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AUDIENCE: 14,769 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]
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HEADLINE: Into the Woods with the Single Oak Project

Source Website

Jack Bettridge

Posted: October 28, 2011

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With such choices as *small-batch, single-barrel*, cask-strength, varied mash bills and different yeast strains, nothing has compared with *Bourbon* Present for diverse choices on the *liquor* store shelf. Now *Buffalo Trace* invites drinkers to participate in *Bourbon* Future with the extra complications of its *Single Oak Project*.

The always-experimental *distillery* (it brought us the first *single-barrel Bourbon, Blanton's*, when the facility was still called *Ancient Age*) has devised a tongue-teasing program for *Bourbon* lovers. Based on 96 specially selected oak trees with which are made 192 one-off *Bourbon* variations, the program asks the public to assess them all at www.singleoakproject.com over the coming years, with a view to creating a standard release that reflects consumer feedback.

The *Buffalo Trace* chief executive officer Mark Brown has said that he hopes the project will "lead us to the Holy Grail of *Bourbon*." Whatever happens, he added, "it has been a great ride trying." The *Bourbons* will appear in numbered bottles in a series of sixteen 12-bottle releases, one every three months, over the next four years, until all 192 variations have been marketed. The first wave went on sale in the May and the second is now available in stores. Predictably, there is not a lot available.

As the company prepares to make its third release in November, feedback has already fleshed out some front runners. Two wheat recipe *Bourbons* made in barrels fashioned from wood at the top end of the tree "barrels #61 and #127" are early favorites. Almost a thousand samplers have given feedback to the website, with the bulk of respondents coming from New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco. However, drinkers from 31 countries have weighed in.

A wide spectrum of variables define the experiment, but each barrel used comes from a single tree (instead of intermarrying staves obtained from different trees). The oaks were selected from the Missouri Ozarks in 1999 to reflect a variety of three grain widths from fine to coarse. Each was cut into top and bottom halves, and barrels were constructed separately from each (the top-half barrels requiring more staves and the bottom-half fewer). Furthermore, the staves were air dried in two groups, one for six months, one for 12.

Take a breath. It gets more complicated. The barrels were subjected to one of two different char levels to toast the inside. Half got a number three toast and the other half the standard *Buffalo Trace* number four toast, which takes 55 seconds.

When it came to the spirit going into the barrels, there were yet two more variables. Half was made from a more widely used rye-informed mashbill (that grain being mixed with a corn-dominant recipe and also including barley as a minority partner). The other half replaced the rye component with softer wheat. Moreover, the new-make spirit went into the barrels at two different alcohol levels: 105 and 125 proof.

And, just when you thought you thought you had your mind wrapped around the different permutations, you're asked to consider that the *Bourbon* was aged in different warehouse types: one with wooden ricks and one with concrete floors.

As the public is intended to participate in the assessment of these *Bourbons*, we will not post formal tasting notes that might obscure results. However, we will say that the current release of 12 is an elegant lot with a commonality of honey notes and some spices. After that they "we suppose as intended" branch out in a number of different directions with a panoply of tasting notes that seem to justify the painstaking variations in their creation.

Of course, the rye and wheat recipes might be expected to produce easily recognizable variations "and they do. But drinkers may well be surprised at how the other variables affect what would otherwise seem to be the very same *Bourbon*. However, the price tag of \$46.35 per 375 milliliter bottle (half the standard size) and limited availability should keep most of us from exploring all 192 bottles.

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Highlights: Single Oak Project, small-batch, single-barrel, Bourbon, liquor, Buffalo Trace, distillery, Blanton's, Ancient Age, Bourbons