

SPIRITS

Shaking Up Bourbon

BY JACK BETTRIDGE

If you have any picture at all of Bourbon making, it is probably not of a 120-foot Russian trawler heaving on the open sea with whiskey barrels lashed to its deck. But that was an image that sparked Trey Zoeller, of Jefferson's Bourbon, when he envisioned his latest creation, Ocean, Aged at Sea. The idea was to recreate the conditions under which the benefits of aging were discovered centuries ago: Casks were serendipitously matured during shipping. So Zoeller asked a friend to haul some Bourbon around the Caribbean, and the whiskey turned almost black and hugely spicy, with lots of licorice and nutmeg.

If you know anything about the barrel specifications of your favorite Bourbon, you know that it is probably not much more than new white oak, charred on the inside. Buffalo Trace distillery has a much nerdier handle on the requirement with its Single Oak Project. In a search for the "Holy Grail of Bourbon," the company made two barrels (one from the bottom of the tree; one from the top) from each of 96 trees all chosen for specific grain characteristics. Buffalo Trace is releasing the product of the 192 barrels in very small batches (with numbered bottles) in hopes that its customers' feedback will illuminate the perfect way to make Bourbon.

If you think Bourbon's stature as one of the most highly regulated spirits—a corn-rich beer distilled at strict proof maximums, aged only in new barrels, never colored, flavored or blended—means it's a sleepy, staid category averse to change, you've not kept up with its recent history.

Or, for that matter, its long heritage. Industry legend has it that Bourbon emerged fully formed and immutable when Elijah Craig, an 18th-century Baptist preacher, accidentally set fire to the inside of an oak barrel and later found it yielded colored and delicious whiskey. Not only does the story have more holes than a wheel of Emmental, it is a disservice to plenty of Bourbon trailblazers. America's original spirit has in fact evolved continuously.

By the early-19th century, James Crow had developed the sour mash method, a now almost-universal process that reuses a portion of mash from a previous fermentation to ensure consistency in flavor. It's ironic, then, that Crow worked at what is now the Woodford Reserve distillery. As well as developing its standard release made in pot stills (most Bourbon is made in column stills), Woodford has also released the first sweet-mash Bourbon in recent memory (an unexpected meeting of maple sugar and rye notes) as part of its innovative Masters Collection.

Maker's Mark would be an industry giant if its only contribution were the audacity to have made superpremium Bourbon. But along with that crazy conceit, it reintroduced



Buffalo Trace's barrel-specific bottles

Bourbon made with softer wheat in place of the rye usually mixed with corn. (Basil Hayden and Bulleit Boursbons have since countered with grain recipes that show pumped-up rye quotients.) A half-century later, Maker's Mark moves the yardage chains again with Maker's 46, a version made toasty by placing French oak staves in the barrels for a few months.

Buffalo Trace distillery has developed a reputation for whiskey experimentation in recent decades. Its Blanton's, released in 1984, is considered the first single-barrel Bourbon. Drinkers were expected to recognize that the distiller's search for the best casks would mean slight flavor variations from bottle to bottle. Since then, Buffalo Trace's Experimental Collection has toyed with everything from grain recipes to wood types to how the still was fired. The company has even tried smaller barrel sizes in a test that was recently deemed a failure.

Jim Beam's Booker Noe, a larger-than-life distiller/ambassador, soon followed Blanton's with the scorching but flavor-packed Booker's, unfiltered and barrel-proof, and made with the same notion that certain floors of certain warehouses render better Bourbon. Booker's son Fred in turn created a single-barrel, high-proof version of the dynamic Knob Creek. Perhaps his most inspired contribution has been the Devil's Cut. A play on the term "angel's share"—alcohol lost to evaporation—the

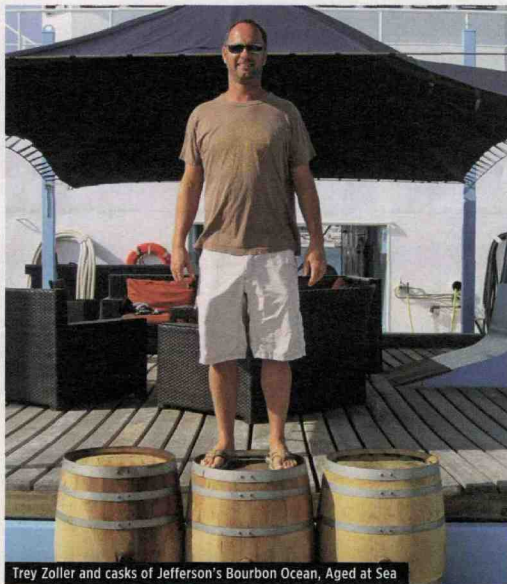
brand is based on recapturing whiskey lost in the barrel staves. Expect more such anomalies: Beam has just opened its Global Innovation Center in Clermont, Ky.

Noe's cousin Parker Beam, at Heaven Hill, created the vintage-dated Bourbon Evan Williams Single Barrel, a typically candied, fruity Bourbon, which stands on the belief that whiskeys made in certain years are distinctive. Chris Morris, at Old Forester, has since fine-tuned the idea with his annual Birthday Boursbons, traced to a single day's distillation.

Beam, meantime, is branching out with his Parker's Heritage Collection, including a Bourbon finished in Cognac casks, which weds the caramel of Bourbon with floral brandy notes. Another Kentucky distillery, Angel's Envy, does a similar treatment with Port wood that ends up full of red berry and sugar maple flavors.

And that only scratches the surface of Bourbon innovation. Microdistillers are offering their own variations, such as the solera-aged whiskey by Hillrock, of upstate New York. And since Bourbon never seems to get any time to slumber, it's hard to imagine how anyone thought it was a sleepy category.

Jack Bettridge is senior features editor of Cigar Aficionado.



Trey Zoeller and casks of Jefferson's Bourbon Ocean, Aged at Sea