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Single tree effects

by Liza Weisstuch

Science is a mind-bendingly complicated enigma. There is a cause that engenders every effect, response and reaction, but even the most basic everyday causalities can elude us. The stimuli that provoke our sensory reactions are lodged deep in microcosmic domains that are seemingly inaccessible, incomprehensible even, to the human mind. That is why Buffalo Trace Distillery's Single Oak Project is a ground-breaking, historic endeavour.

Mark Brown, president and CEO of the Sazerac Company, and Harlen Wheatley, Buffalo Trace master distiller, have orchestrated an experiment of epic proportions to isolate the effect that key variables of aging and barrel production have on a whiskey's flavour profile.

Brown explains the undertaking as the quest to age and bottle

the perfect whiskey, or the Holy Grail. "Grail is said to possess magical powers," he said, sparing no whimsy.

The mission started 12 years ago when Brown and Ronnie Eddins, Buffalo Trace's celebrated longtime warehouse manager who passed away in October, wondered if and how the factors that differentiate one tree from the next, thus one barrel from the next, affect an aging whiskey. From 96 hand-selected trees in Missouri Ozarks, 192 barrels were constructed. Some were made from trees with coarse wood grain and some from fine wood grain, a quality determined by the number of age rings. Staves were cut from the trees' top half or bottom half. The staves were air dried for either six or 12 months. Then the barrels received either a #3 char or the

standard #4 char. Those variables yield 1396 combinations.

Now, for the spirit. The barrels were filled with either rye new make or bourbon new make. The liquid variable is further broken down by one of two entry proofs. Then the barrels were put away in one of two warehouses.

"We would need five quadrillion barrels to do extensive research. We're dealing with unconventional variables about which there's been a good deal of debate," Brown said. Consider, for instance, top half versus bottom half of the tree. The bottom half of the tree is closer to the soil and ground moisture, a factor that influences the chemical compounds of the wood.

Over the Project's estimated course of four years, there will be 73,000 total bottles released. Twelve barrels will be unveiled at

a time every three months.

And if all goes according to plan, the curious among whiskey cognoscenti will be actively involved throughout the experiment, serving as research assistants of a sort. Imbibers register on singleoakproject.com, and analyze releases online. Once the member rates the whiskey, details and the barrel's derivation are disclosed. Over time, a participant can conceivably discern how individual variables affect the whiskey. The highest rated whiskey will be produced for widespread release.

"At first you think it's all malarkey, but the more you listen, the more you know what to talk about," said Brown. "I don't profess to understand it all, but we'll get close." It is the manifestation of the vision of the beloved Eddins, a tribute to his work.