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Bourbon tasting at Iron Bridge Wine Company – a great night out

BY PAM DESMOND · NOVEMBER 7, 2013 · 2 COMMENTS



First, let me start by saying if you are local to the Baltimore area and haven't eaten at [Iron Bridge Wine Company](#), what are you waiting for? The food is always spectacular. The service is excellent and the servers knowledgeable. Go eat there, seriously.

So, yeah, I adore that place, and I'm on their mailing list.

I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with the IronBridge mailing list, because I am no longer in a double-income-no-kids situation. So when I see something like coq au vin with trumpet mushroom risotto or lobster artichoke bisque on the specials list, I can't immediately drop my previous dinner plan and get in the car. These days, I have to read that stuff and then stay home and eat my own cooking. I'm a good cook, but not Iron Bridge good. At least not on a random Tuesday.

Imagine my pleasure when I opened my inbox and saw that Iron Bridge was doing a bourbon tasting.

I have been to "Iron Bridge University" events before—informative wine tastings with a theme—and have always enjoyed them immensely. So I was super excited to see that the bourbon tasting included one bourbon I hadn't tried, and another that I had tried once, but only after "trying" lots of other booze at a party. Suffice it to say I wasn't swirling and sipping and rolling it on my tongue like a good little



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whiskey blogger that evening. Also, it's entirely possible that I might have "tasted" it out of a less-than-clean red Solo cup.

Bourbon tasting at the Iron Bridge. How can anyone miss this?

But I digress.

The bourbon tasting was part of the "Spirits with Stephen" series of Iron Bridge University classes. See, if you call it a university class, it's totally OK to taste four different bourbons and two bourbon cocktails on a Monday evening. Apparently, plenty of people agreed with me. While it wasn't completely sold out, it was full enough to feel festive.

Couples or groups of friends who had signed up together were seated at the tables around the edge of the room. I was seated at the "serpentine" bar-height table in the center with the other parties of one. My advice? The serpentine table is the place to be if you want to talk and get to know your fellow Monday-night enthusiasts.

Don't be afraid to go by yourself. It was an extremely friendly and social evening. There were a few other women about my age. As expected at a bourbon tasting, there were plenty of men. Most seemed to be either in their early 30s or in their 60s or 70s. The older bourbon curmudgeons eyed me a bit gruffly until we started talking, but once they saw that I truly loved bourbon as much as they did, the age and gender gap disappeared.

On to the drinkies.

Blanton's

The first sample was Blanton's single barrel bourbon, which I have had many times. I may or may not have a collection of the Blanton's horsey corks (I'm missing the O and the second N). The nose is dominated by oak with some vanilla and spice underneath. The first taste reveals toffee on the tip of the tongue, but is fairly "dry" (i.e. not sweet) for a bourbon. Citrus and apple notes and a spicy, grassy flavor are also strong on the palette. The finish is moderate, with caramel and cinnamon/spice heat and some remaining wood.

Blanton's was once a house staple for me, as evidenced by my cork collection, so I obviously enjoy it very much. That said, I have since found whiskeys I like as much at lower price points, or like more at the same price point. Still, you can find it at almost any liquor store, and it has broad appeal, so it's always a great choice.

Buffalo Trace's Single Oak Project

The inclusion of a Single Oak Project bourbon in the tasting list is what enticed me to attend, honestly. If you don't know about the Single Oak Project, it is basically Buffalo Trace using us all as guinea pigs in a large bourbon experiment. They make bourbons, varying all sorts of variables from recipe (how much wheat, rye, etc.) and proof, to how the barrels are charred and how many staves they have, to what kind of floor the warehouse has. I kid you not. The bourbons are then numbered and sold in 375ml (half) bottles.

Once you taste them, you are invited to go to singleoakproject.com, create a profile, and rate each bourbon. After you do, you can see the details of how that particular batch was made, as well as others' reviews and notes. Apparently, barrels 97 and 106 are in the lead, so if you happen to see one of those, snatch 'em up.

They're pricey for a half bottle, in the roughly \$50 range, and you don't know what you'll get, so I have been reluctant to buy them. But my curiosity and bourbon geekiness were undoubtedly piqued, so I was quite pleased to arrive at IronBridge and discover that we were tasting not one, but two Single Oak Project samples: numbers 153 and 169.

It's a bit pointless for me to give a detailed review of those two bottles, since the odds of you being able to obtain either of those in particular is rather low. The 153 was a 105 proof rye recipe aged in the wood-floored warehouse in a barrel cut from the top of the tree. (Seriously, you find out whether the barrel they aged it in was from the top or bottom half of the tree. Crazy.) It was extremely smooth with standard notes of caramel, cinnamon, and vanilla. It was frankly way too mellow to compete with the other flavor powerhouses in front of me, but might have been lovely had I been tasting it alone.



Single Oak

The 169 was a 125 proof wheat recipe. It had a decidedly spicy, somewhat floral quality that I wholeheartedly

enjoyed. I was shocked to discover that it was not a high-rye recipe.

I would say that neither pour quite lived up to its \$50/half-bottle price tag on taste alone, so the experience is more about the social aspect of the website, being part of the experiment, and trying new and extremely limited run bourbons. I would absolutely order more of these to taste at a bar, but probably won't buy a bottle. But if you're into being one of only a few people to try a particular bourbon, you won't get smaller run than this!

Hudson Baby Bourbon

This was the bourbon I had tasted in a Solo cup previously. I didn't like it at the time. I thought it was kind of weird. But it's one of the favorite bourbons of the woman who turns my hair blue, my fabulous stylist. Tasting it in this setting from a proper (i.e., clean) glass, it was still a bit weird, but good weird.

The "baby" part of this bourbon is the fact that it is aged for quite a short time compared to most bourbons. It is aged in smaller barrels to maximize oak exposure, and is subjected to "sonic maturation," that is to say bass-heavy rap music, to essentially agitate the bourbon and force it into the wood faster.



Hudson Blanton's

The evening of the tasting, a fellow taster suggested that distillers "sonically mature" bourbons to particular songs and market them that way, to music lovers. I suggested that he patent that idea. It could be a real money-maker, people, I'm telling you. We bourbon geeks are truly geeky. I would totally buy a limited-release bourbon aged to a particular song to give as a gift.

But gimmicks aside, how does this "baby" bourbon taste? It's good. Odd. Sweetly floral with a honeysuckle quality. There are licorice notes and other unusual spices to accompany green oak and sweet corn. I'm not sure I would drink it every day, especially at \$40-50 for a 375ml half bottle, but it was the surprise of the night in a good way. If you enjoy unusual craft bourbon and like to sip and ask yourself, "What the hell is that taste I'm tasting?" this might be one to try.

Cocktails and pairings

Speaking of surprise of the night, the food pairing was actually the biggest surprise. One of the perks of tasting at Iron Bridge University is the treat sent out by the kitchen to accompany the tasting. It is always lovely to every sense, and a thoughtful complement to the libations. I had imagined a not-overly-sweet dessert involving possibly toasted nuts or apples and some sort of burnt sugar. Caramel, toffee, butterscotch. Nearly every bourbon evokes those flavors to some degree.

Instead, what came out was a fried oyster with a mild cocktail sauce on a bed of arugula.

Oh. Yes.

I am not a chef and I don't understand at all why this was perfect. But it was. Perfect. It brought out the flavors in the bourbon and the bourbon brought out the flavors of the appetizer. It was a glorious pairing that opened my mind to the sorts of things that could be paired with bourbon. Oh IronBridge chefs, you have so got my number. Bravo.



Perfect, perfect, pefect.

In addition to the bourbons, there were two cocktails to taste. Now I'm gonna be honest. The idea of mixing any of these bourbons into a cocktail makes me want to weep. Do not mix any of these bourbons into cocktails. If you do, I will come find you and steal all of your good bourbon.

You don't deserve good bourbon if you're just going to mix it with simple syrup or Coke or whatever. Syrupy cocktails are fine if you're into that sort of thing—some of my best friends like syrupy cocktails—but not with any of these three bourbons or anything that costs more than \$30/bottle.

Got me? Do we understand each other?

When I mix (which is rarely), I use Bulleit as my mixing bourbon. Bulleit is good enough to drink straight, but is cheap and uncomplicated enough to mix without guilt.

Anyway, cocktails. One of the cocktails was a straightforward mint julep. Bourbon, simple syrup, and muddled mint. It was fine. The mint was high quality and lovely, but basically, I would rather drink... you know... just bourbon. The other cocktail was something they called a bourbon smash, essentially a mint julep with lemon pieces cut up and smashed and shaken with the mint into bourbon and simple syrup over ice.



Just a great evening out.

It was delicious, and would appeal to pretty much anyone. Fresh and citrusy, with that bourbon kick. I would still rather just drink bourbon, but the bourbon smash would make a lovely "sessionable" summer cocktail when it's too early in the day to drink bourbon straight without getting the judgey eyebrow from your friends. Really though, if it's that early in the day, just drink a fantastic craft beer or, you know, drink water to prophylactically hydrate for later.

All in all, it was a completely delightful evening, and one I would recommend to anyone who is into tasting high quality spirits. Stephen was a knowledgeable and enthusiastic host, I got to taste some new bourbons and meet some fun people, and the food pairing was a revelation. The next Spirits with Stephen evening will likely be after the holidays and will reportedly involve either gin or Scotch. Fingers crossed for Scotch!

Perhaps I'll see you there.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Pam isn't living some imaginary fabulous whiskey lifestyle, she can be found hanging at home in her PJs with her husband and school-aged twins, or driving her glamorous minivan shuttling the kids to dance and gymnastics. She also writes a blog focusing on self-love, body acceptance, and being a mom at Pam-a-rama ding dong. With the more lucrative half of her brain, she works as a statistician and scientific writer. Follow her on Facebook

([facebook.com/whiskeypam](#)) and Twitter (@[pamdesmond](#))! [Contact the author.](#)

John Thompson

Do you know if Iron Bridge is still stocking the Buffalo Trace or Hudson since the tasting? I've had some Hudson before, but I haven't had the Baby Bourbon, and I am curious about that and the Single Oak.

Pam

I just called. Unfortunately, they sold out of both after the tasting.

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