

Food & Drink

BISTRO 82'S FAST START 57 // PHENOMENAL FROG LEGS 62 // DRINKS 71 // RESTAURANT LISTINGS 144

BOURBON IS BACK!



From Michigan micro-distillers to billion-dollar buyouts, America's whiskey business is booming

BY MICHAEL SCHAFER //
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL CRICHTON

Twenty years ago the American whiskey industry was in dire straits. Scotch, particularly single malts, ruled the whiskey world. Vodka, just like today, was the planet's most popular spirit. Bourbon was more popular outside the U.S. than at home. Distilleries were closing, production was way down, and the future was bleak.

h ow things have changed! Producers can't make enough whiskey today. Demand is booming, with no end in sight. Classic and craft cocktails — and a desire for local products — have contributed to the raging popularity of spirits.

U.S. sales of bourbon and Tennessee whiskey have grown steadily over the past decade, and exports topped \$1 billion in 2013, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

And in January, the Japanese beverage giant Suntory made a bid to purchase the Beam Inc. portfolio for approximately \$16 billion in cash. Included in that portfolio are many beloved brands, including the iconic Jim Beam, Knob Creek, Booker's, and Maker's Mark. If the sale proceeds, Suntory would become the world's third largest liquor company.

Suntory's malt whiskeys have garnered many top awards. If you saw the 2003 film *Lost in Translation* you may recall Oscar nominee Bill Murray's endorsement: "For relaxing times, make it Suntory time."

Back across the ocean, business is booming, too. Michigan State University professor Kris Berglund has been conducting "how-to" distilling workshops for several years. Micro-distilleries are popping up about as fast as brewpubs were

less than a decade ago. From Corktown to Traverse City, entrepreneurs are crafting a wide variety of spirits. The state estimates distilling could add \$400 million a year to Michigan's economy.

Bourbon is as American as apple pie. Seriously. Upon leaving office, President George Washington distilled 11,000 gallons of whiskey at Mount Vernon to become the country's largest distiller!

But some history and terminology first. All bourbon is whiskey but not all whiskey is bourbon. Confused? Let's step back a bit.

COMING TO TERMS: A WHISKEY PRIMER

The word whiskey is Gaelic in origin, meaning "water of life." Back in the day, like other adult beverages, it was much safer to drink than water.

In essence, whiskey (or whisky with no "e" but let's not make things too confusing) is a spirit distilled from grains including barley, corn, wheat, and rye. The process is chemically rather simple, like so many of life's pleasures. It's the details that matter.

Whiskey is like distilled beer, but without the hops. Malted grains are steeped in hot water, releasing sugar. This sugary liquid (wort) is cooled. Yeast is added to convert the sugar to alcohol and carbon dioxide. Now known as the "wash," this liquid generates lots of heat while frothing dramatically.

After fermentation is finished, the liquid is distilled. Distillation purifies the wash by evaporation and condensation. (Hang in there, we're almost done!) Alcohol boils at a lower temperature than water. As the wash is heated, alcohol rises from the still before the water, condenses into liquid, and is collected. Two types of stills are used: continuous stills and pot stills.

IMBIBING TIPS:

Many whiskeys are enhanced by the addition of a drop or two of water. The water "opens up" the spirit and it becomes even more aromatic and flavorful. With higher-proof whiskeys, adding a small ice cube is recommended. It cuts the strength of the spirit and there are subtle changes as the ice melts. Purists use distilled water.

It's fun to compare different beverages. If you pour a taste of bourbon, scotch, and cognac, you may be surprised. Bourbon and cognac are closer in flavor than scotch and bourbon.

If you're crafting cocktails with American spirits, using rye-based whiskeys will lend spicier aromas and flavors while corn-based spirits like bourbon are sweeter and smoother.

Once the spirit is collected, it's aged in oak barrels. The type of barrel used, how and where it's stored, and the length of time the whiskey ages are critical. The types of grain, the distillation method, and the casks make each whiskey unique.

Production of whiskey is tightly controlled and highly regulated. Proof is defined as twice the percentage of alcohol by volume (ABV), so a whiskey that is 50 percent ABV is 100 proof.

Proof is not simply a way to measure strength. As the whiskey is distilled, the aromas and flavors are concentrated. While a higher-proof product isn't necessarily better, many experts contend that as proof increases so do the aromatics and the flavors.

In the past, tavern patrons who suspected their glass of whiskey wasn't up to snuff performed a test. Spirits burn at just over 50 percent alcohol. They would take apart a bullet from their gun belt and dump the powder on the bar. They would then wet the powder with the whiskey. Lighting a match would determine if the whiskey had been watered down. If the powder burned yellow and just fizzled out, the spirit was diluted. If it burned blue and flashed, it was *proof* of the whiskey's quality. (Note: Please don't try this in public.)

TYPES OF WHISKEY

There are countless variations of whiskey. Scotch is popular. From American bourbon (more on this shortly) to Irish and Canadian whiskeys, the range of styles and flavors is amazing. Here in the U.S., we also produce rye whiskey and Tennessee whiskey.

- **IRISH WHISKEY:** The Irish claim they invented whiskey — and may well have. The answer is hidden in history's mist. Irish whiskey is regulated by the Irish Whiskey Act of 1980. It must be distilled and aged in Ireland. The spirits must have an ABV of less than 94.8 percent from a yeast-fermented mash of cereal grains. The whiskey must be aged for at least three years in wooden casks. Popular brands are Jameson, Bushmills, and Redbreast.

- **SCOTCH WHISKEY:** Scotch is perhaps the most famous style. It must be made using water and malted barley and fermented only with the addition of yeast. It must be distilled to less than 94.8 percent ABV (Sound familiar?). This whiskey must be matured in Scotland for no less than three years in oak casks and bottled at a minimum strength of 40 percent ABV. It may contain caramel for coloring.

Blended scotch is blends of whiskeys, frequently from different distilleries. Any age on the bottle must refer to the youngest whiskey in the blend. Examples are Dewar's, Chivas Regal, and Teacher's.



WHAT'S IN A PROFILE?

Learning about bourbon may not be as complicated as wine, but there are several aromas, tastes, and finishes to sniff and sip for when sampling. Here are just a few:

Single malt scotches are the product of a single distillery. Glenfiddich, Macallan, and Laphroig are popular. Single malts range from salty and briny to smoky and earthy. They reflect the *terroir* (sense of place) just as fine wines express their origin.

- **CANADIAN WHISKEY:** Canadian whiskey is popular with bartenders. It's light and blends well in cocktails. Tradition dictates that blended whiskey is made from a base whiskey and a flavoring whiskey. The base whiskey, usually from corn, is light in flavor and accounts for the majority of the blend. The flavoring whiskey, frequently with a high rye content, makes up the rest. This brown spirit must be mashed, distilled, and aged in Canada. The ABV may exceed 90 percent, like scotch and Irish whiskey, and it must be aged in wooden barrels for at least three years. A bit over 9 percent may be "other flavorings" such as sherry, fruit, or foreign whiskeys.

- **RYE WHISKEY:** Virtually unseen from Prohibition until the 21st century, rye is rockin' again. Per Uncle Sam, it must be made with a minimum of 51 percent rye, aged in new charred-oak barrels, and distilled to no more than 80 percent ABV. It is barreled for aging at no higher than 125 proof and

DID 'THE REAL MCCOY' START IN DETROIT?

- According to one legend, the expression "the real McCoy" originated just across the Detroit border in Windsor. (More likely, it's a corruption of the Scots' "The real MacKay" that dates to the 1850s. But why let the truth get in the way of good story?) During Prohibition, Bill McCoy and his son operated the Hiram Walker dock for Canadian Club (according to some stories, he was a smuggler). Lots of smugglers claimed to provide good whiskey to thirsty Detroiters but didn't always sell quality products. Entrepreneurs who bought directly from McCoy and son got the genuine Canadian Club. It quickly became widely known as "the real McCoy"!

**AROMA:**

Fruit, vanilla, caramel, spice, tea, hints of peppermint, charred oak, sweet, toffee, toasted nuts, oak, slightly smoky, and full, yet delicate.

**TASTE:**

Toasted nuts, fruit, vanilla, silky texture, spicy, peppery, honey, gentle bite, intense, fruit, tannin, tobacco, bold, caramel, rich, sweet, woody, full-bodied, deep and complex, oak, rich yet soft.

**FINISH:**

Sweet, smooth, medium-long, dry, clean, brief, long, intense, long and lingering, wood, spices, rich and glowing, long and full, lingering accents of caramel and vanilla.

is bottled at no less than 80 proof. To be labeled “straight rye whiskey” it needs to be aged for at least two years. Rye is much spicier than its cousin bourbon. It’s dry and fruity; bourbon is sweeter and smoother. Examples are Knob Creek Rye, George Dickel Rye, and Van Winkle Family Reserve Rye.

- **TENNESSEE WHISKEY:** Similar to bourbon, Tennessee whiskey is distinguished by the Lincoln County Process, commonly known as charcoal filtering. Sugar maple wood is burned to make charcoal. The distilled spirit, known as “white dog” whiskey, is then filtered through a vat of maple charcoal chips prior to aging. This charcoal filtering mellows the whiskey, producing smoother, drier liquor. Jack Daniel’s and George Dickel are the most popular Tennessee whiskeys.

- **BOURBON:** In 1790, President George Washington and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton created an onerous tax on distilling and spirits. Debts owed to France and Spain for money loaned to the colonies during the Revolutionary War were due. The Whiskey Rebellion by the farmer-distillers of Maryland and Pennsylvania was quickly quelled by 13,000 militiamen led by none other than the father of our country, George Washington!

Many folks moved west to the then wild country of current Kentucky and Tennessee to avoid paying the despised tax. Corn grew like wildfire, especially in the limestone soil where present-day

Louisville and Lexington are located. Settlers distilled their corn surplus to make whiskey. Bourbon County, named after the House of Bourbon in France in gratitude for their help during the Revolutionary War, soon became the epicenter of the nascent whiskey industry.

When the whiskey labeled “Bourbon County”

vessel, ensuring that it wasn’t poisoned!)

The origin of the charred barrel — for many the distinguishing characteristic of bourbon — is a matter of conjecture. A popular account is that Elijah Craig, a Baptist minister and distiller from Kentucky, was the first to use them when a fire burned many of his barrel staves. Too frugal to discard them, he turned the charred sections to the inside of his barrels (hoping no one would notice), filled them, and shipped it to New Orleans. During the journey, the char worked its magic.

A more likely explanation: Most distillers bought barrels that had been used to ship fish and meat. They didn’t want the pickling agents to taint their whiskey. After scraping the insides of the barrels, they would light the insides on fire to sterilize them. This charring effect caused the wood to release natural sugars. While the barrels baked in the sun, the whiskey was

partially absorbed into the charred staves. As it cooled, the spirit “returned” to the center of the barrel — smoother, darker, and tastier.

“Show me the way to the next
whisky bar; oh don’t
ask why; oh don’t ask why.”

— FROM THE BERTOLT BRECHT POEM,

“ALABAMA SONG”

(POPULARIZED BY THE DOORS)

became popular in New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, customers started asking for bourbon as a brand. Not quite as established as champagne, but a bit before Prada!

BARRELS OF FUN

Toasting or charring is an ancient practice. Back in the day, Romans dropped a piece of charred bread into their wine goblet. Why? It reduced the acidity of less-than-perfect wines. (Citizens of Rome would also “toast” each other with wine from a common

**BOURBON’S RISE AND FALL ...
(AND NASCAR IS BORN!)**

Bourbon was the drink of choice in Wild West saloons. Its popularity grew until the Civil War. After the war, there were far fewer distilleries and gin overtook bourbon because it was easily made in a bathtub.



World War I and Prohibition devastated the industry. The only way you could have a legal drink was if you had a prescription! But it spurred the roots of one of the most popular sports in America: NASCAR.

Moonshiners continued to make whiskey, and moonrunners drove down twisting, tortuous hilly roads to deliver to thirsty customers. Outrunning federal “revenuers” and avoiding their roadblocks with a tank of ‘shine in the back of their souped coupes was no Sunday drive. When Prohibition finally ended in 1933, the moonrunners began racing each other for fun and money, giving rise to the NASCAR we know today.

In 1964, Congress named bourbon “America’s native spirit.” It’s defined in Title 27 of the Code of Federal Regulations. To be called straight bourbon, it must be produced in the U.S. of a grain mix of at least 51 percent corn distilled at less than 80 percent ABV (160 proof) without any additives (except water to reduce the proof) and aged for a minimum of two years in new, charred white oak barrels.

When Prohibition finally ended in 1933, the moonrunners began racing each other for fun and money, giving rise to the NASCAR we know today.

NOW MADE IN MICHIGAN

Today, Michigan has more than 30 distilleries. Hand-crafted spirits with limited production are hallmarks of these local businesses. Quality, not quantity, makes these spirits special. Here are just a few of the standouts.

- **TWO JAMES SPIRITS:** Here’s a Motown success story. Open only since the fall of last year, this Detroit-based company was founded by David Landrum and Peter Bailey. Partner Andrew Mohr manages the inviting tasting room and public relations.

The longtime friends named their business in honor of their deceased fathers, both named James, who “instilled in them a love of family and hard work,” according to Landrum. This reclaimed taxicab dispatch and storage facility in the Corktown neighborhood is the city of Detroit’s first legal distillery since Prohibition.

Landrum, Bailey, and Mohr are in it for the long haul. After retaining Dave Pickerell, a world-renowned whiskey consultant and the former master distiller at Maker’s Mark, they assembled the still used to produce their products.

According to Pickerell, “they’re really hitting on all cylinders. What sets them apart is they are all about ‘owning their backyard’ with quality spirits in all the right places in the community.” Pickerell was scheduled to assist members of Corktown 500 (a Two James membership drive) at “Camp James” for a weekend of whiskey making in April.

A variety of spirits are available at the distillery. Grass Widow Bourbon is finished in casks previously used to age Madeira wine — “one of George



> **AGE APPROPRIATE** White oak barrels are charred (above left) to give bourbon its distinct flavor. The type of barrel (being cut bottom left), where and how the barrel is stored (above), and the length of aging time make each whiskey unique.

Washington's favorite drinks," according to Pickersell. He should know; he makes whiskey at Mount Vernon. Named after an old Detroit brand, the bourbon is spicy yet smooth with a lingering finish. Also available: 28 Island Vodka, named for islands in the Detroit River used as hideouts during Prohibition, and a surprisingly refreshing Old Cockney Gin. twojames.com

• **JOURNEYMAN DISTILLERY:** Over in Three Oaks on the west side of the state, Bill Welter has been crafting spirits since 2011. His journey is a long one. Upon moving to Scotland, he was captivated by single malt scotch. He then befriended an Australian who ran a Tasmanian distillery (Tasmania, an island 150 miles south of Australia, has a thriving whiskey industry, producing single malt whiskeys rivaling those of Scotland). Welter apprenticed in Tasmania, then came back to the U.S. and apprenticed at a domestic distillery before opening Journeyman Distillery.

Welter has a sense of history — and humor. His distillery is in a renovated building known as the Featherbone Factory. Built by E. K. Warren, an 1800s entrepreneur, the factory was used to manufacture

women's corsets and buggy whips. But Warren "was a staunch Prohibitionist who tried to buy up all the liquor licenses" he could to end drinking even before the Volstead Act was enacted!

Journeyman Distillery has been certified organic by MOSA (Midwest Organic Services Association). Six whiskeys, all 90 proof, are part of the portfolio. Featherbone Bourbon is made from Midwest corn, Michigan wheat, and a dash of rye. Vodka, gin, and rum are also available. journeyman-distillery.com

• **VALENTINE DISTILLING CO.:** A former Wall Street trader and dirty martini aficionado, Rifino Valentine makes award-winning vodkas and gins. "Handmade and homemade" are his hallmarks. Operating since 2008, he is slowly expanding while remaining "maniacally obsessive about quality."

Gin — the original "flavored vodka" — is coming back. Barrel-aged gins are rather unusual. After distilling his Liberator Gin, he ages it in American oak barrels for two years. Liberator Old Tom Gin recently earned the title of "Best Cask Gin in the World" from the World Gin Awards.

Valentine is now making a Woodward Ltd. Whiskey. It's double-distilled, then aged for a minimum of four years in maple-infused, American oak casks. Those barrels add a distinctive sweetness. "I am taking a stand against mass-produced spirits," Valentine says. "I am here to prove that American ingenuity

and quality American manufacturing are still alive." It certainly is. As proof, Valentine is opening a second Ferndale facility to expand sales from seven to 20 states. valentinedistilling.com

• **NEW HOLLAND ARTISAN SPIRITS:** New Holland Brewing Co. — founded in 1996 — is nearly ancient as far as Michigan commercial craft brewing is concerned. Starting as a micro-brewery, it has grown into a thriving mecca for beer lovers in western Michigan. Just a scant nine years later, New Holland Artisan Spirits started distilling spirits.

President and co-founder Brett VanderKamp is "all in" for making spirits. The Artisan Spirits portfolio offers six whiskeys, a gin, and a rum.

Their Beer Barrel Bourbon is sourced outside the facility and then finished in "second-use" Dragon's Milk beer barrels for 90 days. The beer barrels impart a bready, biscuity character to the bourbon. Bill's Michigan Wheat whiskey is distilled in-house from Michigan wheat. Double Down Barley is aged in various heavily charred small barrels of American white oak.

Hatter Royale is definitely a beer brewer's whiskey. This unusual whiskey is infused with centen-

CLASSIC COCKTAILS

MANHATTAN

ingredients:

2 dashes Angostura bitters
1 cherry
Crushed ice
1 ½ ounces sweet vermouth
3 ounces bourbon

directions:

Stir and serve with a cherry over crushed ice. For a dry cocktail, use dry vermouth.

QUICK AND EASY MINT JULEP

ingredients:

3 mint sprigs
1 teaspoon superfine sugar
1 teaspoon water
3 ounces bourbon

directions:

Muddle mint sprigs with sugar and water in a tumbler until sugar is dissolved. Fill glass with finely crushed ice and add bourbon. Stir briskly. Add mint sprig as garnish.

SAZERAC

ingredients:

2 teaspoons absinthe
3 dashes Peychaud's bitters
½ teaspoon sugar or simple syrup
2 ½ ounces bourbon

directions:

Shake all of the ingredients and serve with ice and a twist of lemon.

WHISKEY SOUR

ingredients:

2 dashes Angostura bitters
1 lemon twist
1 ½ ounces lemon juice
3 ounces whiskey

directions:

Shake the ingredients together. Strain and serve with a twist of lemon.



> **WOODWORKING** White oak staves are aged four to six months before being cut and formed into barrels. Bourbon is fermented in large tanks (right).



nial hops and sweetened with 3 percent cane sugar. Walleye Rye is 60 percent rye with a spicy, peppery finish. Zeppelin Bend, crafted from 100 percent barley, is scotch-like in character. newhollandbrew.com

- **GRAND TRAVERSE DISTILLERY:** Grand Traverse is Michigan's largest micro-distillery. Owner Kent Rabish has been in business since 2007. Grains from his friends at the Send Brothers farm, just 9 miles up the road, are distilled by Rabish and his son, Landis. Perry Harmon, a superb mixologist, completes the close-knit team.

While their award-winning vodkas are widely appreciated, their five whiskeys are also tasty. Ole George is 100 percent rye, with a spicy aroma and flavors of rye bread and vanilla. Their bourbon is a bit smoky with characteristic smooth flavors of vanilla and oak.

All of the whiskeys are bottled straight from barrel to bottle. No chill filtering is used because "it strips the spirit of its character and uniqueness," Rabish says. A gin is made, and rum is aging in the barrels at the moment. With four tasting rooms, Grand Traverse Distillery continues to blaze the hand-crafted trail. grandtraversedistillery.com

- **ROUND BARN:** Round Barn in Baroda is producing bourbon, rum, and vodka in addition to their large lineup of wines. With two locations in Baroda and a second tasting room in Union Pier, Rick and Sherrie Moersch, proprietors of Entente Spirits, are expanding their offerings.

Their DiVine vodka is one of only four vodkas in the world made from grapes. It's the only "estate vodka" distilled and bottled in the United States from grapes harvested from the Lake Michigan Shore AVA (American Viticultural Area) in southwest Michigan. roundbarnwinery.com

- **UGLY DOG DISTILLERY:** Just west of Ann Arbor, Ugly Dog was founded as the result of a campfire conversation. Distilling since May 2010, this micro-distillery has a loyal legion of local followers. Named after Ruger, a German wirehaired pointer, this boutique producer focuses on vodka made from Michigan grain — especially flavored ones, including bacon (think Bloody Mary), whipped cream, raspberry, and black cherry. Rum and gin are offered as well. uglydogdistillery.com

- **BLACK STAR FARMS:** A leader in Michi-

gan winemaking, Black Star Farms also distills a variety of spirits. Brandies from pears, apples, apricots, cherries, and plums are crafted on the Leelanau Peninsula in northern Michigan. They also produce two types of grappa, a traditional Italian digestif made from the must (freshly pressed juice containing the skins, seeds, and stems) of their wine grapes. Their White Grape Grappa is made from riesling, gewürztraminer, and vigneoles grapes. A red version comes from pinot noir, cabernet franc, and merlot. blackstarfarms.com ■

BIRMINGHAM'S BARONS OF BOURBON

- Never heard of the Bourbon Barons? Well, they don't call *themselves* that. But this local group of friends gather frequently to taste, discuss, buy, dissect, and enjoy bourbon.

Not just any bourbon — rare, exotic, limited-edition bottles are their specialty. The friendly group is intensely focused on finding the best bourbons available. While price is always a factor, what's in the bottle is most important. As with wine, aromas and flavors are paramount rather than the beauty of the label.

The Bourbon Barons are also wine enthusiasts, but some of them find that wine is "too tough to keep up with. It's so complex with all the different vintages, new regions, and the aging process. It's much easier to become a bourbon expert," says Dr. David Altman, dermatologist by day, bourbon baron by avocation.

Some of these gents were previously passionate about scotch, says Howard C. Weinberger. After delving into the various styles of that peated whiskey, particularly the single malt versions, they began to embrace America's native spirit. Bourbon has a softer, rounder, sweeter flavor profile than scotch. Tastes change!

These aficionados are serious bourbon buffs. As their enthusiasm grew, so did their expectations. In order to meet and exceed those expectations, each guy (it's all guys, about 10 of them at last count) now has a stellar selection of fine bourbons. This tasty result is due in no small part to not-so-subtle peer pressure: They want to taste the "good stuff" — no matter who is hosting.

A few years ago, the barons went so far to buy their own barrels while on a trip to Kentucky. Barrels from Buffalo Trace Distillery were transported back to metro Detroit and bottled — many were handed out as gifts to some lucky friends.

Not that the barons are overly "snobby" about bourbon. Sure, a several-hundred-dollar bottle has its own particular charm. But many excellent examples are available for less than \$50, explains Eric Borman, one of the barons who sat with *Hour Detroit* for a mini-tasting session/lesson.

For example, Old Weller Antique Original 107 is a bargain for about \$25. Elijah Craig 12 Year Old and Four Roses Small Batch are other great values in the \$30 range.