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Wild Turkey Distillery*



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In Good SPIRITS

Master bourbon distillers share a passion for their craft

*Jim Rutledge,
Four Roses Distillery*



By Carol Cowan

Central Kentucky's hot summers, cool winters and pure, limestone-filtered water make the region ideal for the exacting processes of bourbon-making. Most of the world's bourbon distilleries are, in fact, located here – including four just outside Lexington – and the Kentucky Bourbon Trail is one of the fastest-growing tourist attractions in the country.

And while all bourbon shares certain components, it's the master distillers who fine-tune the flavor that distinguishes one brand of America's Native Spirit from another.

WILD TURKEY

"It's just like cooks in a kitchen. You're working with the same basic ingredients, but each one tweaks his recipe in his own way," explains Jimmy Russell, master distiller at the Wild Turkey Distillery in Lawrenceburg. He has been crafting the premium brand for nearly 60 years. "As long as you stay

*Elmer T. Lee,
Buffalo Trace Distillery*





within the guidelines, the different tastes are achieved by how you combine the grains. At Wild Turkey, we stay with the old-fashioned qualities of a lot of flavor and body.”

Russell loves his work and personally welcomes many of the visitors from around the world who tour Wild Turkey.

On how to drink bourbon, he offers this advice: “Bourbon drinkers like to savor the taste. Bourbon is made for sipping, but it is all right to mix it with a bit of soda or ice. Drink it the way you like it. Personally, I like mine with a little ice.”

FOUR ROSES

Time, tradition, experience and passion are the qualifications for a job that marries art and science, says Jim Rutledge, who for 40 years has been master distiller at Four Roses Distillery near Lawrenceburg. “It takes awhile to train the senses,” he says. “Today, we can use technology

to measure components in parts-per-million, but the senses can be fine-tuned to discern parts-per-billion. I love the artistic side.”

Visitors to the Spanish mission-inspired distillery can witness the process up close, as well as sample the merchandise.

“We are the only distillery that actually distills and ages 10 different recipes. The common tie is the source and handling of the grains. Our signature criteria for Four Roses are mellow, smooth taste and a nice, soft finish,” Rutledge says. “We take a scientific approach to achieve the very distinct characters in the different types of bourbon produced here.”

WOODFORD RESERVE

In Versailles, the historic stone buildings of the Woodford Reserve Distillery are more than 100 years old. Woodford Reserve uses c.1830s copper pot stills and barrels made at the company’s own



cooperage to craft its signature small-batch bourbon.

“After distillation, the ‘new make,’ or ‘white dog,’ is crystal clear – it has no color,” says master distiller Chris Morris. “To become bourbon, it must go into an oak barrel. At Woodford Reserve, we heat and cool the maturation warehouse to drive the whiskey into and out of the wood in the barrel, which gives it its wonderful character.”

BUFFALO TRACE

The 237-year-old distillery near Frankfort where Buffalo Trace is made has transitioned from one master distiller to the next only six times since the Civil War, says Harlen Wheatley, Buffalo Trace’s current master distiller. Wheatley trained under Master Distiller Emeritus Elmer T. Lee, now in his 90s.

Wheatley notes that a combination of education and experience ensures preservation

and continuation of the institutional knowledge and distilling legacy of Buffalo Trace.

Lee concurs. “The most important factor is on-the-job training,” he says. “We also have great attention to detail. This is very important to keep things consistent.”

Visitors may opt for a general tour or the in-depth, “hard-hat” tour, both of which include bourbon tastings. 🐾

The state of Kentucky produces more than 95 percent of the world’s bourbon, and Lexington’s many distilleries are a great place to learn more about America’s Native Spirit.



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