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Tuesday, May 3, 2011

More About The Buffalo Trace Single Oak Project.

If you are interested in the new [Single Oak Project](#) from Buffalo Trace (and you should be), I hope by now you have perused the [web site](#) or at least read the [press release](#). This thing is too detailed and too complicated for me to explain it all here.

The Single Oak Project is unique. No one in the whiskey industry has ever done anything like this before. *Why* are they doing it? They are doing it for themselves but also for *you*, the person who reads this blog, i.e., people like us who care way too much about American whiskey and American whiskey-making. Sickness, meet your enablers.

This is craft distilling at its finest, a model and challenge to anyone who claims that descriptor. Buffalo Trace, of course, would not ordinarily be considered a craft distillery but they are blurring the line with this project. What self-proclaimed craft distillery could even attempt something this ambitious?

The Single Oak Project is supposed to be fun but it has a serious side. It represents a genuine and ongoing exploration of the factors that make American whiskey what it is, in an effort to make it better.

Best of all, you can participate in a meaningful way.

On Friday, I tasted the first release set of 12. There were 192 different barrels, hence there are 192 different whiskeys in the project. They will release 12 whiskeys per quarter for the next four years.

Twelve is a good number because that is a standard case in the liquor business. Each case will contain one bottle each of this release. They are 375 ml bottles, 'splits' in wine parlance, and will cost \$46.35 each.

It will start shipping soon and should reach retail by the end of the month. Quantities are very limited – about 400 cases total – so talk to your whiskey monger now.

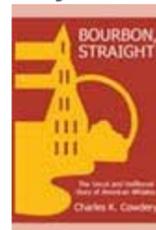
Here is some of what I experienced during the tasting on Friday.

One clever thing they have done is compress the number of variables for each release. Therefore, any two bottles will teach you something really cool. You can, for example, taste two whiskeys in which the only variable is grain coarseness. *Everything* else is controlled for -- I mean *everything* -- and they *do* taste different.

Think about it this way. You can taste two bottles of Blanton's or any other single barrel bourbon, from two different barrels, and know that any differences you taste are coming from the barrel, but you can't know what it is about the barrel that is causing the difference. With Single Oak Project bourbons, you know, because the *only* difference is that one is fine grain and the other is coarse, for example. *Everything* else about the distillate and barrel is the same. Hell, all of the wood is from the same tree.

That is the point of 'single tree,' by the way. It's not because a single-tree barrel is better. It's because with a single tree you have control over all variables because every stave and both heads are made of wood from the same tree. Anything that is true of one stave in that barrel is true of all of them.

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I said you can learn something cool with even two bottles but what if you can get your hands on only one? What then? In that case, I suggest comparing it either to your favorite bourbon or Tennessee whiskey, or specifically to Buffalo Trace bourbon. Use that as a baseline. If your Single Oak bottle is rye recipe, then by comparing it to Buffalo Trace you already have many things in common.

For this first release of Single Oak there are just three variables: recipe (wheat or rye as flavor grain), grain (fine, average, coarse), and tree cut (top half, bottom half).

You know what makes a huge difference? Tree cut, i.e., whether the wood for the barrel came from the top of the tree or the bottom of the tree. Who knew?

There have been some early critics of the project who question its emphasis on barrels. If you think it's possible to overstate the importance of the barrel to American whiskey, you know very little about American whiskey.

When you buy a bottle of Single Oak Project Bourbon, all you will know is its barrel number. Then you can go to the [website](#) to get the full provenance of that barrel. I have no doubt that when this gets going people will post the provenance of each barrel on Straight Bourbon, Bourbon Enthusiast, and similar sites.

This is just one of many experiments Buffalo Trace has conducted in its quest for the 'Holy Grail' of bourbon, aka 'the perfect bourbon.'

Many early critics have taken offense at that too, considering it hubristic, which it is in a way. On the other hand, whiskey is a very same-as-it-ever-was business. Consistency is a core value. Buffalo Trace is just saying that consistency and a constant quest to improve can coexist.

Let me put the span of this thing in perspective. Late Friday morning we planted a white oak tree in honor of Ronnie Eddins on the grounds at Buffalo Trace. Eddins was the longtime warehouse supervisor who died last October. It was Eddins who went to Missouri a decade ago and selected the 96 oak trees for this project. Everyone at Buffalo Trace recognizes that they are working on projects that still will be going long after they are not. That is the nature of whiskey-making.

The rye recipe bourbons in the set taste more or less like Buffalo Trace. The wheaters are not quite Weller, but they're good. Everything I tasted was good. There is no reason any of these whiskeys should be less than good, but inevitably some will taste better than others.

That is why consumers are being asked to review and rate every Single Oak Project whiskey they try. In four years, each barrel will have a score, and one will win. Buffalo Trace intends to replicate that one, in terms of duplicating its specifications, on a production scale, and that will be the Single Oak Project Bourbon going forward (with, I assume, an interlude for proper aging).

Why do I suggest you compare a Single Oak Project whiskey to your personal favorite bourbon or Tennessee whiskey? Because the idea is to learn what variables cause what differences and which combinations of variables are most pleasing to -- *you*. That ultimately is what they -- and you -- will get out of this.

Posted by Chuck Cowdery at **5:09 PM**

Labels:

Buffalo Trace

3 comments:

sku said...

The more I learn about this the more intriguing it sounds, and the more interested I am in it. This may be the single most ambitious project to come out of any distillery or spirits company ever. I can't think of anything comparable, can you Chuck?

May 3, 2011 5:19 PM





Chuck Cowdery said...

It reminds me of some experiments Independent Stave, the cooperage, has done with the assistance of the distilleries. Otherwise, no.

May 3, 2011 5:39 PM

Jason Pyle said...

Chuck, while the Single Oak website does a great job explaining this extremely cool project, I think your post and your contributions recently to Straightbourbon have done the most to put this into context.

I'm excited and can't wait to try as many as I can get my hands on.

However, while a consumer could certainly compare this to their fave American Whiskey and learn something, it seems the biggest comparison is as they intended, comparing known variables to known variables within their own offerings. I'm not sure that a consumer gets as much out of this buying one of the products. It seems to me you really have to commit to buying a couple to see the biggest differences. Otherwise it's a, "Hmm, that could be the wood grain, but not sure."

That's minor and hopefully those that really want to take this on seriously are able to do so with decent availability.

The only other issue I see is execution once all of this is done. Tree's are different. That's a given. And it seems to me eliminating the "Single Oak" part of it would have been a better way to ensure they were able to execute a repeatable flavor profile once a favorite(s) was determined. It doesn't take away from the cool or fun factor, but I think it makes delivering on the winner very tough. But I may be missing the point with that. This may just be more of an educational foray by BT for themselves and for consumers vs. really trying to make the bourbon that appears to more folks.

Anyway, this is indeed very intriguing, super geeky, which is also cool, and definitely craft to the core. Can't wait to try it as mentioned.

Thanks for all of the additional info.

May 3, 2011 8:55 PM

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