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MAY 16TH, 2011

## Buffalo Trace's new "Single Oak" project: Part 1

JOHN HANSELL

Buffalo Trace newest (and biggest) project was announced a couple weeks back. For those of you who haven't heard about it yet (which is understandable given that the whiskeys are only now getting into circulation), here's an excerpt from the press release:

Beginning in 1999, then Warehouse Manager Ronnie Eddins traveled to the Missouri Ozarks to hand pick 96 trees, consisting of fine grain, medium grain and coarse grain wood, based on the tree's growth rings. Each type of grain indicates a different growth rate and will yield a different flavor profile. From there, each tree was cut into a top and a bottom piece, yielding 192 unique sections. Next stop was the lumber yard, where staves were created from each section and were tagged and tracked. The staves were divided into two groups and given different air dried seasonings, 6 months and 12 months. The air drying allows Mother Nature to break down some of the more harsh flavored characteristics commonly found in wood.



After all the staves were air dried, a single barrel was then created from each tree section, resulting in 192 total barrels.

The next step in the process was to experiment with different char levels of the barrels. Two different char levels were used, a number three and a number four char. (The standard char level for all Buffalo Trace products is a number four char, which is a 55 second burn.

Then, barrels were filled with one of two different recipes, a wheat and a rye recipe bourbon. To further the variety of experiments, barrels were filled at two different proofs, 105 proof and 125 proof. And if this wasn't enough, two completely different warehouses were used, one with a wooden ricks and one with concrete floors. In total, seven different variables were employed in Buffalo Trace's ultimate experiment.

And then, the waiting began. For eight years the Distillery continued with its tracking process, creating intricate databases and coming up with a potential of 1,396 tasting combinations from these 192 barrels!

The Single Oak project is *part* of a much larger, and noble, effort: to create the perfect bourbon. How? By asking consumers to rate the whiskey they taste and then provide this feedback to Buffalo Trace via [this new website](#) that has been established for the Single Oak project. As the press release puts it:

On the website, consumers create a profile and after rating each bottle, will then see the aging details and provenance of each barrel. They can interact with others who have also reviewed the barrel, compare their reviews on the same barrel, and even use it as a learning process for themselves by discovering which characteristics they like in a bourbon to help them select future favorites.

Participants online will earn points after reach review and most importantly, help Buffalo Trace Distillery create the perfect bourbon!

According to Mark, at the conclusion of the project, they plan to take the top rated barrel, make more of that product and launch it under the Single Oak Project nameplate. So, ultimately, the 192 unique barrels with 1,396 tasting combinations will lead to one style of bourbon. One damned good bourbon!

I say this is only *part* of a much larger effort to create the perfect bourbon because over the years, Mark Brown, President and CEO of Buffalo Trace, has told me of some of his other projects to achieve this goal. One of them is to critically deconstruct the tasting notes and ratings of key whiskey writers (including yours truly). Incidentally, he told me just last week that, even though each of us may differ the way we describe our whiskeys, there is common ground in our reviews too. (He didn't go into detail, so I suppose we'll save that for a later time.)

Will the lucky ones who actually happen to get their hands on a bottle of Single Oak Project whiskey take the time to rate it and record it on the Single Oak Project website? Only time will tell, but I hope so.

Here's another snippet from the press release, describing the logistics of the first release (and future releases):

The first release of the Single Oak Project Bourbon is expected to hit stores nationwide in very limited quantities around the end of May. Each release will consist of 12 unique single barrel bourbons.

Every case will contain 12 bottles, each from a different barrel. The first release is made up of barrel numbers 3, 4, 35, 36, 67, 68, 99, 100, 131, 132, 163 and 164. Each of these barrels had the same entry proof, seasoning, char level and warehouse aging location. However, the hope is to identify the differences in taste based on recipe, wood grain size and tree cut

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as these characteristics varied amongst this group of barrels.

There will be a series of releases over the next four years until all of the 192 barrels have been released. All releases will be packaged in a 375ml bottle. Suggested retail pricing is \$46.35.

In Part 2 of my post on this project (which will probably be later in the week), I will get out my secret decoder ring and tell you about the first 12 releases and how each barrel of bourbon differs. Additionally, I've tasted all of them and, while I don't plan on rating them formally, I will give you my general thoughts on them (including which ones I liked, the ones I would take a pass on, and why).

Stay tuned!

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19 Comments »

1 **Rick Duff** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 2:37 PM

This is pretty neat. Too bad they couldn't put them into cases of 12 100ml or 50ml bottles instead of the 375ml bottles. At that price and 192 barrels it will cost about \$10,000 to taste them all. Smaller bottles would have gotten a lot more feedback. I understand logistically it may have been impossible. I'd sure hate to shell out \$50 (tax and all) for an experimental 1/2 bottle and get one that isn't a good combination.

REPLY

2 **Jeff Frane** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 3:06 PM

If nothing else, it's a brilliant marketing plan. Bourbon lovers will be tempted to buy as many bottles as possible for comparisons, and quite likely buy more bourbon than they would otherwise as a result. I'd personally love a more controlled offer — the same bourbon with different char and at different proofs, perhaps — where a real comparison can be made. There are so many variables in this experiment that any customer feedback is defused.

REPLY

3 **Eric** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 3:18 PM

I'm signed up on the singleoakproject.com website and anxiously awaiting the first shipment. I agree with Mr. Duff, in that 100ml bottles would be much more accessible. I don't see myself getting more than 2 or 3 bottles this year (if I can even procure that many) at \$50+ a pop. It would be tremendously satisfying to fill out the entire taste chart on the s.o.p. website, but at that price it seems like only industry insiders (or the extremely wealthy) will be able to accomplish that task.

REPLY

4 **Joan** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 4:10 PM

If the cost is prohibitive, why not get a group together? Each person could buy a bottle or two and everyone gets to sample from each bottle. Or, everyone donates so much toward each bottle, and one person makes the purchase. Would the project allow that?

REPLY

5 **John Hansell** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 5:29 PM

It's interesting that two of you already inquired about them bottling in smaller sizes. When I was interviewing Mark Brown, I suggested the same thing.

There's going to be so many of these releases and you have to pick just one—without even knowing what you're going to get. There's certainly a degree of risk here that you might get one that won't charm you. It might be more fun get a "box of chocolates" and try each one than one big random hunk of chocolate, right? Plus, after tasting a smaller sample and knowing you like it, you would then have the option to go and buy the bigger bottle.

REPLY

6 **JWC** SAYS:  
MAY 16, 2011 AT 6:50 PM

John, I agree with the others. Unlike the BTEC, if this experiment was to get feedback, smaller bottles (> greater number of bottles (i.e., increased accessibility) and lower price (affordability)) would have helped them accomplish BT's goals. I guess with the limited number (even if it was the increased number of smaller bottles), I don't see buying more of what you like as really an option.

The next time you speak with Mark Brown, tell him BT needs to give the graphic design company/professional working on their account a BIG PAT on the back. They sure do come out with some of the prettiest bottles.

I'm thinking about buying as many of the first release as possible and then calling it a day. Why? I'm getting tired of hunting down and fighting for the limited release whiskey.

REPLY

7 **Mark Davis** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 2:42 AM

if they can;t do sample sized bottles it would be nice if they could hold tasting events at major cities

Collection "Rediscovered Barrels"

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Review: Hart Brothers (distilled at Laphroaig)

Review: E.H. Taylor Jr. Old Fashioned Sour Mash

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where people could try a selection of say 8 combinations and give notes.

REPLY

8 **Oliver Klimek** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 8:05 AM

I am pretty impressed with this systematic approach. I don't think such a project has ever been tried by a distillery, even in secrecy. A wealth of knowledge can be drawn out of this. But as for the ultimate goal to create the "perfect bourbon", I am skeptical. Personal tastes differ so much that you are likely to find many strong contenders for the title.

REPLY

9 **Texas** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 9:23 AM

It's the price (I can guarantee you no store will sell them at only \$47 per 375ml) and the limited availability that disappoint me. This will limit the people in the project to high-end bourbon drinkers and professionals. Those aren't the people that keep that have made this industry successful.

REPLY

10 **JSJ** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 10:26 AM

This is certainly pricey considering you don't know what you're getting, but you could think of it as a lottery. Lets say you buy a bottle and, to the horror of Buffalo Trace, you cellar it. If that barrel ends up being voted the best, you've suddenly cornered the market on a VERY sought-after bourbon. You could sell it for a king's ransom in the years Buffalo Trace takes to make a new batch.

I'd prefer everyone drink their Single Oak bottles and submit their notes to the website, but you know some folks will play this lottery.

REPLY

11 **Ryan** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 10:28 AM

I have heard two or three of the first barrels really stand-out from the first pack of 12. With a list price of nearly \$93 for 750ml of bourbon—and low odds of getting any of those two or three cherry barrels that might justify some of the sticker shock—I'm either passing on Single Oak or passing on the Antique Collection, but I will not buy both. I've long ignored Experimental Collection releases in favor of my favorite BTAC varietals, and the added over-stimulation of yet another high-scarcity brand range leaves me even less interested in this one than the Experimental Collection. Oh, and when the street price of this project ends up substantially inflated over the \$46.35/375ml list price, this one really won't interest me. Plus the theatrical (for Buffalo Trace) prerelease hype of Single Oak (the perfect bourbon/project holy grail gimmickry) really prejudiced me against it. Perfection, by definition, isn't possible with defects... like hyperbolic marketing campaigns.

REPLY

12 **timd** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 11:47 AM

Great idea – poor execution. 196 different bottles of which most folks reading this blog will try 3-4. "Real world" non-blog following/forum posting people may try one over the course of these years.

375's were a mistake – especially at that price point. I applaud the concept – it's really smart, it's a good idea, and I'd love to participate... but I won't. Not at \$50 bottle. At \$20-\$25 for a 200ml, I could get sucked into trying to play along with a handful. But ultimately John, the forums and other bloggers are going to create a rush on a couple of individual bottles that "we can't live without" and the rest will just sit there for a loooong time.

I wish they'd taken a more practical approach to this project. However, as somebody noted above, the COOL thing would be local tasting events with different bottlings. That would be a really solid approach and help offset the price/rarity issue.

REPLY

**Ryan** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 12:10 PM

Agreed timd. It's worth noting that Sazerac's steady drumbeat in the press, concerning this product line, is that Single Oak is part of an intention to lay the foundation for bourbon(s) ultimately receiving the highest scores and most flattering praise from whisk(e)y reviewers. I'm aware they've created an 'interactive' website for customers, but c'mon... 'real world' consumers have no idea what they're buying until purchasing and registering, and then interaction is limited a description of what one has just bought coupled with few tickbox (survey) questions. I would not call that informative or empowering, I would call that a scavenger hunt. Whereas spirits bloggers are instantly empowered with distillery/brand ambassador information ("decoder rings") and free tasting samples to help them describe—in detail—their favorites of the first release. This one was never intended to play for the 'real world' consumer, but for whisk(e)y social media fodder. A more perpetual cyber billboard for Buffalo Trace.

REPLY

**Texas** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 2:28 PM

Could not have said it better myself. I can see why Jason and John and Cowdery are pumped, but as for most of us...

REPLY

13 **PeterR** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 1:20 PM

John,

How exciting! Do you know if the bottle labels will contain specific information about all experimental conditions? Don't recall seeing anything about age. Since they will be released over 3 year period, is it safe to assume each year's release will be one year older?

Anyone in the Minneapolis area want to share the cost of tastings?

REPLY

14

**Jake Parrott** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 3:42 PM

Stripping and watering these whiskeys (which are 90-proof, chill-filtered) dulls the distinctions BT is trying to trumpet. 192 barrels is far too small a sample size to make correlative judgments.

So enjoy your buzz, BT. Then maybe observe how Four Roses markets to enthusiasts. They get it right.

[Full disclosure, I wholesale bourbon in Washington, DC, but I work with neither Four Roses nor BT.]

REPLY

15 **PeteR** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 4:11 PM

John,

Can you explain how you and Mark arrived at the 1396 tasting combinations? Is there some kind of mixing going on at the time of bottling? In total I only count 192 experiment corners. Also, in the top of the article you mention 192 wood sections, later you mention 192 barrels. Did you mean only 192 barrels? That would only leave <586 half bottles per experimental corner to be for sale to the public.

REPLY

16 **Cheryl Lins** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 8:24 PM

Hi, I'm sure BT was interested in exploring some variables in bourbon and has made a nice experiment. This number of barrels is a drop in the bucket for them. The fact that some of their customers will be able to try some of these experiments is notable. This whiskey honestly probably isn't any more expensive to have made compared to their regular 10 YO whiskey in the overall scheme of things. A little more effort in keeping track of stuff and smaller batch, but it's not like BT is hardup for cash to conduct the experiment. So I think the price is excessive. (Disclaimer: I'm a craft distiller. They're making my prices look cheap! 😊)

On the idea of producing the "perfect" bourbon (or rye or Scotch): I personally think is a boring exercise, pointless. The whole interest in these spirits is in their inherent variability. It's that variability that actually makes a whiskey interesting. It's one reason that small batch and single barrel expressions are so popular. Now from perspective of marketing, having a "perfect" bourbon is a great thing (or so it seems). Perfect may mean that John Hansell (or other respected reviewer) will give this whiskey a "100" score. The best it could possibly be. It will go on the "shelf talkers" with a big "100" in bold, and even someone not very knowledgeable about whiskey or bourbon will be able to say "that must be really great", and if it's in the price range they were going to spend, there's a good chance that's what they'll buy. And maybe the folks that have been only willing to spend up to \$45 for their whiskey, will be willing to spend more for the perfect bourbon.

But if the perfect bourbon actually captures sales, you can be certain that all the other majors will be emulating it or copying it, making the perfect bourbon knockoff. And if their version doesn't get that perfect score (or close enough, a 99), then those other whiskey producers will be saying "What does that John person know? Obviously not enough." 😊

And what if the perfect bourbon turns out to be just a better, more oaky version of Jim Beam White? What then?

I'm not trying to make snarky comments here, but to point out that there are downsides to this idea of a "perfect bourbon". There are people in the wine world that don't agree that Robert Parker's reviews have been universally beneficial. His special preference for certain kinds of oaky wines has lead some producers to modify the style of the traditional wines they've made in order to get higher Parker scores for their wine. You may think their being unscrupulous, but their actually trying to stay in business in the face of the global onslaught of over-oaked wine as well as industrial wine. I'd like to imagine that the bourbon world won't go the same way, but it's been leaning in that direction. Only time will tell.

REPLY

**John Hansell** SAYS:  
MAY 17, 2011 AT 9:05 PM

Thankfully, I will never be as important to the whiskey world as Robert Parker is to the wine world. Nor is it my desire to be so.

REPLY

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