

« [Privatizing the Washington State Liquor Stores? Scene III.](#)

[Innovation V.03: Buffalo Trace's "Single Oak Project"](#)



This is part three of an ongoing series on Innovation In The Spirits Industry.

V.01 was "[Innovation In A Brand](#)" about Knob Creek's single barrel.

V.02, "[Age Your Own Whiskey Kit](#)" discussed the art & science in barrel-aging cocktails.

Happily – innovation sleeps, but awakes when someone chooses to call for change.

And, in Kentucky at the [Buffalo Trace Distillery](#), they woke that lumbering giant with their newest brand, the singularly amazing [Single Oak Project](#).

First – let's get the basics covered for those that may want some background. We're talking about bourbon, but exactly what is bourbon? Well, basically, bourbon is American whiskey and is and can **only** be American whiskey – it has to be made in America, and we're very serious about that. Since '64, our congress has said that no one else in the world can call any distillate containing at least 51% corn mash, bourbon. So, since the early 1800's when bourbon was first made until very recently, bourbon has been *basically* the same thing. You distill it, you put it in a charred oak barrel, you age it and ... *voilà!* You have bourbon.



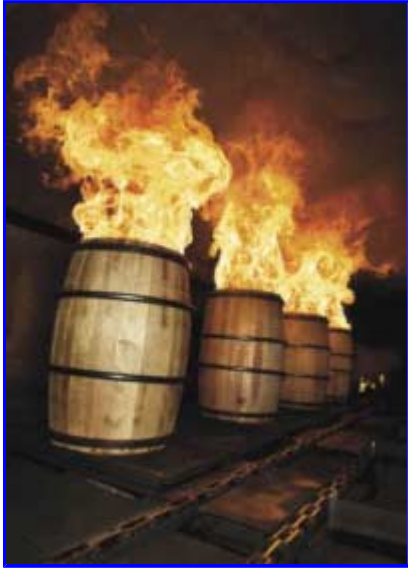
Innovation though has started to change that reality. The first *major* innovation was from the [Woodford Reserve](#) distillery, whose Master Collection turned American whiskey history and practice on its head by using different methods of production to change the flavors of their whiskey, such as using maple wood, old wine or relatively old wood for the barrels to age their spirits. Then, Jim Beam gave us the [Devil's Cut](#), which innovated by inventing a process to suck the leftover bourbon out of the used oak barrels...



Now, Buffalo Trace has gotten into the game by their Single Oak Project, and they are not mess'n around. Their innovation is that they have chosen SPECIFIC trees for their barrels and then have aged the whiskey in what they feel were the very best single trees that they could find. And, not just that, but TEN years ago, Warehouse Manager Ronnie Eddins went and walked around a forest in the Missouri Ozarks and picked 96 oak trees that they knew that they would use for barrels... Ten years ago. That's forethought. That's some nerdy distilling guys wondering what would happen if they used SPECIFIC trees to age their whiskey, and then even past that they aged the staves at

different rates, which

The issue here is Barrels... Bourbon is aged in white oak – the trees are cut into staves, which the wood pieces that make up a barrel. These staves are then toasted to burn the inside of the barrel,



Charring Barrels

which is what causes whiskey to get a lot of its flavor and especially its color. Here's the fun part (*at least for those of you that will enjoy this nerdy nuance*): How whisk(e)y works is that the high-proof, straight off the still alcohol goes into these barrels, and then the now-whisk(e)y will sit in that barrel for years, soaking into the wood. So, in the summer, when it's hot – the whiskey will soak into the wood, pushed in as the heat causes the environment inside the barrel to expand. Conversely, in the winter, Kentucky gets cold – causing the wood to constrict which forces out all of the whiskey from the wood – and season after season of this sugars which caramelized during the charring process and natural color are pulled from the barrel, and that's what causes whisk(e)y to be whisk(e)y. Sweet, 'oakey' & amber in color.

[**Side Note:** I am writing "whisk(e)y" with the brackets around the "e" because, generally for American whiskey, we spell the word with that "e", while in the UK, they leave out the "e"... with the exception of [Maker's Mark](#), who, on their bottles of bourbon, spell whiskey, "whisky" in the UK fashion due to their Scottish heritage.]

It gets even more nerdy – turns out that the wood from the TOPS of the trees contain more sugars, while the harder, older wood at the bottom will not provide as much flavor to the whisk(e)y. So, what Buffalo Trace is doing is splitting their normal ol' Buffalo Trace whiskey between barrels, EACH TREE getting their own barrels – but separating lots of it between the TOP and BOTTOM wood, which are made into staves and then into the barrels. So, not only are there 93 trees worth of experimentation, but really double that as they are selling different lots with the top & bottom staves, allowing YOU to taste the difference. That's some nerdy shit, 'eh? I love it.

The big question though? Is this innovation going to produce a better whiskey? Is this crazy? Is this even innovation or just crazy people acting crazy? Well, we'll find out, and when we find out, we'll let you know.



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