WHISKY ADVOCATE

Date: Saturday, October 01, 2011
Location: EMMAUS, PA
Circulation (DMA): 40,000 (N/A)
Type (Frequency): Magazine (4Y)
Page: 18
Keyword: Buffalo Trace

Buffalo Trace Unveils Single Oak Bourbon Experiment

BY CHARLES K. COWDERY

It was hiding in plain sight.

Journalists summoned to Kentucky's Buffalo Trace distillery at the end of April for a "major announcement" knew only that it had to do with CEO Mark Brown's oft-repeated "Quest for the Holy Grail" of bourbon.

Had it been found?

Although no 'perfect bourbon' was revealed, something else remarkable was. Though less than the Grail, it was more than a shrubbery. It was a Missouri grove of 150 year old white oaks, felled more than a decade ago and rendered into 192 whiskey barrels, two from each tree.

Those barrels were then filled with bourbon white dog, and thus was launched one of the boldest, most sweeping experiments in the history of American whiskey.

Bottling the first release of the Single Oak Project.

Whiskey experiments are hard to do because the best ones take at least one full maturation cycle. When all results are in, this one will have spanned fifteen years.

The Single Oak Project had been alluded to in the past as "something else we're working on," so the fact that Buffalo Trace and Independent Stave Company had made some one-tree barrels wasn't a surprise. What they did with them was.

Experiments are about identifying, limiting, and controlling for variables. In this case, some of the 192 barrels were coarse grained, some fine, some average. Half came from the top of a tree and half from the bottom. In half, the wood was air-seasoned for six months, twelve months for the rest.

For the whiskey, half was entered into the barrel at a low 105° proof, and half went in at 125°, the legal maximum. Half was rye-recipe bourbon (like Buffalo Trace), half was wheat (like W. L. Weller).

There are seven variables in all. Everything that doesn't vary is the same; such as distillation proof (140°), bottling proof (90°), age (8-9 years), distillery (Buffalo Trace), and distiller (Harlen Wheatley).

Since the experiment yielded 192 different whiskeys, a well-conceived release strategy was essential. Instead of all at once, the whiskeys will be released over four years. Every three months a new case of twelve will be released. The 375 ml bottles will sell for about $46 each.

Another way to look at it is that each release represents a batch of twelve barrels, which equals about 400 cases (4,800 bottles).

There is a method to this as well. Each release will focus on a small subset of variables. In the first (May, 2011), three variables are featured: recipe (wheat or rye as flavor grain), wood grain density (fine, average, coarse), and tree cut (top half, bottom half). Everything else is the same.

A special web site, where consumers can participate in the experiment by contributing their tasting notes and interacting with the distillery and each other, ties it all together. (www.singleoakproject.com)

When you buy a bottle of Single Oak Project bourbon, all you will know initially is the barrel number, i.e., which of the 192 barrels it came from. To determine the specific characteristics of that barrel — its DNA — you need to access the web site.

If you buy two or more different bottles from a given release you will be able to compare whiskeys that are identical in every respect except for the focus variables. Between any two bottles in the first release, for example, there will be as few as one variable, and no more than three.

It will be a learning experience for everyone.

"This has been a painstaking, but at the same time fun project for us," said Brown. "We have an insatiable desire to learn, and what better way to do that than to solicit the help of some of our most loyal fans to tell us what they like, why they like it, and then set about making it!"

The on-line evaluation solicits a rating so at the end of the experiment, one barrel will have been selected as best. Buffalo Trace intends to duplicate the specifications of that barrel and put that bourbon into regular production, but that is a long way off.

Many fans formed strong opinions before the first bottle had appeared in a store. Complaints were reminiscent of an old joke in which several people critique a restaurant. "The food is terrible," says one. "Yes," says another, "and such small portions."

The 'lily pads' (a cross-section of each tree) were arrayed for us in the room where we dined that Thursday night. A tasting of the first twelve bourbons began bright and early the next morning. We tasted them blind, then learned their DNA.

This taster found that top and wheat with an average grain (#99) produces a stand-out whiskey. Others were good too. None were bad, but some were better than others. The most noteworthy fact is that each was unique.

Only 180 to go.

BUFFALO TRACE