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[SKU](#)

Sku eats, drinks and is merry in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles and beyond.

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Whiskey FAQ

[American Single Malts](#)

[American Whiskey](#)

[Distilleries and Brands](#)

[Bourbon](#)

[Canadian Whisky](#)

[Independent Bottlers](#)

[Irish Whiskey](#)

[Japanese Whisky](#)

[Rye](#)

[Scotch](#)

[Tennessee Whiskey](#)

[Trader Joe's Scotch](#)

[Reading Whiskey Labels](#)

[Whisky or Whiskey?](#)

Whisky Links

[Bourbon Dork](#)

[Chuck Cowdery Blog](#)

[\(Bourbon\)](#)

[Dr. Whisky](#)

[Nonjatta \(Japanese](#)

[Whiskey\)](#)

[Sláinte: The Irish Whiskey](#)

[Blog](#)

[StraightBourbon.com](#)

[The Scotch Blog](#)

[The Scotch Chix](#)

[What Does John Know?](#)

[\(Malt Advocate Mag. Blog\)](#)

[Whiskey Minute \(Recent](#)

[Eats on YouTube\)](#)

[Whisky Cast \(Podcast\)](#)

[Whisky Magazine](#)

[WhiskyWhiskyWhisky](#)

[Forum](#)

Blog Archive

▼ 2011 (57)

▼ May (6)

[Whiskey Wednesday:](#)

[The Buffalo Trace](#)

[Single Oak P...](#)

[Lukshon: You Get](#)

[What You Get](#)

[New York Report:](#)

[Third Wave Coffee](#)

[at Grumpy and ...](#)

[Whiskey Wednesday:](#)

[Introducing The](#)

[Single Cow Pro...](#)

[Whiskey Wednesday:](#)

[Know the New](#)

[Knob](#)

[New York Report:](#)

[Minetta Tavern](#)

► April (12)

► March (14)

► February (12)

► January (13)

► 2010 (170)

► 2009 (168)

► 2008 (165)

► 2007 (103)

TUESDAY, MAY 10, 2011

Whiskey Wednesday: The Buffalo Trace Single Oak Project

Last week, I [poked](#) what I thought was a little good natured fun at Buffalo Trace's new Single Oak Project. Based on the comments, though, it appears that I hit a bit of a nerve. The Project appears to be as controversial as it is innovative, so I thought I'd give it a more in depth treatment.

The Prelude: The Perfect Bourbon

Earlier this year, Buffalo Trace started dropping hints about a major spring release. Back in March, BT Master Distiller Harlen Wheatley, speaking on the [K&L Spirit Journal podcast](#), let drop that there was a big release coming in April.

A few days later, the *Washington Post* ran a story by Jason Wilson provocatively entitled [Does the Perfect Bourbon Exist?](#) In the story, Wilson revealed something called Project Holy Grail, an effort by BT to isolate the variables that would lead to the perfect bourbon, designed to get a perfect 100 point rating the spirits world's most influential critics, "among them F. Paul Pacult, who publishes the newsletter Spirit Journal; Gary Regan, the cocktail columnist of the San Francisco Chronicle; and John Hansell, editor of Malt Advocate magazine."

This led to a long and far ranging discussion on a [number of whiskey sites](#) (several of which I participated in). The assumption, reasonably gleaned from the *Post* article, was that BT's April release would be this perfect 100 point bourbon. People were, needless to say, skeptical.

The Release

What BT in fact announced in April was something very different from the perfect bourbon: The Single Oak Project, a release of 192 single barrel bourbons, each aged in barrels made from a single oak tree and each having some differences which would allow tasters to compare the impact of different variables on a whiskey. For instance, one barrel might be made from wood from the top of the tree and one from wood taken from the bottom of the tree, another might have variations on the coarseness of the wood, another might have the same wood but the barrel might have been aged in a different part of the warehouse. As Chuck Cowdery [explained](#):

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.

The bourbons are all eight years old and will be released in 375 ml bottles at 45% abv for \$46 per bottle (that is the BT price; as with many BT products, consumers in markets far from Kentucky will likely pay large mark ups). The bottles will be released twelve at a time, every three months for the next four years.

The Website

Here's another interesting twist. The bottle won't tell you anything about the oak. In order to find out what kind of wood and other variables went into a given bourbon, you will have to visit the very handsome Single Oak Project [website](#). By registering and entering your barrel number, you are given the opportunity to review the bourbon. The website review process consists of 11 questions in which you can click on answers; there is no opportunity to write your own notes. Once you complete your review, you get to view the "DNA" of the bourbon in that bottle, including the fill proof, char level, aging warehouse, tree cut, harvest location, warehouse type, staves seasoning, and woodgrain size. You can also compare your review to other reviews.

Presumably, BT will use the reviews (and their own evaluations) to figure out which variables might lead them further in their quest for that perfect bourbon.

The Reaction

The consumer reaction to this announcement, as evidenced on web

Labels

[Absinthe](#) (5)
[American Breakfast](#) (17)
[American Malt](#) (8)
[Apple Brandy](#) (2)
[April Fools](#) (2)
[Argentinian](#) (2)
[Armagnac](#) (2)
[Armenian](#) (1)
[Ask Mr. Pyrite](#) (2)
[Bars](#) (3)
[BBQ](#) (5)
[Beer](#) (1)
[Blogs](#) (16)
[Bourbon](#) (68)
[Brandy](#) (17)
[Brazilian](#) (1)
[Breakfast](#) (2)
[Budget Booze](#) (6)
[Burgers](#) (8)
[Butter](#) (5)
[Cajun](#) (3)
[Cambodian](#) (1)
[Camel Milk](#) (1)
[Canadian Whiskey](#) (9)
[Chanukah](#) (2)
[Cheese](#) (27)
[Chicago](#) (1)
[Chinese](#) (29)
[Chocolate](#) (30)
[Cocktails](#) (21)
[Coffee](#) (16)
[Cognac](#) (11)
[Colombian](#) (3)
[Commentary](#) (42)
[Cookies](#) (4)
[Corn Whiskey](#) (5)
[Corporations](#) (10)
[Costa Rican](#) (1)
[Cuban](#) (2)
[Cupcakes](#) (6)
[Deli](#) (4)
[Dim Sum](#) (8)
[Disneyland](#) (6)
[Distillery List](#) (5)
[DIY](#) (17)
[Doughnuts](#) (11)
[Drinks](#) (260)
[Eats](#) (289)
[Ecuadoran](#) (1)
[Ethiopian](#) (6)
[Farmers Market](#) (8)
[Favorites](#) (16)
[Fiction](#) (18)
[Film](#) (2)
[French](#) (9)
[French Dips](#) (1)
[Fried Chicken](#) (4)
[Frog Schnitzel](#) (1)
[Gifts](#) (10)
[Gin](#) (2)
[Guilty Pleasures](#) (1)
[Haitian](#) (2)
[Hawaii](#) (21)
[Hazlenuts](#) (1)
[Hollywood Farmers Market](#) (12)
[Hot dogs](#) (8)
[I-5 Eats](#) (1)
[Ice Cream](#) (19)
[Indian](#) (4)
[Indonesian](#) (2)
[Irish Whiskey](#) (12)
[Italian](#) (13)
[Japanese](#) (2)
[Japanese Whiskey](#) (9)
[Jewish](#) (3)
[Kids](#) (12)
[Korean](#) (28)
[LA County Fair](#) (4)
[Labels](#) (2)
[Las Vegas](#) (4)
[Latte Art](#) (1)
[Liquor Stores](#) (8)
[Mexican](#) (22)
[Mezcal](#) (3)
[Middle Eastern](#) (7)
[Milk](#) (1)
[Moroccan](#) (1)
[Music](#) (1)

forums and blog comments, is somewhat skeptical. Consumers seem unclear as to how it will work, how much the bottles will actually cost at retail, and whether they will even be available given how many of BT's other limited edition bottlings become scarce commodities. There certainly seemed to be a sense of people being overwhelmed with the prospect of 192 distinctly different bottlings being released rapid fire, 48 bottles per year. The cost of owning a complete collection, at the BT price, is \$8,832, and when you consider a realistic, non-predatory retail mark up somewhere like California, that easily passes the \$10,000 mark.


I'm as cynical and jaded as the next whiskey fan, but I think we should all take a moment to acknowledge that this is possibly the single most ambitious project that has ever come out of any distillery. I may not taste them all, I may not taste any of them, but I'm thrilled that BT is doing this. BT could have done this completely in-house without releasing a single bottle. I assume that distilleries are always experimenting with different variables and their effect on the whiskey. They just don't do it on this scale, and they don't release the results of those experiments to the public. The main beneficiary of this experiment is going to be BT, who will get to learn an amazing amount about their whiskey and its interplay with wood, and that will help them to make better bourbon, but we get a chance to go along for the ride. (I do wish these were released at cask strength, but of course, that would mean even fewer bottles would be available).

Is there marketing at play here? Of course. This is still a product, and BT is among the most skilled marketers in the whiskey business. Think about it, people scramble to grab up the Antique Collection every year, even though it is always the same five whiskeys, and the obsessing over each Pappy Van Winkle release has become akin to the annual Christmas rush to find the latest video game console.

Even so, I don't think the worry about availability is merited. While it may be hard to get any single bottle of the first set of twelve, there are going to be releases every three months for four years. I'm guessing that by the third release of 2014, people aren't going to be calling their retailers six weeks early to get a bottle. You may not get to taste all 192, but surely everyone will have a chance to sample a few of these.

The new media aspect of this project also merits mention. Letting people enter their own reviews on the website is genius. So far, whiskey companies have been pretty unsophisticated in their use of new media. This is the most promising new media whiskey promotion I've seen, though they probably would have benefited from using even more interactive social media devices, such as letting people comment on reviews or engage in on-line Q&As with BT staff. Even without that though, if people really take to the site, it will be an interesting way to view reviews and a useful tool for BT. After all, how many other distillers get the benefit of a database of individual customer reviews.

So I say, let the festival of oak begin!

Posted by sku at 6:00 PM 

Labels: [Bourbon](#) , [Commentary](#) , [Drinks](#) , [Whiskey](#)

3 comments:

Jason Pyle said...

I think you summed up my thoughts entirely. I was puzzled, mostly due to what I'd call a lack of very clear marketing by the folks at BT, but as a whiskey geek this is very exciting stuff. I'm anxious to see where it goes and more anxious to try as many as I can within reason.

[May 10, 2011 10:02 PM](#)

David D said...

I agree with everything you said except for two things:

1) \$47 is not the BT cost. It's what they say the cost should be. Young's Market in CA will set the cost, and in our case, the wholesale will likely be around \$45 meaning you won't pay less than \$55 or \$60 from the conscience stores. Although likely \$70 to \$80.

2) I don't think availability will be easy. We're one of the biggest Sazerac accounts in the nation and I'm only expecting ONE bottle of each barrel. Do we really think that with 450-500 or so bottles per barrel that each account will get more than one or two max? Do you know how pissed off people get when you tell them this? Surprisingly, they're not mad at BT, they're mad at ME!

[May 11, 2011 7:42 AM](#)



sku said...

Thanks for the clarification David. I certainly empathize with your situation here. I still think that while there will be a

- [New York](#) (5)
- [Oaxacan](#) (2)
- [pee](#) (1)
- [Peruvian](#) (2)
- [Pizza](#) (5)
- [Plate Lunch](#) (1)
- [Policies](#) (1)
- [Pork](#) (42)
- [Pretentious Naval Gazing](#) (2)
- [Produce](#) (9)
- [Reads](#) (32)
- [RIP](#) (8)
- [Rum](#) (3)
- [Russian](#) (2)
- [Rye](#) (41)
- [Salvadoran](#) (7)
- [Scotch](#) (76)
- [Shave Ice](#) (5)
- [Singaporean](#) (1)
- [SMW Extravaganza](#) (1)
- [South Asian](#) (1)
- [Spanish](#) (1)
- [Spelling](#) (3)
- [Steak](#) (4)
- [Sweets](#) (123)
- [Tahoe](#) (3)
- [Tastings](#) (9)
- [Television](#) (4)
- [Tennessee Whiskey](#) (11)
- [Tequila](#) (1)
- [Texas](#) (2)
- [Thai](#) (10)
- [Vietnamese](#) (7)
- [Vodka](#) (1)
- [Wheat Whiskey](#) (3)
- [Whiskey](#) (225)
- [Whisky Live](#) (8)

huge rush for the first few sets, it will likely settle down. While I find the project fascinating and I'm anxious to hear what people say about these bourbons, I'm not particularly interested in buying them myself (though I could see purchasing them for a group to share).

May 11, 2011 8:50 AM

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