

A close-up photograph of a clear glass bottle pouring a golden-brown liquid, likely whiskey, into a lowball glass. The glass is partially filled and sits on a light-colored, textured napkin. The background is a plain, light surface.

imbibe

THE STATE OF
**American
WHISKEY**



The State of **AMERICAN WHISKEY**

Interesting things are afoot for the country's signature spirit.

These are boom times for bourbon, and rye's not far behind. And as craft distillers introduce single malts and experimental whiskies, and major distilleries reveal their innovative sides as well, the state of American whiskey seems stronger than ever. Here's an overview of a spirit in mid-boom, and a look at the directions our favorite domestic spirit may head.

From distilleries to retailers to malt houses, every corner of the whiskey world is undergoing seismic change. We asked a handful of influential figures in the whiskey boom for their perspectives on how this change is taking place, and where they see American whiskey headed.



PAUL HLETKO
Chicago, Illinois

The founder of Few Spirits—maker of whiskies including a bourbon, a rye, a single malt and the limited-edition Brainville Rye, produced in conjunction with The Flaming Lips—Hletko is also the president of the American Craft Spirits Association.

“As people have moved away from vodka, they’re looking for things with flavor, tradition and great quality. When you combine good quality with tradition and distinction, that’s helped build the American whiskey category over the past 15 years. There’s a lot of creativity going on in American whiskey now. That’s going on with craft distillers, ranging from Few to Westland to House Spirits, Santa Fe, Corsair—and you’re seeing some interesting things coming down the pike from the bigger legacy distillers, as well. You can’t pretend that Jim Beam and Buffalo Trace aren’t doing cool stuff with American whiskey. There’s a lot of creativity happening, and that’s a good thing. Not all of the cool stuff will last, but the experimentation and creativity is something that will hopefully stick around and drive innovation in spirits in general, and American whiskey in particular.”

WHISKEY 101

American whiskey is an expanding category, ranging from classic styles such as bourbon and rye whiskey to single malts akin to those from Scotland and Japan, and including unexpected whiskies such as those made from millet or sorghum, as well as whiskies aged in novel or untraditional ways. Despite the variety, however, all whiskies share a basic DNA—here’s a simplified guide to the process.

◆ All whiskey starts with grain. While some whiskies, such as barley-based single malts, are made entirely from a single grain variety, most employ some mixture of grains for flavor, aromatics and body. Corn makes up the lion’s share of bourbon recipes (by law, the grain must account for at least 51 percent of bourbon’s mashbill), and rye similarly plays that role for rye whiskey (as well as appearing in some bourbon and mixed-grain whiskies, along with barley), and grains such as oats, sorghum, triticale and spelt have drawn the interest of some distillers.

◆ After the grain has been milled, it’s cooked (single malts can skip this step) and cooled. Yeast is then added (either directly to the thick mash or, for single malts, to the wash—hot water that’s soaked up the grain’s sugars and enzymes) and fermentation takes place, converting the grain’s sugar to alcohol. Yeast choice plays a big role in the flavor of the finished whiskey, and distilleries such as Four Roses use multiple strains to produce different results. Many distilleries also add a small amount of fermented mash from a previous batch to the fresh mash to maintain flavor consistency. Fermentation typically takes about three days.

◆ When fermentation is complete, the fermented liquid (called distiller’s beer, often with an alcohol level somewhere between 8 and 11 percent) is drained off and distilled. Column stills make the bulk of

American whiskey, though many craft distillers opt instead for pot stills, similar to those used to make Scotch whisky. Most whiskey is distilled at least twice (often in different stills—in bourbon’s case, a copper “doubler” pot still is utilized for the second distillation) to obtain the desired strength and character.

◆ The resulting whiskey is clear, and often quite raw. While some distillers sell this “white dog,” the spirit needs aging to reach its full potential. Oak barrels are typically used to mature and season the whiskey. (While other types of wood may be utilized, oak is by far the preferred style.) Almost all American whiskey barrels are made of American white oak, though French oak and some other varieties are tapped by some distilleries. Most American whiskey barrels are charred on the inside before use, resulting in whiskies laced with bold flavors of caramel and vanilla, though some distillers instead toast the barrels to produce a different set of aromas and flavors.

◆ Time is the final ingredient in most whiskies. Some craft distillers may age their whiskey for only a matter of weeks or months, but years are often needed for the whiskey to reach its full character. Whiskies labeled as straight bourbon or straight rye are required to spend a minimum of two years in the barrel (though if aged less than four years, the label must note this youth), and most American whiskies on the market are anywhere between four and 12 years old, with many bottles containing a mélange of different ages.

◆ Most American whiskies have nothing added before bottling, with the exception of water to dilute the whiskey to the desired proof (and the law prohibits straight bourbon or rye from having any other ingredients added). Flavored and blended whiskies (with neutral spirits added to soften the whiskey’s flavor) are obvious exceptions to this rule.

HOW TO READ A WHISKEY LABEL

HANDCRAFTED
Distilleries large and small make whiskey much the same way—“handcrafted” sounds great, but means nothing. Keep looking.

FAMILY RESERVE
See “handcrafted”—terms like Special Reserve, Family Reserve and similar language have no real meaning.

SMALL BATCH
“Small” is in the eye of the beholder, and some “small” batches still contain whiskies from scores of different barrels. “Single barrel,” while more descriptive and typically more accurate, still carries no legal definition.

DISTILLED AND BOTTLED BY
Is there a “Freeman Bros.” distillery, or was the whiskey purchased wholesale from another distillery and simply bottled by another company? (The answer in this case is “neither”—we just made up the name.) If the label says “distilled and bottled by,” you’re dealing with an actual distiller.

STRAIGHT AMERICAN WHISKEY
The term “straight” whiskey is legally defined, and this term is often seen on bourbon and rye labels. It notes that nothing but water (to reach the desired proof) has been added to the whiskey before bottling.

AGED 10 YEARS
Most whiskies are mixtures of spirits from many, many barrels—if there’s an age statement, it notes the youngest whiskey in the mix.

BOTTLED IN BOND
An increasingly rare term on labels, this carries legal weight regarding handling and taxation; the takeaway for consumers is that the whiskey is 50 percent alcohol, or 100-proof.

LOT NO.
This has no legal weight but is often used to note smaller releases from craft distillers, and different lots from the same distiller sometimes vary in flavor and style.




Illustration by Matty Newton; timeline images from left: courtesy of Maker’s Mark; courtesy of Jim Beam; courtesy of Anchor Distilling Company

1976
Aug. 1, 1980
1984
Late 1980s
1992
1993

A Modern Timeline of AMERICAN WHISKEY


The United States celebrates the bicentennial. Vodka surpasses whiskey in U.S. sales.

The Wall Street Journal runs a front-page article on little-known bourbon brand Maker’s Mark; the article is later credited with helping to revive bourbon’s long-lackluster reputation.



Blanton’s is introduced as the first single-barrel bourbon.


Jim Beam master distiller Booker Noe begins bottling select barrels of bourbon for friends and family; the so-called “small batch” bourbon is released to the public in 1992 as Booker’s Bourbon.



The first Bourbon Festival is held in Bardstown, Kentucky.

Sazerac Co. purchases the Stagg Distillery, which it renames Buffalo Trace in 1999.

Fritz Maytag establishes Anchor Distilling Company in San Francisco, with the aim of making pot-distilled whiskey with a base of malted rye. The first of what becomes Old Potrero whiskey goes into barrels the following year.

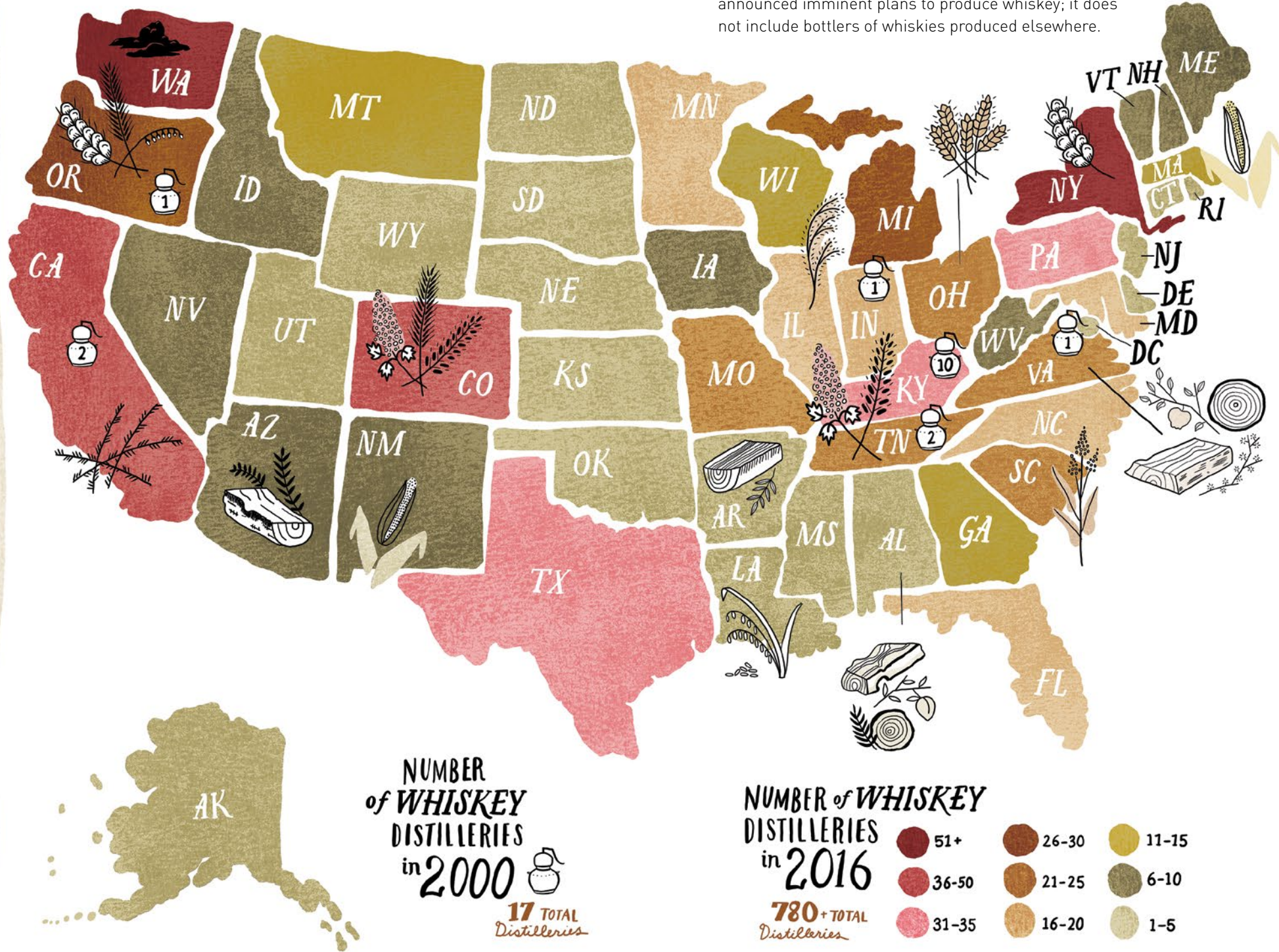


**This is a fictitious label created solely to illustrate the points of this diagram.*

WHISKEY DISTILLERIES in America, 2000 & 2016

ILLUSTRATION BY BOLOGNA SANDWICH

While around a dozen major distilleries still account for a vast majority of American whiskey production by volume, the nation's whiskey landscape has changed considerably in just a few years. According to Steve Ury, a Los Angeles-based attorney who's tracked whiskey distilleries since 2009 for his blog, Sku's Recent Eats (and whose research we've drawn heavily from for this map), the size and pace of change have been astounding. "My first list had maybe 20 craft distillers—now there are hundreds," he says. Here's an overview of the nation's whiskey landscape, along with examples of its range and regional styles. This list includes distilleries currently selling whiskey, along with those that either have whiskey maturing (but not yet available), or have announced imminent plans to produce whiskey; it does not include bottlers of whiskeys produced elsewhere.



PEAT Westland Distillery began tapping peat bogs on Washington's Olympic Peninsula to smoke the grain for its peated single malts, akin to the terroir-driven whiskeys from Scotland's islands.



QUINOA / TRITICALE / RYE Standard rye meets offbeat quinoa in the grains utilized for whiskey by Feisty Spirits in Colorado.



BARLEY / RYE / OATS Ransom Spirits follows a 19th-century recipe for Irish whiskey, combining oats, rye, and both malted and unmalted barley for its distinctive Emerald 1846 whiskey.



BLUE CORN Instead of basic commodity corn, Left Turn Distilling in Albuquerque utilizes blue corn to make its signature whiskey.



KERNZA This wheat-like perennial, long grown for livestock fodder and favored for its gentle environmental footprint, is being transformed into whiskey by Ventura Distilling.



HICKORY Wheat is cold-smoked with hickory prior to milling, then distilled into Rock Town Distillery's Arkansas Hickory Smoked Whiskey.



MESQUITE Hamilton Distillers adds a regional touch to their single malt by smoking the grain with Southwestern mesquite.



RICE Louisiana rice is the only grain utilized in Riz, a whiskey from New Orleans-based Atelier Vie.



MILLET Chicago's Koval Distillery has long embraced nontraditional grains, such as oats and millet, for its whiskeys.



WHEAT Middle West Spirits in Ohio makes OVO Whiskey, a delicate wheat-based spirit, and neighboring Michigan has 10 distilleries trying their hands at wheat-based whiskeys.



QUINOA / TRITICALE Corsair Distillery has long had one of the country's most innovative whiskey portfolios, made with offbeat techniques and untraditional grains like quinoa and triticale.



BARLEY More than a dozen distillers in New York make barley-based single malts, including Van Brunt Stillhouse, Hillrock Estate and Tuthilltown Spirits.



PEACH / PECAN John Emerald Distilling turns to peach and pecan wood for smoking the barley that goes into its Alabama Single Malt.



CORN Local grain matters to many distillers, and the New England Corn Whiskey from Berkshire Mountain Distillers uses grain grown just two miles away.



SORGHUM High Wire Distilling is one of the distilleries embracing its Southern roots by making a rich, alluring whiskey from sorghum.



CHERRY / APPLE Copper Fox Distillery makes its Wasmund's Single Malt using barley that's been smoked using apple and cherry wood.

MILE HIGH PEAR COCKTAIL

This aromatic drink from Seven Grand plays a barley-based American single malt against the bright fragrance of pears and absinthe.

2 oz. American single-malt whiskey (Seven Grand uses Stranahan's)
 ½ oz. pear liqueur
 ¼ oz. simple syrup (1:1)
 2 dashes Peychaud's Bitters
 2 dashes orange bitters
 Absinthe (for a rinse)

Glass: Old Fashioned
 Garnish: lemon twist

Stir the ingredients with ice. Rinse an Old Fashioned glass with absinthe, discard the excess, then strain the drink into the prepared glass. Twist a lemon peel over the drink and use as garnish.

John Coltharp
 Seven Grand, Los Angeles



Left: Lara Ferroni; illustration by Matly Newton; timeline images from left: Ben Krantz, courtesy of Jack Daniels

AMERICAN WHISKEY INDEX

- 2.9:** Amount, in billions of dollars, of American whiskey sales in 2015.
- 20.3:** Number, in millions, of 9-liter cases of American whiskey sold in 2015.
- 32,000:** Approximate number of barley varieties collected in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.
- <15:** Varieties of barley commonly used to produce malt for beer and whiskey.
- 51:** The percentage of corn that an American whiskey must legally contain to be labeled as bourbon.
- 95:** Approximate percentage of all bourbon that's distilled in the state of Kentucky.
- 170:** Percent bourbon production has grown in Kentucky since 1999.
- 2.4:** The 2016 tax-assessed value, in billions of dollars, of all bourbon aging in Kentucky.
- 4:** Approximate number of smaller-scale "craft" distilleries in the U.S. making whiskey in 2000.
- 770+:** Approximate number of smaller-scale "craft" distilleries in the U.S. making whiskey (or with plans to make whiskey) at the end of 2016.
- 115:** Estimated number of labels and brands that have bottled whiskey from a single distillery, MGP Ingredients in Lawrenceburg, Indiana.
- 3,500:** Number of whiskey barrels produced daily by Brown-Forman cooperages.
- 32:** Number of oak staves used to build a traditional whiskey barrel.
- 53:** Gallon capacity of a traditional American whiskey barrel.
- 60-70:** Estimated percentage of a whiskey's flavor that comes from the wooden barrel.
- 7.2:** Number of barrels of spirits, in millions, currently aging in Kentucky (includes whiskey, brandy and other spirits).
- 171,100:** Price quote, in dollars, for fabrication of a new 750-gallon standard copper still from Vendome Copper & Brass Works in Louisville, Kentucky, not including customization.
- 10-12:** Average lead time, in months, to have a custom still built by Vendome.



TAD SEESTEDT Sheridan, Oregon

Founder of Ransom Spirits, Seestedt produces four styles of whiskey, including *The Emerald 1865*—made from a blend of malted and unmalted barley, oats and rye, based on a 19th-century recipe for Irish whiskey—and the descriptively named *Rye, Barley, Wheat Whiskey*.

"It's not that I have anything against corn—my preference usually swings the other way. I was interested in what other grains could do, and there's a pretty wide range to choose from. Barley is the obvious choice, but even within that, there are a vast number of different flavor and aromatic profiles you can get. Personally, when I'm approaching a wine or spirit or food, the first thing I do is smell it. And coming out of the eau de vie world, I think of spirits primarily in regards to aromatics—that's what they're all about. I hope the little guys can continue to proliferate, and also thrive. I think there are a lot of challenges for small producers within the distribution chain—it can be very difficult, and I'm fortunate because I got an early start. But for some of the newer distillers, distribution and sales are their greatest challenges. Hopefully we'll be able to support this full spectrum of whiskey styles, with different mashbills and aging techniques. We have the opportunity to be the most diverse whiskey-producing country in the world. We're just at the beginning—there are limitless possibilities."

1996

Clear Creek Distillery introduces McCarthy's Oregon Single Malt, a peated malt whiskey named for distillery founder Steve McCarthy.

1996

As testament to the growing interest in premium bourbon, Brown-Forman launches Woodford Reserve, utilizing pot-distilled whiskey made at the historic Labrot & Graham distillery near Versailles, Kentucky.

1996

St. George Spirits founder Jörg Rupf interviews Lance Winters (right) for a position as distiller; for his résumé, Winters produces a bottle of homemade whiskey. Winters is hired; St. George begins producing its single malt whiskey the same year and releases its first bottles in 2000.



Nov. 7, 1996

A massive fire sweeps through the Heaven Hill Distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky, destroying seven warehouses containing 90,000 barrels of whiskey (an estimated 2 percent of the country's bourbon at the time).

1997

Jack Daniel's looks to the growing market for premium whiskey, introducing Jack Daniel's Single Barrel.



1999

Heaven Hill purchases the historic Bernheim distillery in Louisville and makes this plant its new center of whiskey production.

2003

Ralph Erenzo and Brian Lee found Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, New York, and are soon making whiskeys including a bourbon, a rye, and a single malt, sold under the Hudson Whiskey label.



HARLEN WHEATLEY
Frankfort, Kentucky

As master distiller at Buffalo Trace Distillery, Wheatley oversees production of whiskies including the distillery's flagship bourbon and Sazerac rye whiskey, to experimental releases and the cult bourbon Pappy Van Winkle.

"I remember when I came to Buffalo Trace [in 1995], seeing the potential that was here, and in the whiskey industry. It's been a perfect storm of getting good information out, of new products coming along like single-barrel [bourbon] that revolutionized the way people think about premium whiskey, and the internet making it possible to spread the word. It was the right time—the potential was always there. There's going to continue to be a very rapid change over the next five years. You have about 1,000 distilleries in the country, producing all kinds of products—there's going to be a huge variety of whiskey available, and that variety is going to skyrocket. There'll be a decision for the customer when he walks through the door, based on where in the country he is—he'll have local producers, and [national] people like us, and he'll have to decide what to spend his money on. They'll look for people with experience, but we'll also have people trying new things, which is why we do that, too. It comes down to the curiosity of customers."



THE CLASSICS

Buffalo Trace master distiller Harlen Wheatley likes to tell a story about his predecessor, Elmer T. Lee. "We were the first to come out with a single-barrel bourbon, Blanton's, in 1984," Wheatley says. "Elmer said they were going to charge \$25 a bottle, and the feedback was, 'Who'd pay that much for a bottle of bourbon?'"

The answer—then, and now—is "almost everybody," as bourbon's fortunes have soared in the decades since. Single-barrel bourbons and small-batch selections boosted bourbon into the spotlight before the turn of the millennium, and the thirst for American whiskey in recent years has made the nation's signature spirit an ever-hotter commodity. As prices have crept up—the most sought-after bourbons, such as Pappy Van Winkle (also made by Buffalo Trace), easily fetch four figures at online auctions—Kentucky distillers have sought to keep abreast of demand by eliminating some budget brands and replacing them with more mid-range whiskeys (sayonara, Old Fitzgerald and hello, Larceny) and dropping age statements from established labels, the better to stretch a tight supply.

Long-established distilleries such as Maker's Mark and Heaven Hill have helped satisfy demand by spreading their wings with line extensions such as Evan Williams Single Barrel and Maker's 46, and the venerable Brown-Forman company created a connoisseurs network all its own by regularly introducing limited-edition variations of its signature Woodford Reserve bourbon. Meanwhile, the old guard of Kentucky distillers is being joined by a few new faces, as brands including Angel's Envy and Michter's add brand-new distilleries to the Louisville scene.

But while bourbon booms, the real success story has been rye whiskey, which seemed to be on life support only 15 years ago. Cocktail drinkers increasingly demanded rye for their Manhattans, and as the few remaining producers gradually bumped up production (though the results take years to mature), some entrepreneurs turned to a seemingly bottomless well of rye whiskey from MGP Ingredients in Indiana. MGP rye is now sold under more than 40 different labels, and the whiskey has reshaped the way many drinkers think about rye.

Portrait illustrations by Matty Newton; photo by Stuart Mullerberg; barrel illustration by Bologna Sandwich; timeline images from left: courtesy of Stranahan's, courtesy of Jack Daniels

WHAT'S IN A BARREL?

The one-size-fits-all barrel approach has given way to variety among American whiskey distillers.

THE STANDARD

The traditional barrel used for almost all bourbon and rye whiskey is a 53-gallon first-use barrel made from American oak (much of it from Missouri) and charred heavily on the inside.

WOOD TYPE

Some distillers opt for Minnesota oak, Oregon oak or French oak, which have their own flavor characteristics and affect the whiskey in different ways, and others age or "finish" whiskeys in barrels made of maple, hickory or other woods, or in oak barrels made using wood from a single tree, as in Buffalo Trace's Single Oak Project.

MULTIPLE BARRELS

Distilleries such as New York's Hillrock Estate take a solera-like approach to whiskey, removing and adding small amounts of whiskey from multiple barrels; other distilleries may take whiskeys aged or finished in several types of barrels and mix them together, as in Woodford Reserve's limited-release Four Barrel Bourbon, which used standard barrels as well as maple casks, and repurposed sherry and port barrels.

REPURPOSED

Taking a cue from Scottish distilleries, American whiskey distillers are using barrels that once held sherry, rum, brandy or other wines and spirits, to age or finish whiskeys, picking up aromatics and flavor along the way.



WOOD TREATMENT

Distillers are experimenting with everything from very light toasts of the wood to deep, intense chars, and some are mixing multiple woods together (inserting French oak staves into a standard American oak barrel, for example, as with Maker's 46) or cutting a barrel's interior surface into honeycomb patterns to increase surface area.

ENVIRONMENT

Buffalo Trace's Warehouse X runs tightly controlled experiments on barrels of whiskey, exposing them to different levels of infrared light, temperature and humidity, to determine the role of such variables on whiskey's flavor; other distilleries are putting such variations into practice, such as Jefferson's Ocean-Aged Bourbon, which saw the barrels loaded onto the deck of a ship and exposed to the elements while at sea.



MONIQUE HUSTON
Chicago, Illinois

The director of spirits at The Winebow Group, Huston is a veteran bartender and spirits educator.

"There is such a range of people gravitating to whiskey today. I started in whiskey in 1998, and you had people who were long-time whiskey drinkers, and they were either bourbon or scotch drinkers—you didn't have rye as a category, and you didn't have American single malts. But now you have a much larger group; you have millennials, you have a lot more women who are drinking whiskey now, and this breadth of who whiskey appeals to is the biggest change. It's no longer the lifelong bourbon or scotch drinker coming into the bar—it's everybody, men and women, across the board. I think we've seen such an explosion in craft distilleries—it'll be interesting to see who matures, and who matures well. A lot of them will shut down, and we're already seeing consolidation from bigger companies buying craft distillers. It'll be interesting to see who remains independent, and who keeps their integrity. That will always be a solid point of differentiation among distillers—to see who remains independent and competitive."

Sept. 2004

The American Whiskey Trail is launched, highlighting the history of distilleries in Kentucky, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Virginia and New York.

2004

Jess Graber and George Stranahan begin producing Stranahan's Colorado Whiskey in Denver, jump-starting interest in American craft whiskeys; the whiskey's first release takes place in 2006.



2004

F. Booker Noe, longtime master distiller at Jim Beam and grandson of the distillery's namesake founder, dies in Kentucky.

2004

Heaven Hill debuts its Bourbon Heritage Center in Bardstown, making bourbon country a bigger draw for whiskey tourism.

2007

The U.S. Senate designates September as National Bourbon Heritage Month.

2008

Jeff Arnett (right) takes over as master distiller at Jack Daniel's, leading the largest expansion of brands in the company's history.



2010

As sales of bourbon boom, Maker's Mark introduces its first new product since 1953.

THE ROYCROFT COCKTAIL

Herbal and fruit liqueurs lace this rye whiskey sour.

1 oz. rye whiskey (Crunkleton uses Rittenhouse 100-proof)
 ½ oz. green Chartreuse
 ½ oz. Bénédictine
 ½ oz. Cherry Heering
 1 oz. fresh lemon juice

Tools: shaker, strainer
 Glass: coupe
 Garnish: thin slice of fresh ginger

Shake the ingredients with ice, strain into a chilled coupe, then garnish.

Gary Crunkleton
The Crunkleton
Chapel Hill, North Carolina



Left: Lara Ferroni; right: Stuart Mullenberg. Illustration by Mally Newton; timeline images from left: courtesy of Hudson Whiskey, Tad Myers



AMERICAN SINGLE MALT

Early adopters often lead short lives—they burn out or are bought out or are somehow subsumed into the bigger system. But in the mid-1990s, when Lance Winters signed on with Jörg Rupf at California's St. George Spirits, the goal was to do something relatively new, as well as to stick around long enough to see it mature. "The whole reason I started distilling was to make whiskey," Winters says. "Jörg's instruction to me was to make something original to the conversation about whiskey."

For that something original, Winters set his sights on single malt, a style more synonymous with Scotland and Japan. In doing so, St. George joined a tiny cadre of single-malt distillers that's now swelling into a small, but mighty, army. Single malts from distilleries including Seattle's Westland, Denver's Stranahan's and Virginia's Copper Fox have boosted the category's

prestige, and older expressions from trailblazers such as St. George are proving that there's merit in sticking with single malt for the long game. "When we got into the business, we had a clear understanding of what Americans could bring to the table when it comes to single-malt whiskey," says Matt Hofmann, master distiller at Westland Distilling.

When Westland debuted in 2010, it bet big on single malt, making the whiskey the only spirit the distillery would produce. That bet's paid off, not just for Westland—which sold to Remy Cointreau in January—but for the category, as well, with the distillery joining more than 30 other producers to create the American Single Malt Whiskey Commission in 2016. "It's become more obvious over time that American single malt has real potential," says Hofmann. "Not just as a novelty, but as a compelling category."



WAYNE CARPENTER
Mount Vernon, Washington
The founder of Skagit Valley Malting, Carpenter works with bakers, brewers and distillers to source and process specialty grains, such as rare varieties of barley, triticale and other flavorful grains, and to experiment with how the grains are utilized for beer or whiskey.

"In a way, the whiskey world's gotten more interesting because we're going back and getting something that was lost. In single malt whiskey, they started refining the malts to preserve the flavors they were after—that's a success story. But malt houses became more narrow in their ability to handle grains of different varieties—not just rye versus barley, but there are around 32,000 varieties of barley, and most of them weren't handled because they didn't fit the box of what they were looking for, so they were forgotten. Today there are distillers like Westland, Copperworks and St. George who are interested in introducing flavors, rather than just using the same approach. They're perfecting the way to make whiskey traditionally, while also looking at introducing new American flavors, like in the beer world. We've had some wonderful results in the first tests, trying other barley varieties that aren't standard malt varieties, and trying different roasts of grain, like in beer. We're anxious for the whiskeys to age, to see how that plays out. We're in a new chapter now, reintroducing flavors that were forgotten."



Jimmy Russell (right) celebrates his 60th anniversary as Wild Turkey's master distiller.

Suntory Holdings acquires Beam, Inc. for \$16 billion.

American whiskey exports top \$1 billion in sales for the first time. Sales of all types of whiskey in the U.S. add up to \$7 billion, surpassing vodka's sales figure of \$5.6 billion. While vodka sales still exceeded those of whiskey by volume, *The Atlantic* projects whiskey to pass vodka (in volume) by 2018.

In a case later dubbed "Pappygate," 65 cases of highly prized Pappy Van Winkle bourbon disappear from a Kentucky warehouse. In 2015, nine people are indicted by a grand jury in Franklin County, Kentucky, for engaging in organized crime in relation to the Van Winkle case and other thefts that allegedly pilfered more than \$100,000 in bourbon.

Bourbon sales exceed \$2.2 billion, up from \$1.3 billion in 2003.

The Jim Beam distillery in Clermont, Kentucky, debuts its American Stillhouse center, marking a further foray by bourbon distillers into tourism.



Global liquor giant William Grant & Sons enters a partnership with Tuthilltown Spirits for production and distribution of Hudson Whiskey, in what's seen as a boon to craft distillers.

2010

2012

2013

2013

2014

2014



ANN MARSHALL & SCOTT BLACKWELL
Charleston, South Carolina

As owners and distillers at High Wire Distillery, Scott Blackwell and Ann Marshall produce two bourbons, a rye whiskey, a sorghum whiskey, and a recent limited-edition whiskey made from heirloom Jimmy Red corn; the initial batch sold out in 11 minutes.

Ann: “When we got into the business, we knew there was no way we could out-Maker’s Mark Maker’s Mark, or compete with Jack Daniel’s. But coming from the natural-foods world, we knew we could be nimble as a small company—if we focus on the ingredients, and all the variables like the barrel, then we’ve got a leg up. We’ve got liberty as a small company to experiment with things like traditional grains that have a long heritage in Southern agriculture. There are now big distilleries that are growing test plots; we feel that craft distillers have had a hand in pushing these guys, and making the playing field more diverse and interesting. That feels like a win to everybody.”

Scott: “I think whiskey’s going to get more interesting. As a whiskey drinker, I’ve had my share of mainstream whiskey, and I like the idea of regional distillers making their own marks. Not every interesting-sounding thing is going to be delicious, but it’s like what happened in food: Natural foods started out as things that tasted like cardboard, but then people figured out that flavor wins in the end, and they brought some enthusiasm to it. That same line of thinking is what got us into this business, and we have chefs [in Charleston] like Sean Brock and Mike Lata who are big whiskey fans, and doing things with the same ingredients we’re talking about, and that keeps us charged. It challenges us to do better, and to think a little harder and look a little deeper. That’s our quest.”



St. George Spirits.

THE CRAFT BOOM

Fewer than 20 distilleries satisfied the taste for American whiskey at the turn of the millennium, but at the end of 2016, nearly 800 distilleries were producing (or had announced plans to produce) whiskey in some capacity (see the map on page 40).

American classics are the style of choice for many craft-whiskey distillers, with bourbon now bottled from Washington state to Florida, and rye whiskey flowing from New England to the desert Southwest. And while single malts edge into the spectrum, other more offbeat styles have begun to emerge—corn whiskeys made with heirloom grain, whiskeys distilled from grains including millet and triticale—and distilleries in every corner of the country are adding local touches to the spirit, seasoning the grain with smoke from mesquite, cherry or apple trees, or using regional grains such as sorghum or Louisiana rice to create distinctive local styles.

Craft whiskeys have also caught the eye of larger, established spirits companies that can take the whiskey

to national and global markets. Whiskeys from Tuthilltown Spirits (which makes the Hudson Whiskeys line), Anchor Distilling and Stranahan’s were early pickups, and in just the last year, Utah’s High West, Seattle’s Westland and West Virginia’s Smooth Ambler were all acquired by larger companies. For many of these distillers, such partnerships make sense. “Most of the innovation is happening on the streets, and it’d be disingenuous for the big guys to come in and tell you something is wrong,” says Westland’s Matt Hofmann. “You’ll just see more exciting stuff in the future.”

But as American whiskey continues to build, some distillers warn caution and urge consumers to play a role. “I’d encourage more people to support their local whiskey-makers, in whatever endeavors they’re doing,” says St. George’s Lance Winters. “The best things small guys have going for them is their independence—if you can help these guys preserve their independence, there’s a good chance they can do what they’re meant to do, which is innovate and be creative.”

Illustration by Maty Newton, photo this page: Ben Krantz, facing page: Lara Ferroni; timeline images from left: courtesy of Jim Beam, courtesy of Heaven Hill



WHISKEY DAISY



This riff on a 19th-century classic matches bourbon’s subtle softness to rye’s bright spice.

- 1 oz. bourbon
- 1 oz. rye whiskey
- ¾ oz. fresh lemon juice
- ½ oz. simple syrup (1:1)
- ½ oz. orgeat

Tools: shaker, strainer
 Glass: coupe

Shake the ingredients with ice to chill, then strain into a chilled coupe.

Jim Kearns
Slowly Shirley
New York City

<p>Nov. 2014</p> <p>The first bottle from the first batch of bourbon at Boundary Oak Distillery sold in an online auction for \$25,500, the highest price paid for a bottle of American whiskey at auction, according to the Kentucky Distillers Association.</p>	<p>2015</p> <p>After 50 years in the spirits business, Four Roses master distiller Jim Rutledge retires. The following year, he announces plans to open his own Kentucky distillery.</p>	<p>Aug. 2015</p> <p>Michter’s Distillery begins production at its new facility in Louisville.</p>	<p>May 2, 2016</p> <p>Jim Beam Bourbon fills its 14 millionth barrel of bourbon—an industry record—since the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.</p> 	<p>Nov. 2016</p> <p>Angel’s Envy opens its first Louisville distillery, at a cost of \$27 million.</p>	<p>Late 2016</p> <p>In a flurry of late-year business maneuvers by large liquor companies, Utah-based High West Distillery is purchased by Constellation Brands for a reported \$160 million; Seattle’s Westland Distilling is purchased by Remy-Cointreau for an undisclosed sum (the deal became official in January); and West Virginia’s Smooth Ambler sells a majority stake to Pernod-Ricard.</p>	<p>Jan. 2017</p> <p>Parker Beam (right), longtime master distiller at Heaven Hill and a member of one of bourbon’s most prominent families, dies in Kentucky.</p> 
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