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there are more barrels in maturation
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0 74851 08450 2
October 2016
Issue 137
\$7.99



WORDS
LEW BRYSON

What's Coming Down In **MISSOURI?**

Buffalo Trace and the Single Oak Project

The damp quiet of the Missouri forest is shattered by the ringing roar of a Stihl chainsaw. The hard-hatted logger sheers off a shallow face cut to direct the fall of the big white oak tree, then pierces the heart of the tree with the tip of the saw. He flat cuts the middle, leaving only a narrow 'hinge' in the front, and a somewhat larger 'trigger' in the back; his assistant hammers wedges in front of the trigger to hold the path open for the saw.

The moment comes, and the logger guns the engine, steps up, and rips through the trigger in one smooth action. As he does, the tree slowly gathers way, and as the trigger disappears in a shower of wet sawdust the tree falls with tremendous impact... right where the logger planned it.

He steps back, doffing his hard-hat and goggles, and now you see that it's Buffalo Trace Master Distiller Harlen Wheatley. He grins broadly. "I'd like to see those craft guys beat that!" he says, clearly relishing the hands-on aspect.

Wheatley was out in the woods of southern Missouri following up on one of the more visible parts of Buffalo Trace's massive experimental whiskey program, the Single Oak Project (SOP). Begun in 1999, the project is part of the "Holy Grail Project," a whimsically-named but totally serious search for the

components of the perfect Bourbon.

The SOP was named for the salient factor in a program that actually considered seven different variables. Recipe (wheat or rye), entry proof (105 or 125), stave seasoning (six or twelve months), wood grain size (tight, average, or coarse), warehouse type (concrete or wooden floor), barrel char level (three or four), and the big one: tree cut, whether the wood for the barrel came from the top or bottom half of the harvested tree. As Wheatley says, "There's no end to (different factors); that's why you have to focus on a few."

The research part of the project has come to a close, but interest in the whiskey was high enough – and the whiskey definitely good enough – that Buffalo Trace has decided to make a regular bottling of Single Oak Bourbon, reproducing the winning formula from the barrel judged the best. That's a rye recipe Bourbon, entered at 125 proof into a barrel charred to a number 4 depth, made from staves cut from the bottom half of a tree with average grain and air seasoned for twelve months, and aged for eight years in a concrete-floored warehouse.

To distinguish that title difference, which part of the tree was used in the barrels, Buffalo Trace enlisted the help of Independent Stave Company (ISC), the Missouri company that makes the barrels for most of the Bourbon



industry. With the help of Wheatley and the late Ronnie Eddins, Buffalo Trace Warehouse Manager, they picked and harvested 96 oak trees for the project, each yielding two barrels, one built from the top of the tree, one from the bottom. ISC has highly automated their operations, and was able to track each log as it was rough cut at their stave mills, seasoned, and then shaped into barrels at their cooperage in Kentucky.

One thing learned from the trip to the woods is that 'top of the tree' is a bit misleading. When a 90 year old white oak is dropped, only the bottom ten to 15 feet are used for barrels. That's the 'money log,' as the loggers say, the prime wood that pays the most per foot. The next section up the trunk will go for railroad ties, and then for pallets, for a price that barely covers expenses.

A good tree may yield three barrels, though there are sometimes imperfections inside the trunk –

firescar, mineral streaks – that make some of the wood unusable. The loggers know that the better the log, the more ISC will pay them for it.

That's important, because the loggers aren't employees of ISC; the company doesn't own any land or trees. The logs come to ISC from over 200 small logging companies, often family-owned, or simply families, some of whom have been in this business for generations.

If you heard about the oak shortage a couple years back, you might be wondering if that has an effect on these projects, or the logger's job, or the barrel-making at ISC. Don't worry about that as we were informed that there is no shortage of white oak.

Don't believe that? You would if you'd get a look at the yard at the mill. On that day, spread out under a grey, low overcast sky, it's like some deleted scene from *Apocalypse Now*. Acres and acres of rough cut oak logs, stacked

Above left to right:

Robbie, Justin and Chad from ISC and Kelly Frizell one of the loggers. Bottles of the Single Oak Bourbon coming off the bottling line at Buffalo Trace.

five and six high, constantly sprayed by robotic water guns on towers, under a gray and lowering sky.

They're all 'under water,' as the yard workers put it, constantly wet down to prevent cracking and bacterial growth. The water runs off, dark brown with the leached tannin, into a settling pond, where it's pumped back up to the water guns.

Each tree is tagged with a barcode that will follow it through the entire process. That has enabled Buffalo Trace to put to use what Wheatley notes was the real lesson of the SOP about log selection. "We realised that our regular Bourbons need to have barrels made from randomly-sourced logs," he says, "not all bottoms or tops, not all from one place. They all have something to offer." Besides, as Buffalo Trace President Mark Brown pointed out, it's not like they could go through the forest only cutting down the bottom of trees!

There are still special projects going on. The folks from ISC noted the identification of the log that Wheatley felled, and said it was a particularly prime one. It may only be a private release, but you can bet there will be a 'master distiller's cut' barrel of whiskey ageing at Buffalo Trace within a year. Like the new Single Oak Bourbon, though, we will have to wait until 2025 to try it. ○

“ When a 90 year old white oak is dropped, only the bottom ten to fifteen feet are used for barrels ”

Lew Bryson