



RICHARD CARLETON HACKER

Sipping Bourbons

Small-batch and single-barrel bourbons have won over whiskey connoisseurs.



Photo: Richard Carleton Hacker

A bevy of bourbons: Proof on Main, in Louisville, Kentucky, is a bourbon-lover's bar, and stocks almost 50 small-batch bourbons, including rarities such as Johnny Drum Private Stock, Old Pogue Master's Select, Ridgemont Reserve, and Rowan's Creek, among others.

Elmer T. Lee. Now in his 90s and retired, Lee, along with current master distiller Gary Gayheart, still takes part in selecting the best barrels for each bottling.

Since that time, we have seen a number of classic sipping bourbons emerge, such as Russell's Reserve. Launched in 1999 to honor master distiller Jimmy Russell's 45 years with the Wild Turkey distillery, each 10-year-old barrel is still sampled by Jimmy and his son, associate distiller Eddie Russell, before it is selected for this 101-proof elixir. Jimmy also selects the whiskeys that make up the rich and elegant single-barrel Kentucky Spirit. And every year Julian Van Winkle III comes out with a limited, 3,000-bottle offering of Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve 23-Year-Old, which is quickly snapped up by repeat customers. Yes, we now have premium bourbons that are as collectible as they are drinkable.

A classic example is Woodford Reserve Master's Collection, an occasional release of what will eventually be a five-part limited edition that takes one of the whiskey-making elements — grain, water, fermentation, distillation, and wood aging — and tweaks it slightly, according to the inspiration of master distiller Chris Morris. Previously, there had been Four Grain, Sonoma-Cutrer Finish, and Sweet Mash offerings. But the latest, Seasoned Oak Finish, is by far the best. Most bourbon barrels are aged from three to seven months before filling, but for this present-

tation, Morris has taken custom-made new oak barrels that have been aged for three years, and sealed with heads aged for five years. Into this bespoke oak Morris put triple-distilled seven-year-old Woodford Reserve, and then aged it for an additional eight months. The ultra-aged new oak brought out additional complexities rarely encountered in bourbon, including cinnamon and curry, making this a rarity that will probably never be repeated.

Then there is Michter's 25 Year Old Single Barrel Bourbon, from a distillery name that dates from 1753 and allegedly supplied spirits to Washington's Continental Army, although I doubt it was as smooth and silky as this potion. Slightly headier is the uncut, unfiltered 137.4-proof George T. Stagg 15-Year-Old, full of sweet chocolate, cherries and honey. You might also consider sleuthing out the slightly elusive A.H. Hirsch 16 Year Old, the last of the old, post-Prohibition pot-distilled Pennsylvania bourbons.

And for those post-barbecue moments with friends, I strongly recommend Parker's Heritage Collection "Golden Anniversary," a compilation of bourbons from each of the five decades Parker Beam — a sixth-generation distiller and descendant of Jim Beam — has been master distiller at Heaven Hill. After 50 years, Parker knows where the best barrels are kept and this is evident in the flavors of soft butter, cherries and smoke that swirl in the amber liquid of this one-time offering.

Indeed, we have entered the Age of Fine Sipping Bourbons, and just in time, for they are suitable companions for warm days and cool nights. ○

The month of May always reminds me of the Kentucky Derby, one of our few national sporting events to be represented by a cocktail. After all, the Derby means Mint Juleps. However, as any bourbon aficionado knows, the best way to enjoy a Mint Julep is to skip the simple syrup and water, take away the muddled mint, and leave out the ice. If you do this correctly, you will then have a glass of pure, unadulterated bourbon, which is the only way to really appreciate this native American spirit. After all, a premium bourbon, small-batch or otherwise, is really too fine a whiskey to be tainted by outside ingredients.

That was the impetus for Beam's Small Batch Bourbon collection, which started out in 1988 with Booker's, one of the few uncut, unfiltered bourbons on the market, and bottled at anywhere from 121 to 127 proof, depending on when it was "dumped" (an industry term) from the barrel. Its high proof is why Booker's is one of the few bourbons I recommend adding ice to — just a cube, made with distilled water. But four years before Booker's, there was Blanton's, the first single-barrel bourbon in modern times. It was the inspiration of master distiller