ingredients he added local honey.

Brown-Forman purchased the brand in 1979. Then in January 2016 the Sazerac Company bought the brand. Over the years neutral spirits had been introduced to the formula.

Also among the most famous and widespread of these liqueurs is craft producer Pritchard’s Sweet Lucy. Sweet Lucy has been flowing up and down the Mississippi flyway for years. This bourbon-based formula is blended with apricot and orange and it has warmed the body and soul of outdoorsmen for years. This is a true southern favorite.



Another such success is from Nelson’s Greenbrier Distillery – Louisa’s Liqueur. Louisa’s Liqueur is named for the woman who single-handedly ran the distillery from 1891 to 1909. This coffee-caramel-pecan liqueur has taken off like a shot for the newly reinvented distillery.

Buffalo Trace Bourbon Cream is the bestselling of the bourbon-based cream liqueurs. Bourbon Cream is a handcrafted pairing of Buffalo Trace Kentucky Straight Bourbon and cream. This liqueur is rich and sweet, with hints of caramel and creamy vanilla. Very much like its Irish cream shelf brethren, but with a slightly more decadent taste. Boone County Bourbon Cream is also very good. Ezra Brooks Bourbon Cream from Heaven Hill is another popular bourbon cream.

Another popular entry is Tennessee Sipping Cream from the Pennington Distilling Company, which is made with classic Tennessee whiskey and real cream. The original is the most popular, but it also comes in a number of flavors, most popular of which are the Mocha and the Pumpkin Spice.

Last but not least, Evan Williams Original Southern Egg nog is the most ubiquitous of the whiskey based egg nogs. Real dairy cream and 7-Year-Old Kentucky Bourbon are blended, producing a thick, sweet liqueur with a nose of crème brûlée and nutmeg, with notes of vanilla and bourbon bread pudding.





HAND SANITIZER

Of course, we don't drink hand sanitizer, but it is an important footnote to this story as the updated edition of this book is being written. Just as many distilleries (breweries and wineries) had to adjust to life during Prohibition – some were able to pivot, many did not or could not — the coronavirus pandemic has caused a multitude of problems for the distilling industry.

The federal government looked on workers in the wine, beer, and spirits industry as “essential workers.” That meant workers were obliged to keep reporting for work despite record numbers of illnesses and deaths. But as this issue confronted the industry, different players met the challenge in different ways.

No question, alcohol consumption rose steadily throughout the pandemic. Stores that sold liquor saw serious spikes in purchasing. But that affected only the larger producers. The larger distilleries who profited from third-



party retailers kept on making whiskey, albeit, with reduced staffs.

But the smaller craft beverage producers were slammed hard. Those distilleries depended on customer sales through their own registers. With consumers at home, many small craft distillers saw less folks in the tasting room, and dollars became scarce. Distilleries were faced with some stark choices. Many distillers started offering curbside pick-up, still others offered delivery and shipping.

Many of these small distilleries began producing hand sanitizer. Even a few of the big guys joined in, such as Evan Williams and Jim Beam, to help out in the crisis. Sanitizer was in severe shortage, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Major retailers saw their stocks wiped out in days. In Kentucky and Tennessee many smaller distilleries rose to the challenge. They immediately swapped out their necessary parts and ingredients and began producing hand sanitizer. In many cases, portions, if not all of the initial inventory, were donated to various town organizations. Many of these products were quickly made, and lacked

governmental approval. Fast-tracking of sanitizer approval by the government quickly opened the floodgates. Many followed guidelines of the World Health Organization, but also had to follow FDA regulations as well. These distilleries were seen as heroes. Overall, according to the Kentucky Distiller Association, 27 of their members donated more than 125,000 gallons of sanitizer across the commonwealth. That's about 630,000 750 ml whiskey bottles worth of sanitizer.

Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear said, "These companies worked quickly and tirelessly to source the materials and manufacture this essential product for Kentuckians fighting on the front lines of this pandemic. I am grateful and proud to have the KDA and its members on Team Kentucky."

Tennessee distillers also banded together. "We saw a need in our communities, and we are on a mission to make a difference," said Kris Tatum, president of Tennessee Distillers Guild. "It's a great feeling when competitors collectively decide to put profits aside and jointly decide to



support the communities that have made us successful in the first place.”

“We’re trying to help government entities, including fire departments, police stations, physicians offices, and other businesses that are the heartbeat of our state and still on the front lines serving the public and keeping the economy going,” said Greg Eidam, head distiller at Sugarlands Distilling Company in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Many of the craft distilleries in Tennessee answered that same call, donating hand sanitizer to police and fire departments, EMTs, and other frontline workers.

Soon, these small distilleries began to offer their sanitizers for sale. Slowly, the larger commercial manufacturers caught up with the demand, and with distilleries allowed to reopen in summer, with outdoor tastings, the hand sanitizer explosion waned, and the distillers went back to making spirits. But years from now, small bottles of hand sanitizers produced by craft whiskey distillers will be the stuff of legend, much like prescription alcohol and malted beverages from the 1920s.



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TWO KENTUCKY CLASSICS

The Mint Julep is the quintessential Kentucky cocktail. The word “julep” derives from the Persian word for a sweet rosewater syrup, gulab. Back in the day, these drinks were issued to help make medicine go down. American mint juleps were mostly medicinal, lightly alcoholic concoctions blended with camphor.

The history of the Julep dates as far back as a mention in Medical Communications, a doctor’s firsthand account of administering the drink: “sickness at the stomach, with frequent retching, and, at times, a difficulty of swallowing. I then prescribed her an emetic, some opening powders, and a mint julep.”

The first printed cocktail recipe appeared in a book by John Davis published in London in 1803, in which it was described as “a dram of spirituous liquor that has mint steeped in it, taken by Virginians of a morning.”



The great popularizer of the drink was the iconic Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, who introduced the drink to Washington, D.C., at the Round Robin Bar in the famous Willard Hotel in the early half of the 19th century. It eventually made it into the famed 1862 edition of *Bar-Tenders Guide: How to Mix Drinks* or *The Bon-Vivant's Companion* by Jerry Thomas.

The Mint Julep cemented its place in history through its association with the Kentucky Derby, starting in 1938. It is estimated that more than 120,000 juleps are served at Churchill Downs the weekend of the Kentucky Oaks and Kentucky Derby each year.

“While spectators in the stands of the Kentucky Derby sip Mint Juleps, tailgaters in the parking lot gather around ‘Kentucky Classics,’ a cocktail of Ale-8 and bourbon,” wrote Mandy Naglich in VinePairs.com.

If the Mint Julep is the Grand Dame of Kentucky cocktails, her back-porch sister is certainly a Kentucky Mule, more classically, if you’re at a BBQ or a tailgate, a bourbon and Ale 8!

Ale 8 (officially named Ale-8-One, but known locally as Ale 8) was created by soda bottler G. L. Wainscott in 1926. Allegedly it was originally named “A Late One” and eventually morphed into “Ale-8-One.” It is generally thought to be a blending of ginger ale and citrus flavors. They’ve been selling the soda ever since. It is an iconic Southern brand. Until 2001 it was only available in Kentucky, but can now be found all over the South and as far west as Texas.





VODKA

Pickers Vodka from SPEAKeasy Distillers (now Pennington Distillery)

Walton's Finest Vodka from SPEAKeasy Distillers (now Pennington Distillery)

Pyramid Vodka

Black Mule Vodka from Tenn South Distillery

Big Machine Vodka from Tenn South Distillery

Old Glory Tennessee Vodka

Old Dominick Memphis Vodka

Corsair Vanilla Bean

Lass & Lions Vodka

Old Forge Vodka

Kore Vodka from PostModern Spirits

Tennessee Legend Vodka

Tennessee Valley Vodka from Knox Whiskey Works

A SIDE NOTE ON GIN AND VODKA

While whiskey, bourbon, and rye tend to be the products most closely associated with Kentucky and Tennessee, there is still a substantial output of vodka and gin in these states. Some of the bigger distilleries have been making these spirits for years.

Gins and vodkas have been produced in the region under such labels as Burnett's, Barton, Heaven Hill,

Crystal Palace Gin, Czarina Gin, Fleischmann's Gin, Glenmore Gin, Mr. Boston Gin, and many more.

But the craft distilling boom has brought with it a whole new wave of vodkas and gins. Here are a few to watch out for.

GIN

Corsair Artisan Gin

Corsair Genever

Corsair Barrel Aged Gin

Crane City Gin from Nashville Craft Distillery

Ginferous Gin from Pos Modern Spirits

Jackson Avenue Gin from Knox Whiskey Works

RUM

Prichard's Fine Rum

Prichard's Fine Rum Private Stock

Angry Pecker Rum from Tennessee Hills Distillery

Old Forge Rum

Renegade Rum from Thunder Road Distilling

Barreled Renegade Rum from Thunder Road Distilling



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sugar or molasses), it is for all intents and purposes a very good rum! How is that? Well, staying in the true nature of being Southern, Naked Biscuit utilizes one of the region's most popular sugar substitutes—sorghum.

For the generations that survived the Great Depression, and for decades later, sorghum was the South's favorite sweetener. It is made from the sorghum plant and makes a product not unlike dark honey. These days, it's much more popular as a gluten-free flour, but it's flavorful enough for a very fine rum-like product. It makes a mean cocktail. Perfect for daiquiris and piña coladas, or a Naked Biscuit and Coke!

NAKED BISCUIT FROM NASHVILLE CRAFT DISTILLING

While Nashville Craft Distilling's Naked Biscuit doesn't exactly qualify as a rum (since it's not derived from cane

“There’s no substitute
for time spent
in a barrel.”

—Lincoln Henderson



KENTUCKY



MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME

There are two things that Kentucky is historically known for—horse racing and bourbon. And both are steeped in tradition.

As a sports historian, I've covered the Kentucky Derby, the Keeneland events, and some of the sport's biggest legends. I've always been entranced with places like Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Three Day Event in Lexington. There is nothing more exhilarating than hanging out on the backstretch of Churchill Downs during the foggy, early morning workouts the week before the Derby, or being around Louisville and Lexington during Derby Week. Men and women from all walks of life, dressed up and down, the crazy hats, track stewards in pinks, strains of "My Old Kentucky Home," and everyone sipping the ubiquitous mint julep.

And now here I am, a dozen years later, covering the same territory, but with a completely different bent—covering that other classic Blue Grass tradition. I've traded the barns



and shed rows of the Downs' backstretch for the spirit safes and rickhouses of some of America's most storied distilleries, as well as some of its newest ones.

My most enduring memory of my last visit to the Derby and Kentucky was when I bought a commemorative bottle of Kentucky Derby Woodford Reserve. It was more for memory's sake than the quenching of my thirst or a desire to impress friends and family. But while entertaining one winter night, many years later, several friends caught sight of the dusty bottle, and insisted we break the seal. A tad woozy, I happily indulged them.

It was amazing. The liquid inside was magical. My friends and I all agreed. It was a large bottle, and within a few months, the last of it was drained by the subsequent Derby. And my love affair with bourbon was secured.

HISTORY

"It began in the 1700s with the first settlers of Kentucky. Like most farmers and frontiersmen, they found that getting crops to market over narrow trails and steep mountains

was a daunting task," states the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. "They soon learned that converting corn and other grains to whiskey made them easily transportable, prevented the excess grain from simply rotting, and gave them some welcome diversion from the rough life of the frontier."

Of course, the question remains, how did it come to be known as bourbon? Kentucky's Bourbon County was established in 1795 when it was still part of Virginia. Corn and other grains converted to whiskey began making their way to New Orleans down the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, in barrels stamped Bourbon County. The "bourbon" whiskey soon became popular in the southern port town, and the name stuck. It didn't hurt that the famed street in New Orleans, where most of the whiskey was imbibed, carried the same name.

Bourbon's status as an American drink was cemented in 1964 when Congress declared bourbon a distinctive product that could only be made in the United States. The making of that beverage was codified by federal law.



LEXINGTON VS. LOUISVILLE: A STATE OBSESSION

The one thing you need to know immediately is that there are two main distilling regions in Kentucky: Lexington and Louisville. This is an insurmountable physical and mental fault line in the state. Just as there is Keeneland and Churchill Downs, there is also the rivalry that exists between the University of Kentucky Wildcats and University of Louisville Cardinals. This cross-state rivalry, which goes back to 1913 in basketball, is among the most ferocious of conflicts, as evidenced by the 2012 Final Four meeting between the two in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.

The same kind of state pride is at stake in the distilling business. Friendly chidings and barbs are exchanged regularly. Lexington boasts Buffalo Trace, Woodford Reserve, Wild Turkey, and Four Roses, while Louisville hosts the Evan Williams Experience, Bulleit, the Brown-Forman offices, Stitzel-Weller, Angel's Envy, Heaven Hill, and Jim Beam.

But distilling is an incredibly important industry in Kentucky, employing more than 9,000 people and adding more than \$125 million in tax revenues alone. Indeed, the industry has employed some families as far back as seven generations. Few industries have that kind of dynastic feel to them. As with other industries of such an ilk, in a 10- or 15-year career you could move around or stay in one place, and you will probably meet a good portion of the people in that industry. Such is the state of distilling in Kentucky. These are people who are fiercely competitive, but also amazingly compassionate.

In 1996, when Heaven Hill suffered the most devastating distillery fire in modern memory, that indisputable industry

compassion kicked into high gear. Rather than ignoring the company's difficult situation, several of the major distillers raided their stores to help Heaven Hill meet its goals and keep running until it was able to rebuild. That's what makes it a family. As competitive as the industry is, that kind of neighborly camaraderie is a core element of what makes the story of Kentucky bourbon so special.

REBIRTH

Bourbon, and brown spirits in general, has experienced a massive rebirth in the last 10 years. And the sky is the limit. Best-selling wine expert Kevin Zraly of Windows on the World Wine Course once told me that the easiest way to see if a region has arrived is to follow the money. Banks are the least excited about getting stung by a bubble. If money is pouring in from everywhere, it's a safe bet that the region would make it. If that's the case, Kentucky has arrived. Billions of dollars have been invested in refurbishing some of the oldest and largest distilleries in the United States. Likewise, many long-shuttered distilleries, victims of

the gin, vodka, and tequila surge over the last 30 years, have roared back to life. Indeed, these are not the only signs. Massive new distilleries are racing to make enough whiskey to feed the seemingly unquenchable public. The craft distilling movement has made large and small distilleries sprout like mushrooms. Old labels are getting facelifts, being reintroduced, and new ones are being born.

These are exciting times for a state steeped in tradition. It's all happening so fast that both insiders and bourbon-loving observers cannot keep up with the immense growth. Whether it's taking a page from the single malt industry and finishing bourbon with wine, port, or sherry casks, or introducing new mash bills and new wood storage methods, the new expressions being introduced, from bourbon to rye, are all exciting and fascinating.

IS TENNESSEE WHISKEY BOURBON?

By Richard Thomas

One of the classic American bar debates is whether Tennessee whiskey is bourbon. Usually it's "Is Jack Daniel's bourbon?" But George Dickel was part of the category for decades, and it now includes a growing list of Tennessee craft distillers, as well. I didn't hear this discussed often in my native Kentucky, mind you, because at home most folks (or those who weren't dry county teetotalers at any rate) would say respectfully, "We make bourbon, and them folks down in Tennessee do their own thing." I had to move to other parts to really hear about this argument.

If you want to take up this timeless argument yourself

sometime, here are some factual talking points that both sides can use:

The Law: Tennessee passed a new whiskey law in 2013, and it overlapped the federal law governing bourbon, with some additional requirements. The main extra requirement is that a whiskey had to use the Lincoln County Process (filtration through sugar maple charcoal prior to aging in new oak barrels) to qualify as Tennessee whiskey. A "grandfather" exception in the Tennessee law was made for Prichard's Distillery, which didn't use the Lincoln County Process (although it was, ironically, located in Lincoln County) and had been calling its stuff Tennessee whiskey for more than a decade. Despite this, nothing prevents a Tennessee whiskey from being called bourbon at the federal level. As Chuck Cowdery has documented on his blog, sometimes the Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) has categorized Jack Daniel's as bourbon in its labeling paperwork, although the approved label itself reads "Tennessee Whiskey." Federal regulations recognize Tennessee whiskey in a loose sense, but do not specifically

define it. A whiskey gets to be a Tennessee whiskey by complying with state law and asking the federal government to call it that, but its makers could easily switch and ask to be called bourbon instead.

The Lincoln County Process: As the signature production step of Tennessee whiskey, the Lincoln County Process is central to its definition. Some bourbons are charcoal filtered, too, like Ezra Brooks and Jim Beam Green Label, but this is done after the barrels are dumped and before bottling. Although there are variations of the Lincoln County Process, the important part is that the step is carried out before the newly made whiskey goes into the barrels. Tennessee whiskey sees some impurities removed before aging, whereas the charcoal-filtered bourbons do so after aging, so what is actually removed can be different.

The People Who Make It Say So: Jack Daniel's, George Dickel, Nelson's Green Brier, and others insist that what they do is Tennessee whiskey, not bourbon. Their bourbon-making peers accept that, even in Tennessee. The legal challenges to the 2013 Tennessee Whiskey Law failed to

overturn it, so the law will stand for the foreseeable future. No one with the power to attempt to change what the labels say is disputing that there is such a thing as Tennessee whiskey.





Its stainless steel and copper shine and sparkle like few other places.



ANGEL'S ENVY

Set in the middle of downtown Louisville, opposite Louisville Slugger Stadium, nestled among the office buildings of this fine old city, Angel's Envy is certainly the envy of anyone who wants to be in the distilling business.

The incredibly well-appointed gift shop and education center is the height of sleek and modern industrial glam. The upstairs event space is otherworldly, a combination of beaux arts and the National Park Service, with massive windows

cased in steel and brick overlooking the city and the Ohio River. It is nothing short of breathtaking.

But despite the dazzling views and architecture, Angel's Envy is all about genes. It is hard to start a distillery with better genes. Lincoln Henderson and his son Wes Henderson have both spent many years building various whiskey brands.

Lincoln Henderson is one of the most storied master distillers in the history of the region. He created such premium products as Gentleman Jack and Jack Daniel's Single Barrel, and he created Woodford Reserve (with Chris Morris at his side). He also guided much of the distilling program at Brown-Forman for almost two generations.

Wes worked alongside of him. When Woodford was created out of thin air, Wes helped plan the buildings in the distillery we know today. Wes is also a master distiller in his own right. These are two terribly accomplished men.

Lincoln retired in the mid-1990s. And when the new craft distilling boom hit, Wes went to visit his father, on a Sunday morning, with a crazy idea—they should finally

start a distillery of their own. Lincoln had never had that kind of backing or control. And so their experiments with mash and finishing began, with Lincoln combing through his legendary black book for ideas.

When the first experimental barrels were ready to taste, Lincoln opened them only to find that the angels had taken a heavy share. Once they tasted the whiskey inside, Lincoln declared that the angels should envy him and Wes. The whiskey left behind was superb. And that's the legend of the distillery's name.

In the beginning the whiskey was made to Lincoln's specific instructions and formula. The small production run was an immediate hit. While it made bourbon the old-fashioned way, Angel's Envy is a port-finished product, meaning that the bourbon, which had properly rested in charred American white oak, then spent additional time in port casks to acquire a softer, rounder finish that gives it a brandy or cognac feel.

Momentum gathered and demand grew. Today Angel's Envy is the most expensive and lavish bourbon distillery in

the Louisville region. It is designed beautifully, simply, and to the teeth. Somewhat resembling the old nave of a church (it is a converted old tool works), it is indeed a modern steampunk temple to distilled spirits—a gem of the distilling world.

The grain for the bourbon is sourced from Doug Langley's farms in Shelby County, Kentucky. And the grain for Angel's Envy Rye comes from Brooks Grain. Its barley comes from Consolidated Grain in Louisville. It uses a char #3 American oak barrel from Kelvin Cooperage.

Sadly, Lincoln has passed on. Despite the many high points of his career, those closest to him still feel that Angel's Envy was his greatest achievement. But that's not true. It might be said that his greatest achievement was his family. The family still runs the distillery, which is now owned by liquor giant Bacardi.

Angel's Envy Port Finished Bourbon is the big product here. It is a sophisticated bourbon, aimed not only at the American market, but positioned perfectly for the European and Asian markets, where it will compete with single malt

whiskies from Scotland.

First released in 2015, Angel's Envy Rye Whiskey is a small production rye. It is a six-to seven-year-old whiskey made of 95% rye and 5% malted barley. It is aged for up to 18 months in Caribbean XO rum casks (which had aged cognac before that). It comes from batches of 8 to 12 barrels at a time, twice a year, and the distillery produces approximately 48,000 bottles annually.



B. BIRD DISTILLERY

Augusta, Kentucky, is located on a shallow bend in the Ohio River. It is a charming old town, with a number of buildings that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Dinah Bird purchased the estate in 2002. It houses a winery, Baker-Bird Winery, and a distillery, B. Bird Distillery.

The original buildings were established by distiller John Baker, a veteran of the American Revolution. John was a distiller in Washington County, Pennsylvania. After the failure of the Whiskey Rebellion John moved to Augusta in 1797. There he founded a new distillery. Abraham Baker, John's son, purchased the land and his son, Abraham Baker, Jr., built the winery and extensive wine cellar in the 1850s.

The Baker-Bird Winery is one of the oldest wineries in America, and is one of only 22 wineries on the National Historic Registry. By the 1870s Bracken County was the country's leading wine-producing county. "At the time, the Ohio River Valley was the place to grow grapes in the US,"



according to Ms. Bird. “The German immigrants who settled here said the hilly area reminded them of their homeland.”

Today, the Baker-Bird Wine Cellar, originally built by Abraham, is the largest, oldest wine cellar in America and the only winery to have survived a Civil War battle. The Baker-Bird Winery is the “Home of Bourbon Barrel Aged Wines” and offers many other internationally acclaimed wines.

The winery partnered with Woodford Reserve Distillery to make their famed Black Barrel wine, which is aged in bourbon barrels. The entire project, including the time the barrels are needed to age whiskey takes up to ten years. The wine is said to offer the classic “Kentucky hug.” Doug Padgett is the master distiller, a job he has held since January of 2019.

Historic B. Bird American Revolution Corn Whiskey (100 proof) is a crystal-clear unaged corn whiskey made right there on the premises. This is the same distillate that gets laid down to make their bourbon. Great nose with corn and butter. Incredibly smooth.

Historic Becker & Bird Give Me Liberty Brandy (80 proof)

is made from the winery’s wines. A total vertical production. The brandy was launched in late 2020.

Historic B. Bird Kentucky Statehood Straight American Whiskey (100 proof) is a bourbon that’s been aged for two years in new American charred oak.



THE BARD DISTILLERY

In 2019, Thomas and Kim Bard opened The Bard Distillery in Graham, Kentucky, in Muhlenberg County. The two met each

other during their years in NASCAR. They'd visited Maker's Mark in 2006, and had been dreaming of having their own distillery ever since. Then they decided to make it happen. So in 2013, they bought the old Graham School. The school had been closed since 2004. The campus consisted of three historic buildings (60,000 square feet of free space) on 25 acres. The buildings themselves were erected in the 1920s and 1930s and some of the period art deco touches have survived to today.

"One of our reasons for buying this facility was so that we could preserve these buildings. They weren't falling down, but close to falling down," Kim told me in December 2019.

"I went to school here until I was in third grade and we live five minutes from here, so this is our home," added Thomas, who doubles as the distillery's engineer. "The family history has always revolved around Bardstown. I'm the fifth-generation grandson of the founder of Bardstown, William Bard, so the family heritage has always involved bourbon."

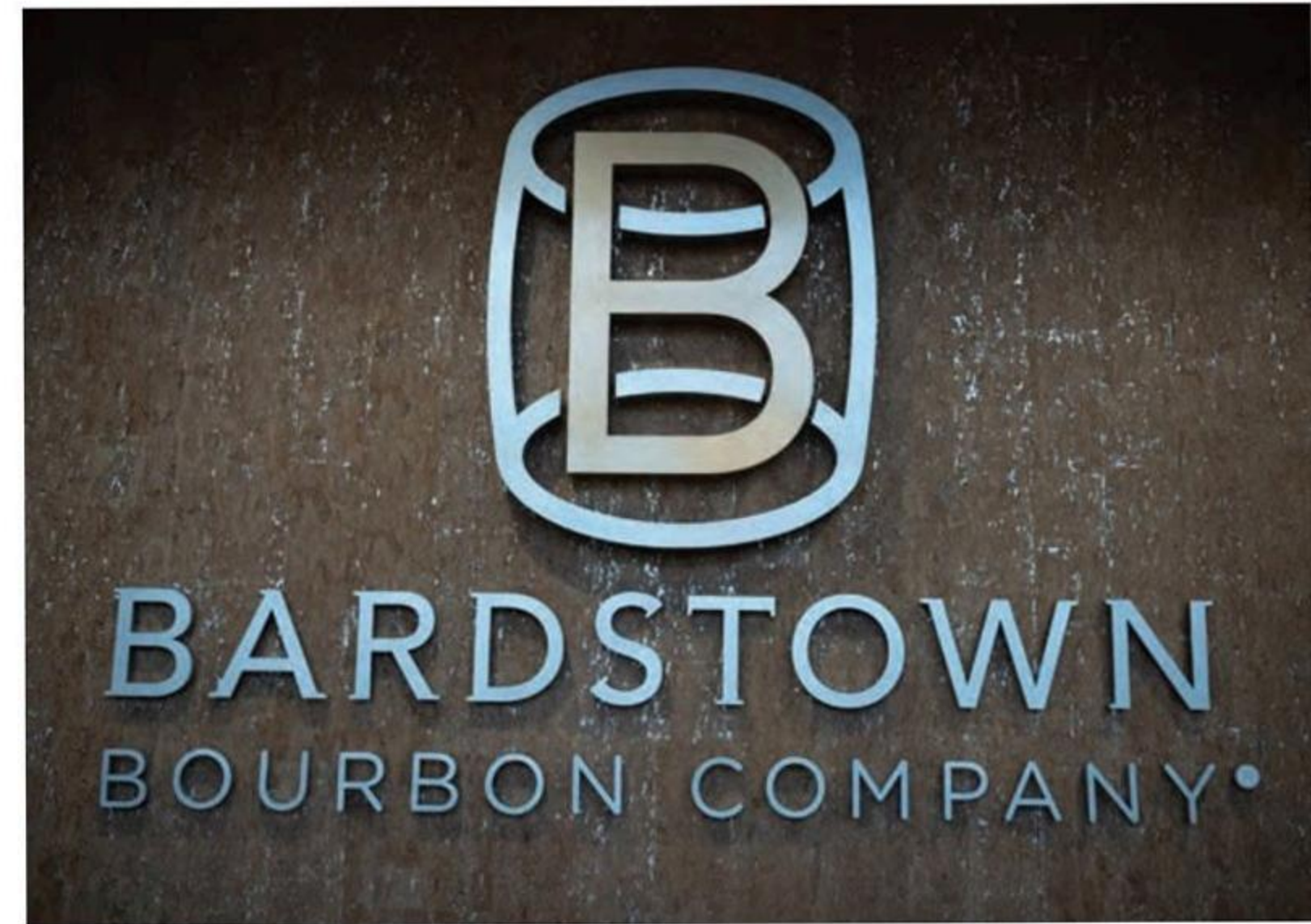
"Both of us have given up our day jobs and we're all in at

this point," said Kim. "Once we start renovations on it, we'll be able to put a 500- to 750-gallon pot still in that and then a column still at some point so we can run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." They received their first new American oak charred barrels in July 2019.

Bard Distillery will produce un-aged spirits, whiskey, and high-end bourbon, as well as gin and vodka.

Muhlenberg Silver Muhl Whiskey (124 proof) small batch, new make unaged white whiskey. Crystal clear. Super smooth. Bottled in limited quantities.

Cinder & Smoke Straight Bourbon Whiskey Aged 13 Years (98.6 proof) is made from blended sourced whiskey bottled cask strength. No filtering. Batches are small. Bottlings range from 300 to 500 bottles. Reviews so far have been very positive. This is a new distillery well worth following closely.



BARDSTOWN BOURBON COMPANY

Peter Loftin was the founding member and chairman of the Bardstown Bourbon Company. Before entering the spirits business, Loftin made his mark in the telecommunications industry after the Bell telephone monopoly break up. In 1983, he founded and led Raleigh, North Carolina-based

Business Telecom Inc. (BTI). By 1999, BTI had approximately \$400 million in annual revenues.

Through a bond issue and a sale of stock to a private equity firm, Loftin essentially liquidated his position and began to cast about for a new venture. Between 2000 and 2013, he bought, restored, and sold Casa Causaurina, the former home of Gianni Versace, turning it into a high-end boutique hotel and club. His next project was among his many loves – bourbon. In 2016, Loftin founded the largest new whiskey distillery in the United States. Bardstown Bourbon is a collaborative whiskey, bourbon, and rye distilling program located in Bardstown, Kentucky. The original intent was to make whiskey for others. Constellation Brands acquired a minority stake in the company in 2016. Loftin passed away in November 2019.

The distillery is currently led by the affable and capable Colonel (Ret.) Mark W. Erwin who now serves as president and CEO. Erwin took command in September 2019. He was an accomplished businessman long before joining Bardstown, having advised major Fortune 500 companies,

and having served in the United States Army for 26 years, culminating his military career as the Chief of Staff of the United States Army Special Operations Command. He has a commanding presence, but is always collegial and chatty.

Bardstown is interested in only one thing—making bourbon and rye. Nothing else. However, Bardstown has three distinct programs. First is the manufacture and sale of its own line of excellent bourbon and rye. Second, they produce and package bourbon and rye for other companies under private labels; for some customers, they handle the extra capacity their partners cannot, for others they are the distillery where all the product is made, and some are special one-off projects or bottlings. Third, they sell bulk bourbon and rye to other companies.



So far it has been an immensely successful endeavor. Running 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, and bulking up on equipment and staff, Bardstown doubled capacity in 2018, and in 2019 yet again. The company has two large column stills and more than 32 fermenters, giving them a current capacity of 100,000 barrels of bourbon per year. They are one of the top ten privately-owned distilleries, by volume, in the country. Some of the partners they have worked with