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IS AMERICA'S WHISKEY COUNTRY BECOMING

"The New Napa?"

Jailer's Inn B&B, Bardstown, KY

By Charles K. Cowdery

NAPA VALLEY, THE CROWN JEWEL OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S WINE COUNTRY, receives more than five million tourists a year. They take in some of the valley's 200 wineries and dine at spots like The French Laundry in Yountville, one of the most esteemed restaurants in the world. They also take cooking classes and balloon rides, attend concerts, play golf, and, of course, shop. They spend boatloads of cash.

When you have a tourist destination that is so successful and well-established it's easy to assume it has been like that forever...but it hasn't. Before 1976 California wines were not taken seriously in the world market and wine tourism was no big deal either, a minor weekend diversion for San Francisco sophisticates. Most of what Napa has become has happened in the last 30 years.

It's not just wine. In Scotland, whisky tourism attracts about a million people a year, who spend about \$40 million. Although curious visitors have been calling on Scotland's distilleries for at least a century, the Scotch Whisky Tourism Initiative, now known as ScotlandWhisky, was only just launched in 2003. Last year, the number of distillery visitors increased twelve per cent.

DO YOU KNOW JACK?

It's not surprising, then, that entrepreneurs in Kentucky and Tennessee have wondered, "where's mine?" Slowly but surely, the parts of both states where whiskey is made have been developing a tourism infrastructure to complement the distillery tours that are their principal draw (both Tennessee and Kentucky have many small wineries

too, for those in Napa who are keeping score).

In Scotland, whisky tourism attracts about a million people a year, who spend about \$40 million.

The long time heavyweight champion in that regard is Tennessee's Jack Daniel distillery, which gives about 250,000 tours a year. That Jack is a world unto itself is evidenced by the fact that the George Dickel distillery, about seventeen miles to the northeast in Normandy, gets only about 15,000 visitors a year.

But Dickel's modest draw shows that Tennessee whiskey tourism does not have to begin and end in Lynchburg. Diageo just revived Dickel as a tourist attraction in 2004 and is pleased with its growth.





"There are adoring Dickel fans who make the trip to Cascade Hollow an annual visit" — GILLIAN COOK

"There are adoring Dickel fans who make the trip to Cascade Hollow an annual visit," says Gillian Cook, a Diageo public relations executive.

Jack Daniel's parent Brown-Forman owns many of the 'other' attractions in Lynchburg, such as Miss Mary Bobo's Boarding House Restaurant and the Lynchburg Hardware and General Store, which mostly sells Jack Daniel's souvenirs. The town square has also proved a hospitable location for a variety of unaffiliated shops, as well as for the Tennessee Walking Horse Museum.

There are about ten motels, a dozen bed-and-breakfasts, and a big RV park in the vicinity, mostly to serve Jack's pilgrims. While you're there, Prichard's, a micro-distillery known for its rum, is only about eighteen miles from Jack Daniel's — in the opposite direction from Dickel — in Kelso, Tennessee. It also welcomes visitors.

FOLLOW THE TRAIL

Although Tennessee has America's single greatest whiskey attraction — plus the Jack Daniel's Saloon at Nashville's Opryland theme park — Kentucky has done a better job at a coordinated tourism effort aimed at whiskey enthusiasts, from casual to hardcore.

The Kentucky Distillers' Association (KDA) is a 130 year old organization, but it only got serious about tourism promotion 10 years ago, with the establishment of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. The Trail was designed to be a central clearinghouse for information about all of the bourbon distilleries that

offer public tours, which it was until the end of 2009, when Sazerac decided to go it alone with its two Kentucky distilleries, Buffalo Trace in Frankfort and Tom Moore in Bardstown. That leaves the KDA's official Kentucky Bourbon Trail with six producers hosting public tours: Four Roses and Wild Turkey (both in Lawrenceburg), Maker's Mark (in Loretto), Jim Beam and Heaven Hill (both in or near Bardstown), and Woodford Reserve (in Versailles).

The KDA says its members have logged 1.7 million visits in the last 5 years. Those numbers won't impress anyone in Napa or Scotland, or even Tennessee where Jack Daniel's alone had almost as many, but it still has people calling America's whiskey country the "New Napa" or "Southern Sonoma."

URBAN BOURBON

Louisville is Kentucky's largest and most cosmopolitan urban center. It has no dis-

tilleries that offer tours, but it does have most of the state's bourbon-themed restaurants and bars, the largest and most diverse collection of lodging choices, and non-whiskey attractions such as Churchill Downs, Louisville Slugger, and the Muhammad Ali Center.

"Because of the success of models such as Napa with Wine Country and the Scotch Whisky Trail, people have an easy frame of reference," says Stacey Yates, vice president of marketing communications for the Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau (LCVB). "They know Kentucky as the birthplace of bourbon, so to add the dimension that it can be a



A Passport to Good Bourbon

Since becoming president of the KDA in 2008, Eric Gregory has launched several initiatives to coordinate his group's efforts with state, county, and municipal tourism promoters. The KDA itself runs the Kentucky Bourbon Trail Passport program. The passport is a free booklet with information about the six member sites. If you visit all six and get them to stamp your passport, the KDA will send you a T-shirt.

To date, more than 7,000 people have claimed their shirts, most of them in the last 3 years. Three thousand completed passports were redeemed in 2009; in 2010 they had passed that mark by the end of July. All kinds of people from all over the world do the Trail. "Harley-Davidson riders doing the Trail send us more pictures than any other constituency," says Gregory. Such rapid growth "makes it hard to budget, but that's a good problem to have."



area bars make up the LCVB's Urban Bourbon Trail (UBT), which has a passport with a T-shirt prize (like the KDA's state-wide trail: see sidebar).

Bourbon's Bistro was one of the first bar-restaurants in Louisville to play on the city's

EAT YOUR WHISKEY

Five of the participating bars are in downtown hotels. They range from the clubby, jazz-age feel of the Old Seelbach Bar to the modern art chic of Proof on Main. A few steps north of the Seelbach, the Maker's Mark Bourbon House and Lounge features many more bourbons than its namesake. It also sports a sophisticated menu, with items such as fried green tomatoes with roasted garlic aioli and goat cheese, Thai crab cakes, and shrimp and grits with bourbon-smoked tomatoes and bourbon cream sauce.

You can follow the trail of shrimp and grits out to Corbett's, a fine dining restaurant in a historic mansion in the city's eastern suburbs. It isn't on the UBT and doesn't spotlight bourbon *per se*, but aspires to a French Laundry-type of reputation.

vacation experience as well is an easy bridge to make."

That's good for a broader appeal, but if you're a bourbon tourist, you'll want to get right to the whiskey. Nine Louisville-

bourbon heritage, not least by putting 'bourbon' in its name. The upscale menu features many dishes with bourbon as an ingredient, and the bar offers bourbon tasting flights from its extensive selection.

Take the Taste Home

If you want to take whiskey home, whiskey you might not see at home, you've got plenty of options. Toddy's in Bardstown probably has the most history, being right in downtown Bardstown and having been founded, owned by, and named for a member of the Beam family. (He's long dead. The current owner is named Guthrie.) Bottles signed by local master distillers go on the shelf at Toddy's for the same price as unsigned bottles, for the first person who happens to see them. The same family owns the much larger – though less characterful – Liquor World on the north side of town.

For the best selection and lowest prices look for the Liquor Barn chain, which has several stores in and around Louisville and Lexington. If you're coming into Kentucky from the north, there are several excellent stores just across the river, including the Cork 'N Bottle in Covington, which has been doing its own single barrel bottlings for more than 20 years and usually has about ten different ones on hand at any given time. Another is The Party Source in Bellevue, whose whiskey director is Jay Erisman, a contributor to this magazine who somehow talks distilleries into giving his store limited edition bottlings no one else has.



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A bourbon tourist doesn't necessarily want bourbon in every dish or at every meal, but he or she does want memorable dining experiences that are regionally distinctive. Corbett's and other local restaurants like Proof, Limestone, and Equus do it by giving traditional local dishes an updated twist, emphasizing local and seasonal ingredients. Lynn's Paradise Café, also not on the UBT but a Louisville original, serves a bourbon ball milkshake made with Woodford Reserve bourbon.

ROLLING THE BARRELS

You can get it to go, too. Bourbon Barrel Foods is a small producer of gourmet sauces located in Louisville's historic Butchertown neighborhood. Owner Matt Jamie makes artisan soy sauce

BAXTER STATION PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE LOUISVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

using Kentucky-grown soybeans and winter wheat, which he ferments in used bourbon barrels for a smoky, oaky flavor with "a mild sweetness reminiscent of fine Kentucky bourbon." He also makes Worcestershire sauce that he ages in bourbon barrels.



Jamie's products are sold in local gourmet shops and used in area restaurants. At other places you can get coffee beans marinated in bourbon; candy, jelly, and barbeque sauce made with bourbon; even bourbon-scented candles. Kentucky Gentleman Cigars, based in Lawrenceburg, uses retired bourbon barrels to age domestic and imported tobacco for cigars they roll there. They will also sell you wood chips for your smoker made from cut up bourbon barrels.

Louisville also has one of Kentucky's two cooperages that make the barrels in which bourbon and other American whiskeys are aged. The Brown-Forman Cooperage makes barrels for Jack Daniel's, Woodford Reserve, and other Brown-Forman products. It recently began to offer public tours, which can be scheduled through Mint Julep Tours (see sidebar).

Kentucky's other major whiskey barrel cooperage is Independent Stave Company (ISC) in bucolic Lebanon, Kentucky, which is about ten miles southeast of equally bucolic Loretto, where the Maker's Mark distillery is located. ISC offers two public tours a day, at 9:30 AM and 1:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

KENTUCKY'S SECOND CITY

The Kentucky producer tours, including outlier Sazerac's two distilleries, are clustered in two parts of the state. Louisville and the two clusters form a triangle, each side of which takes about an hour to drive. One cluster is in and around the town of Bardstown, which styles itself the Bourbon Capital of the World. The other is just west of Lexington and forms a smaller triangle with Frankfort, Lawrenceburg, and Versailles. Let's look at that one first.

Lexington is Kentucky's second largest city, and between the University of Kentucky and the horse breeding industry, it supports many interesting bars and restaurants that have a local flavor. Chef Jonathan Lundy grew up on a farm near Midway, Kentucky, and has been the chef/owner of Jonathan's at Gratz Park, in Lexington's premier historic district, since 1998. His bourbon bread pudding is legendary.

In and around Lexington, horses and horse farms are the big tourism draw. If you don't visit any, it's still worth your time to take a leisurely drive through the countryside to see a few from the road, perhaps taking the long way from one distillery to another. Scenery and scenic drives in general, not just among the horse farms, are another attraction of both Kentucky and Tennessee. Lexington is also redeveloping the site of the old James E. Pepper distillery as a commercial and entertainment district linked to the area's bourbon heritage.

The Woodford Reserve distillery is tucked away in a hollow near Versailles, back a small road through wooden-fenced horse farms. The distillery's stone warehouses and unique triple pot stills make for an interesting difference when touring Kentucky distilleries.

The Wild Turkey distillery outside of Lawrenceburg is perched on a scenic bluff high above the Kentucky River. If

The Bourbon Bus

Although they do a variety of Louisville and Kentucky tours, Louisville-based Mint Julep Tours was founded in 2006 primarily because of the growing interest in whiskey tourism. "We have hosted whiskey clubs from as far away as Portugal," says Mint Julep owner Sean Higgins. "More groups are coming in. We used to count on ones and twos to fill the bourbon bus but now we are dealing with groups of six to twenty." (Mint Julep has been so successful that it has already spawned a competitor, City Taste Tours.)

Mint Julep's Higgins is able to work with the distilleries and other attractions to offer a unique experience tailored to each group. He offers tours to Louisville's Brown-Forman Cooperage, and he hopes to persuade Vendome, the Louisville company that builds most of the whiskey stills used in Kentucky and Tennessee, to offer tours.



you come at it from the Lawrenceburg side, you should drive past the distillery, cross the river, turn around and come back just for the spectacular view (also for the billboard-sized Wild Turkey sign you can see from the bridge that reads, "Bourbon Lovers, Welcome to Paradise").

The only distillery in Frankfort, the state capital, Buffalo Trace receives about 50,000 visitors a year and aims to double that. In 2010 Buffalo Trace became the first distillery in Kentucky to have its own restaurant on the grounds, called the Firehouse Café. They also opened walking trails to take advantage of the distillery's scenic Kentucky River location.

THE BOURBON CAPITAL

Bardstown is small, but mighty in bourbon appeal. Besides being home to the Heaven Hill and Tom Moore distilleries — Beam's Booker Noe distillery is just out of town to the northwest — it hosts the Kentucky Bourbon Festival each September. The Oscar Getz Museum of Whiskey History is open year-round. In the center of town, the Old Talbott Tavern has been a bar, restaurant, and inn since 1779. The Chapeze House, named for the local distillery owner who built it in 1787, hosts the Kentucky Bourbon Cooking School and other bourbon-related events.



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Bardstown's Federal Hill Mansion in "My Old Kentucky Home" State Park was Stephen Foster's inspiration for Kentucky's state song by that name. You can tour the mansion, and why not sleep there, too? You can't, sorry, but you can stay in a nearly identical mansion on the other side of town, the Rosemark Haven bed and breakfast. Or you can stay at Beautiful Dreamer bed and breakfast, which sits eye-to-eye with Federal Hill on the other side of Stephen Foster

Boulevard.

Kurtz's Restaurant is also right across from the park, and a reliable choice for traditional Kentucky fare such as fried chicken, country ham, and biscuit pudding with bourbon sauce. There is a good chance the people at the next table are current or retired distillery hands.

Of course, Kentucky and Tennessee are not the Napa Valley and never will be. It's not Scotland either. Those are just broad comparisons anyway, and America's whiskey region still has a lot of work to do. But just as Napa tourism took off after Napa wines became recognized as world class, American whiskey tourism will grow along with the worldwide popularity of the drink itself. Production of American whiskey has increased by more than 50 per cent since 1999. Megabrands Jack Daniel's and Jim Beam now get half of their sales from outside the U.S. More and more, that is where the tourists will come from too.

The best form of tourism promotion is to give each visitor the experience of a lifetime so they will come back and recommend you to their friends. If America's whiskey country can do that, it will have a long, successful run.



BOTTLES PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE LOUISVILLE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU