



## The Art of Bourbon

*Over the past half-century, Maker's Mark has made the transition from small family-owned artisan brand to international bar-room staple. The Maker's story is a textbook example of carefully building a reputation by doing one thing, and doing it very well.*

→ **By Evan Dashevsky**



A little over an hour's drive from Louisville, lies central Kentucky's famous Bourbon Trail which lays claim to several of the top brands of that classic American spirit. The brands made here are some of the best-known examples of drinkable Americana: Jim Beam, Wild Turkey, and Evan Williams among them. However, no brand of Kentucky Bourbon is as instantly recognizable as Loretto-based Maker's Mark. While it doesn't match the output of some of its high-volume peers, even the most avid teetotaler can instantly place that distinctive cornered bottle individually dipped and dribbled in ruby red wax. That wax is a powerful visual cue from that forgone era when messages were sealed with personalized marker pressed into wax. No two bottles of Maker's Mark have ever been exactly the same due to the inherent randomness of the Pollockesque bottle waxing process. It's this branded uniqueness that reminds us of a time before the information age traded the human touch for convenience, and the industrial revolution substituted craft for conformity (even today, each bottle of Maker's is slathered in genuine red



→ A Cooper cobbles together charred oak aging barrels used in the production of Maker's new 46 line. These barrels are the key to tinting a Bourbon with just the right flavor and hue.



Top: Maker's original is unique among Kentucky Bourbons in its lack of rye used to formulate its grain mash. Right: Maker's Master Distiller, Kevin Smith showcasing Maker's 46, the company's first new line in 50 years. Far right: A bubbling, fermenting cauldron of grains that will eventually become Maker's Mark.

wax by real human hands—no robots dousing bottles in vats of processed plastic found here). If such artisan craft was put in the packaging and branding, imagine the care placed into the golden spirit within.

By writ of law, in order to call itself Bourbon, there are certain rules to which a spirit must adhere. For example, the grain “mash” from which the alcohol is fermented must be culled from a grain mixture that is at least 51 percent corn; the final product must contain no color or flavoring; and it must be aged in charred oak barrels. The processes of grain fermentation and distillation produce a crystal clear rocket fuel known as “white dog” (also sometimes referred to as “high wine” or “moonshine”) that emits a buttery or popcorn aroma on top of a brawny alcoholic burn. The white dog's bite is then somewhat muzzled with added water, but it will only graduate into Bourbon (both legally and sensory) after it is aged in wooden barrels where the white dog is allowed to seep in and out of the charred wood grain to produce that mellowed refined taste and unmistakable earthy hue. Within these legally defined confines of Bourbon production, there is room for sub-



had been well established.) Samuels sought to create a completely new kind of Bourbon: a more sippable, palatable spirit that would offer as much flavor as it did the burn of the drink's traditional flavor profile. To begin his hunt for that unique Bourbon flavor, Samuels put on his baking mitts. He began a process of baking various kinds of breads to find the perfect blend of grains that matched the aroma profile he had in mind. After several rounds of trial and error, he finally discovered the recipe that would become the foundation for Maker's Mark: a signature stew of corn, malted barley, and locally sourced “Red Winter” wheat (there are higher amounts of wheat and barley in Maker's compared to other Bourbons to make up the brand's signature lack of rye). The result is distinct, sweetly tinted Bourbon with notes of caramel and vanilla that softens some of the upfront burn you find in other brands.

tle differences in methodology and preparation. This is the juncture of the artist and the scientist. What makes a Bourbon distinctive is the varying makeup of grains in the mash recipe, the preparation and construction of the barrels in which it is stored, and the longevity and method in which the Bourbon is aged. It is through this artistic process of experimenting with the variables, along with a drive for a truly unique product that led to the creation of Maker's Mark.

The story of Maker's begins in the early 1950s in the kitchen of Bill Samuels Sr. who descended from a long line of distillers. (The “S” and “IV” on the Maker's label refer to Samuels' place as the fourth in a line of distillers. Interestingly, the family later discovered that Bill was actually a sixth generation distiller with roots leading back to the 18th century, however by that point, the brand

Samuels built his distillery on the site of a run down gristmill and started “mashing” in 1953. But it wasn't until 1958 that Samuels bottled the first batch of Maker's Mark. Here, the story of the iconic brand owes a lot to Bill Samuels' wife, Marge Samuels. It was she who helped design the iconic look of Maker's Mark, from the dipped wax to the squat cornered bottle to the patented font face and symbols used on the label.

Over the next few decades, Maker's Mark continued as a successful family-owned endeavor but would become a near-ubiquitous barroom staple in the 1980s following a favorable profile in the *Wall Street Journal*. Illinois-based Fortune Brands purchased the company in 2005, but the brand is still produced in Kentucky as a small batch operation (where “small batch” refers to fermenting and preparing 20 barrels from a single grain vat at

a time) and is still run by the Samuels' clan under the watch of Bill Samuels Jr. Overseeing production and artistry of the brand is Master Distiller Kevin Smith. Under his guide, the company is now, for the first time in the brand's half-century history, adding a new line to the Maker's Mark brand. This summer saw the introduction of Maker's 46. “Bill Samuels Jr. and I sat down and wrote out what we wanted to create: a Bourbon that was unlike anything else you could find on the market place,” comments the enthusiastic Smith. “We wanted to amp-up the caramel vanilla flavors that we love about Maker's Mark—vanilla is like catnip for people. We wanted to take-up that sweetness,



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that recognizable full-on power taste. We wanted to take it up a notch so that the flavor was well pronounced, but that you didn't blow your ears off with the burn from the alcohol. We wanted to create a lingering forward yet spicy flavor.” And to find this new unique flavor, in tradition of the company's founding product, they undertook “a lot of trial-and-error” to get that spicier, fuller flavor they were searching for (that extra kick also comes with a slightly higher proof: 94, as compared to traditional Maker's 90). “Smell how that opens it up. I have yet to have found a Bourbon as spicy as this” Smith says as he takes a bottle of 46 to his nose and closes his eyes to breathe in the new Bourbon baby he spent the last few years bringing into the world. “Now, without Maker's Mark we would have never gotten to 46. But this new product is really something great. I get a different flavor every time. This is just one of those incredible Bourbons.”

To achieve the new flavor, Smith turned to President of Independent Stave and all-around expert on all things wood, Brad Boswell (who refers to himself as a “wood chef”). Oak barrels used in the aging process are created according to specific “recipes.” These recipes have three main variables: the species of woods used; how the wood is aged or “seasoned;” and finally, how the wood is burned. The staves used for the barrels in the

production of 46 are from a French Oak that is aged over an 18-month period (I am told that French Oak adds a bit more kick to the final product than its American counterpart). Additionally, the barrels used in preparation of 46 are heated in a completely unique way. Traditionally, there have been two ways of using heat to add the final touch to aging barrel wood: either “charring” or “toasting.” Charring is when a direct flame is put to the wood to create a black-charcoaled texture on the inside of the barrels, while toasting refers to the process of placing the wood under an intense heat for a long period of time which “cooks” the wood but won't add any color or char. The staves in the barrels used to age Maker's 46 are prepared with a new process: “searing.” This searing process is somewhere in-between charring and toasting, where the staves are hit with an indirect radiant heat for a period of time to the point where the wood caramelizes, but never catches on fire. Burnt

wood helps facilitate a lot of the sweeter Bourbon flavors like vanillas and toffees, and this searing process (which is being utilized for the first time ever with 46) adds a very unique sensory experience. This stave preparation process is so central to the new line that the name “46” is taken from the number given to this new searing process that came about during the development phase.

In today's video on-demand and drive-thru banking world, it's a rare pleasure to find a product that is the result of human pursuit for perfection rather than configured from the triangulations of some tasting panel's group-think. When we see that dribbled red wax, we are reminded of a time where craft was king, rather than Kraft™. And as Maker's gains in popularity in markets around the globe, their artisan approach is finding appreciative imbibers from all corners who have grown weary of McMarketed goods. Maker's will, by design, never reach the volume of some of the Kentucky Bourbons whose only goal is to seal and ship as many bottles as their machines can muster. And for taking the time to get it right, the spirits landscape is a better place that Maker's has made its mark. **S**

Classic (Small Batch) Bourbon Cocktails

With so much character, yet such a smooth profile, Makers Mark lends itself perfectly to a fine cocktail. Leave the 'well brands' to amateurs and raise the bar on your favorite Bourbon cocktails, such as these classics.

The Old Fashioned

- 1 1/2 parts Bourbon
- 2 orange slices
- 2 maraschino cherries
- 1/2 part club soda
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Muddle orange slice, maraschino cherry, and teaspoon of sugar in an Old Fashioned glass.
- Fill glass with ice.
- Add Bourbon and a splash of club soda.
- Garnish with additional orange slice and maraschino cherry.



Bourbon Highball

- 2 ounces Bourbon
- 8 ounces Ginger Ale
- Build in a highball glass and fill with Gingerale.
- Stir and garnish with the twist of a lemon peel.

