

RED WHISKEY

November 6, 2006

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"Red whiskey, red whiskey, red whiskey I cry. If I don't get red whiskey, I surely will die." A lot of people must have agreed with this 19th century lament. In 1860 the annual consumption of spirits was almost 3 gallons for every man, woman, child, including slaves and Indians in the U.S. Today the estimate is about 1/3 of that amount. America has always been a drinking nation.

However, what we drink has changed over time. This paper concerns that unique American spirit, bourbon whiskey. It is made from corn, America's indigenous grain. But almost 200 years were to pass from the first colonies to the discovery of how to make good, red, bourbon whiskey.

The national pastime started early. In 1621 Mayflower colonists panicked because they were running out of the beer they had brought with them. However, by 7 years later they were making their own. As you can ferment almost any fruit or vegetable, they used plums, potatoes, elderberries, pumpkins and whatever else was available. After their trees had matured, apples and pears became the ingredients of choice.

Down in Virginia, the early colonists were making a beer from Indian corn. They claimed it was "good enough to tide them over until they got used to the local water." However, not having pasteurization, beer didn't keep but a short while. It was not hard to figure out that a farmer's excess grain was better kept as whiskey.

It is believed that liquor was first distilled in America by the Dutch on Staten Island in 1640. Converted to whiskey, grain was much more easily transported. It could then be used for barter or indeed as a substitute for money which was in short supply. For example, a horse could carry about 4 bushels of grain. As two-30 gallon barrels of whiskey, it could carry the product of 24 bushels of grain.

There are many stories that could be told about the history of drinking during the 150 years before the revolution. Many people thought that water was bad for you. Given the state of public sanitation in those days, they may have been right- The Puritans' strict governmental control of personal life, the importance of taverns in political life, and especially the growing importance of rum are all worthy of a paper in themselves.

After home made cider, rum was the favorite drink in Colonial America. There was the infamous triangle trade of New England rum to Africa, slaves to the West Indian sugar plantations, and finally sugar molasses to Newport to make more rum. It was so profitable

one round trip could pay for the ship. Many well known patriots were involved. John Hancock and John Adams were both in the distilling business. By the way, after his presidency, George Washington became a major commercial rye distiller at Mt Vernon.

Rum continued to be important until 1808 when Congress prohibited further importation of slaves from Africa and thus broke the triangle trade. It was too costly to transport rum very far inland, and the pioneers looked for other sources.

By 1800 the immigration west was in full swing. Very soon over 350,000 people had settled in Kentucky alone. Many of the early settlers were Scotch-Irish, who were known for their fierce independence and self-sufficiency. They brought their whiskey making skills and equipment with them.

Unlike rye, which continued to be grown in the more settled middle states such as New Jersey, corn was the choice of the pioneers. Corn was easy to grow in the rich soil of central Kentucky. It was said that you did not need much more than a tomahawk to prepare the ground.

Kentucky seemed perfect for whiskey making and for what was to become its signature product, Kentucky Bourbon. While corn whiskey was made in many other places, none had the unique advantages of Kentucky. The state had an abundance of oak trees, pristine limestone filtered water, fertile land and a reasonably temperate climate.

It is probable that the first whiskey distilled in Kentucky was in 1774 at Harrodsburg, the first permanent settlement. As settlement spread, so did the making of whiskey. It was not bourbon. What we call bourbon today has a precise definition. But what they made was a very superior corn based whiskey, much prized.

Sometime between 1778 and 1790, John Ritchie made whiskey near today's Bardstown south of Louisville- Then Ritchie, together with some companions, loaded a flatboat with his product and made the trip down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans. He reported that he had sold both his whiskey and his boat for a "good profit." Thus began the intimate relationship of Kentucky whiskey and the way west.

In 1783 Evan Williams started what is regarded as the first commercial distillery in Louisville. It seemed like everyone was making whiskey. By 1811 there were some 139 stills in Lexington's Fayette County alone and it was estimated that there were at least 2,000 more in the state.

It is worth noting that a distillery, even a simple farmer's pot still, had considerable economic value to a community. Besides providing a local market for grain, there were

cooperages making barrels, and the drayage companies for transport to market. None-the-less, prior to the Civil War, distilling was more an adjunct to farming than the serious industry it would become.

So how did bourbon get its name? There are all kinds of stories. Most historians believe that, in 1780, when Virginia began to carve its vast western territories into smaller units, one was named Bourbon in appreciation of French assistance during the Revolutionary War. Barrels of whiskey shipped down river from anywhere in this very large area were stamped "Bourbon County." After Kentucky became a state in 1792 original Bourbon County was divided into 33 more manageable counties. One of them was still called Bourbon although no whiskey was made there. But by that time the name bourbon had become generic for Kentucky's unique corn based whiskey-

"Born with the Republic" says one distiller's advertisements. Not quite so, as 'bourbon' as we know it did not come along until about 60 years later. Even then the exact definition was subject to considerable disagreement. In 1905 Theodore Roosevelt's pure food and drug legislation was passed. That was the first Federal attempt to straighten out the misbranding and adulterating that was pervasive throughout the food, drug and liquor industries.

However, the old line bourbon makers were still upset about what they called "imitation whiskey." So William Howard Taft in 1909 declared, somewhat reasonably, that all potable liquor distilled from grain was "whiskey." None-the-less, it wasn't until the repeal of prohibition that the distinction between whiskeys was settled. Probably as much to facilitate levying taxes as to pacify the distillers trying to protect their brands, bourbon received a legal definition.

According to the Federal Alcohol Administration Act of 1936, to be called bourbon, the whiskey must be made from a mixture of grains of which at least 51 % is corn, the distillate is distilled at no more than 160 proof and is aged in charred oak barrels for at least 2 years. Proof, by the way, refers to the percentage of alcohol. Pure alcohol is 200 proof. 100 proof whiskey is 50% alcohol and so on.

In practice today's bourbon is 60-75% corn. The remainder is generally rye. but sometimes wheat, and barley malt. The exact recipe is each distiller's most treasured secret. Further, most bourbons are aged in the charred barrel for at least 4 years, more generally 6 to 8 years. Most old time bourbon drinkers agree that, unlike scotch, bourbon does not get much better with further aging.

This governmental meddling is but one example of the intimate relationship between the production of alcohol and the history of this country. Let's look at that history for a moment. It began in 1733 with Britain's attempts to control and tax the molasses trade. This highly unpopular action is said to have stirred the first rumbles of rebellion.

Then in 1791, at arch-federalist Alexander Hamilton's behest, the newly formed United States government imposed an excise tax on the domestic manufacture of spirits. The purpose was to pay Revolutionary War debts. This tax was met with violent protest particularly in the pioneer west. President George Washington had to form a militia nearly as large as the Continental Army to suppress this "whiskey rebellion" in Western Pennsylvania. The tax was repealed in 1802 under Jefferson who always voted to protect the yeoman farmer.

But in 1814 the tax on domestic liquor was again imposed to help pay for the War of 1812. Not much is known about how this tax was received but it was abolished in 1817. Then the Civil War came along. In 1862 the Internal Revenue Bureau was established to collect tax on most commodities. The tax on whiskey was 20 cents a gallon. As one congressman assured his constituents, he had nothing against whiskey, it was just that they had a war to fight and needed the money.

One writer titled this chapter of American history as "drinking down the national debt." Indeed they did. In 1864 the tax was increased to \$1.50 per gallon. In 1865 it was raised again to \$2.00. However, in 1868 the tax was reduced to 50 cents. Those higher rates had encouraged widespread moon shining and resulted in lost revenue. But the tax to pay for war was never rescinded.

During World War I the rate was \$1.10 per gallon. In World War II the rate went up to \$9.00 and in 1951, the Korean War period, it was raised to \$10.50 per gallon. Today it is \$13.50.

Total taxes before sales tax are estimated to make up about 57% of the price of a typical bottle of whiskey. From 1876 until Prohibition liquor taxes were generating fully one-half of federal revenue. For example, in 1900 total revenue from all sources was \$295,000,000. Of this \$183,000,000 was from the tax on alcohol.

Prohibition. The very word strikes terror in the heart of even the most modest tippler. If you recall how much alcohol was consumed at the high point, 1860, it is not difficult to understand the motives behind the temperance movement, the anti-saloon league and eventually the call for prohibition itself. In this rapidly industrializing country the story of

Little Nell standing at the door of the local pub urging her father to come home was not fiction. These were the times of the 12-hour days and the 6-day week in wretched working conditions. Life was grim. A shot now and then was a comfort not only to the body but to the spirit. Drinking got out of hand.

By 1890 half the states had voted themselves dry. Kentucky continued to make its bourbon although it was illegal to drink it in 97% of the counties. The industrial barons such as Carnegie and Morgan had initially heartily supported the temperance movement. Soused workers in the factories were a detriment to the business. But when they realized that government alcohol revenues were in danger if there was out-right prohibition, and that the alternative was the hated income tax, they switched sides. But it was too late. The income tax was the bastard get of prohibition. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for repeal was the allure of the restored liquor tax. Incidentally, there was also the cost of another war on the horizon.

The repeal of national prohibition in 1933 did not immediately open the flood gates across the country. Instead each state was free to choose its own path. Some passed state wide laws. Many left it up to the individual county. Kentucky took a particularly odd path. Of the 120 counties in the state, only five, the big cities, were legally wet. Nelson County, home of 5 major distilleries was itself dry. Only gradually, and then only after the end of World War II, did the country slowly liberalize its some hundreds of different laws.

Controlling the public use of alcohol goes back as far as the Puritans who wrote rules for almost every aspect of public life. Jumping forward 200 years, when Abraham Lincoln briefly operated a tavern in New Salem, IL, he was required to post a \$500 bond to insure that he would not sell liquor to Negroes, Indians or children.

Oft times these laws seemed ridiculous. For example, until recently in Boston, women could not stand at the bar. On Sundays, no one could. But the basic idea everywhere seems to have been that the upper classes could be trusted in their country clubs, but the lower orders needed watching. An interesting response to this after World War II was the establishment of their own VFW clubs by the returning veterans.

The last state to legalize what everybody was doing was Mississippi in 1966. It might seem hypocritical to vote dry and drink wet as most southerners did. But consider that many Southern counties, including many in Kentucky, were too poor to pay a decent wage to their civil servants or their preachers. The solution was for those who did the drinking to pay the bootlegger who in turn paid the sheriff to keep the drinkers inline. Similarly extra whiskey

money in the collection plate insured the necessary prayers for the drinker's immortal souls and stern lectures on the evils of voting wet. This system seems sensible to me.

It would not do to leave this subject without a reading of one Noah S. Sweats' speech to the Mississippi legislature in 1952. I quote: "I had not intended to discuss this controversial matter at this time. However, I have never shunned a controversy, and I will take a stand on any issue at any time."

"You asked me how i stand on whisky. Here is how I stand: If you mean, by whisky, the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty - yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children - if you mean the evil drink that topples Christian man and woman from the pinnacles of righteous and gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, despair, shame, helplessness and hopelessness - then I am against it with all my power."

"But if, when you say whisky, you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the elixir of life, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and a warm glow of contentment in their eyes - if you mean Christmas cheer, the stimulating sip that puts a little spring into the step of an elderly gentleman on a frosty morning - if you mean the drink that enables man to magnify his joy and to forget life's great tragedies, heartbreaks and sorrows - if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars that provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirmed - to build highways and hospitals and schools -then I certainly am in favor of it."

"This is my stand. And I will not compromise." Unquote.

So how is good legitimate bourbon made? From a broad perspective, it is not difficult. The distinctions are in the details and each master distiller has his own special formula. Jim Beam Company still uses a formula developed by the first Beam 200 years ago.

The first step is to make a sort of cooked porridge called a mash. The mash consists of water, corn, rye or wheat and barley whose seeds have been allowed to germinate called malt. When the mash is well cooked, yeast is added along with a portion of mash from the precious distillation. It is this add-back that makes whiskey "sour mash." In addition to flavor it helps guarantee a certain consistency of product. All bourbons today use the sour mash process. Some of them brag about it for the benefit of the uninitiated.

The yeast converts the corn sugars to alcohol and carbon dioxide. The entire process takes about 72 hours. The end product is called beer which it indeed resembles. The mixture

is then distilled, which means boiled. Distillation is based on the fact that alcohol has a significantly lower boiling point than water. So when the beer is heated in a closed container called a still, the alcohol vaporizes first. This distillate is cooled and condensed to a clear, colorless liquid. Sometimes it is called grain neutral spirits. It is not yet bourbon.

It is a matter of dispute as to who first discovered that storing grain alcohol in charred oak barrels smoothed and gentled its raw flavor. But there is no dispute that people liked it. In 1850 our population stood at slightly over 23 million. In that year they consumed 52 million gallons of distilled spirits. They like it a lot! By 1860 the population was 31 million and they drank 90 million gallons. This amounts to about 6 gallons for every person over the age of 15.

1860 was the high point of alcohol consumption in the United States. Since then the rate has gradually dropped to the somewhat steady 2 gallons per person per year we have today.

As the population moved west, whiskey went with it. As Mark Twain quipped, "westward the jug of empire took its way." Lewis and Clark included a cask in their supplies. But when a cowboy asked for a shot of red whiskey at the Long Branch Saloon in Dodge City, Kansas, what he got may or may not have been what started as 100% bourbon back in Kentucky.

In those days glass bottles were fragile and expensive. Whiskey was shipped in barrels. And that barrel probably went through a number of hands before reaching Dodge.

Whiskey in barrels could easily be doctored and extended; and it generally was. In California even tequila was sometimes added. It was no problem to pour adulterated whiskey into a better brand's barrel. After a couple of drinks our cowboy probably didn't care.

In 1870 George Gavin Brown of Louisville was the first distiller to sell his bourbon only in sealed bottles. He called it "Old Forester." The intended market was physicians who in those days prescribed whiskey for a great number of ailments. They said it "symptomatically relieved their patients." However, they needed a product they could rely on, and Brown provided it. Old Forester is still the flagship brand of today's giant Brown Forman Company.

In 1903 an automatic bottle-making machine was invented and bottles became much more affordable. There after, most distillers realized the value in branding and advertising and their whiskey was sold only in sealed bottles. The government also liked the idea of bottles as they were easier to monitor for the purposes of the ubiquitous tax.

To close the subject of taxes, here are some current statistics. In 2004 total revenues on all alcoholic beverages were \$22 billion. But the federal revenues on distilled spirits alone were a measly \$5 billion- It is obvious that if we are ever going to pay for the war on terror, we are going to have to drink more. It's the patriotic thing to do.

One effect of prohibition was to introduce Americans to scotch, Canadian whiskey and the very popular home made bathtub gin. Thousands of ordinary citizens, women as well as men, became scofflaws. They drank copiously, especially in those dens of iniquity called speakeasies. Before prohibition New York City counted some 16,000 taverns and saloons. During prohibition the number reportedly rose to 32,000. And the gangster became a new American institution. Sadly, most legitimate distillers either mothballed their plants or went out of business. A few sold out to moon shiners whose product was only from a day to a month old and frequently toxic.

When prohibition ended it was difficult to restart. Quite a few plants were technologically obsolete. Besides, a business whose product won't be sold until at least 4 years after it's manufactured requires an unusual amount of capital. So there was considerable consolidation on the business side. The bourbon industry became increasingly associated with out-of-state concerns whose skills were in finance, sales and distribution. The actual making however stayed firmly in the hands of the experienced Kentucky distillers.

They were proud of their product and many put their names on it, including Jim Beam, Evan Williams, Elijah Craig, W. K. Weller, J. W. Dant and J. T. S. Brown. Isaac W. Bernheim called his whiskey I. W. Harper. When asked why he had not used his last name, he explained that Harper was his banker. Bernheim died a multi-millionaire.

While most of these people kept a keen eye on their product, it was the master distillers who practiced the art of making bourbon. Despite some technological improvements and a better understanding of the chemistry involved, they still rely almost entirely on look, taste and smell to make their decisions. They are the source of the legends and much of the romance surrounding bourbon.

Consider the case of Jim Beam. For over the two centuries since Jacob Beam migrated from Maryland to Kentucky, the Beam family has been making whiskey. Seven generations from Jacob, Jim Beam is the world's best selling bourbon. Some consider Jim Beam bourbon an icon, a permanent fixture of American culture. A remarkable 30 descendents of Jacob have been or are now intimately associated with the bourbon business. And they were not just with the one Beam company. Jacob's descendants could be found

throughout bourbon country, guiding the flavor and quality of almost 20 other distilleries, whether they owned them or not. The Beam saga is the stuff of legends.

Just as the industry was getting back on its feet after prohibition, disaster struck again in the form of World War II. In 1944, a scant 8 years after repeal, the distilling industry totally converted to war production of industrial alcohol.

When the war ended, it was clear that the bourbon producers were in trouble. During the 20's, people had come to prefer gin. During the war rum was the only spirit readily available, and it became popular again. While there was a lot of drinking going on, bourbon started a slide in relative popularity from which it has never really recovered. With more women drinking, the trend was to lighter alcohols. Vodka, rarely seen before the war, is now the country's most popular hard liquor. Wine consumption has grown exponentially.

The consolidation of bourbon producers therefore continued. In 1955 there were 58 active plants. Today there are 12. But the good news is that bourbon production has stabilized. With the baby boomers' odd penchant for buying the most expensive, the sale of premium and super premium brands has kept the industry very profitable.

Which takes us to the ultimate question, "Which bourbon is best?" And, of course, the answer is the same as it was in Jacob Beam's time, "You pays your money and you takes your choice." Single barrel, aged forever, and all the other advertising slogans have a basis in reality to be sure. But which you buy comes down to which you like. There are differences in brands. Some are subtle, and some to an experienced bourbon lover, quite pronounced. But they are all good.

For those who would like to investigate further, let me recommend a day trip to Bardstown, Kentucky, just south of Louisville. This is the heart of bourbon country. The many distilleries in the area maintain visitor centers with tours and tasting rooms. In my opinion nothing is quite so salubrious as Kentucky in May with a bourbon toddy in hand. Check it out.

To get in the proper humor for the trip, let us leave taxes, prohibition, advertising and all the rest behind. I believe I can do no better than to close with an excerpt from a letter written in 1933 by Kentuckian Lt. General Simon Boliver Buckner, Jr.

The old general wrote, quote... "The preparation of the quintessence of gentlemanly beverage can be described only in like terms. A mint Julep is not the product of a formula. It is a ceremony and must be performed by a gentleman possessing a true sense of the artistic, a deep reverence for the ingredients and a proper appreciation of the occasion."

"It is a rite that must not be entrusted to a novice, a statistician, nor a Yankee. It is a heritage of the Old South, an emblem of hospitality, and a vehicle in which noble minds can travel together upon the flower strewn paths of a happy and congenial thought."

"Go to a spring where cool, crystal-clear water bubbles from under a bank of dew-washed ferns. In a consecrated vessel, dip up a little water at the source. Follow the stream through its banks of green moss and wildflowers until it broadens and trickles through beds of mint growing in aromatic profusion and waving softly in the summer breeze. Gather the sweetest and tenderest shoots and gently carry them home. Go to the sideboard and select a decanter of Kentucky bourbon, distilled by a master hand, mellowed with age yet still vigorous and inspiring. And an ancestral sugar bowl, a row of silver goblets, some spoons and some ice and you are ready to start."

"Into a canvas bag, pound twice as much ice as you think you will need. Make (t fine as snow, keep it dry, and do not allow it to degenerate into slush."

"Into each goblet, put a slightly heaping teaspoonful of granulated sugar, barely cover this with spring water and slightly bruise one mint leaf into this, leaving the spoon in the goblet. Then pour elixir from the decanter until the goblets are about one-fourth full. Fill the goblets with snowy-ice, sprinkling in a small amount of sugar as you fill. Wipe the outside of the goblets dry and embellish copiously with mint."

"Then comes the important and delicate operation of frosting. By proper manipulation of the spoon, the ingredients are circulated and blended until Nature, wishing to take a further hand and add another of its beautiful phenomena, encrusts the whole in a glistening coat of white frost. Thus harmoniously blended by the deft touches of a skilled hand, you have a beverage eminently appropriate for honorable men and beautiful women."

"When all is ready, assemble your guests on the porch or in the garden, where the aroma of the juleps will rise heavenwards and make the birds sing. Propose a worthy toast, raise the goblet to your lips, bury your nose in the mint, inhale a deep breath of its fragrance, and sip the nectar of the gods."

"Being overcome by thirst, I can write no further."

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