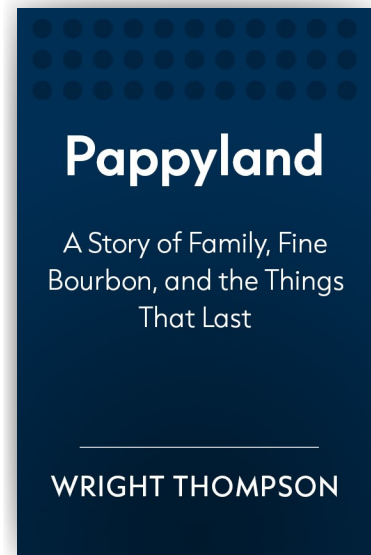


Pappyland

A Story of Family, Fine Bourbon,
and the Things That Last

Wright Thompson

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Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
ISBN: 978-0-7352-2125-3
Estimated reading time of review: 5 minutes



REVIEW

By **KATIE FLEMING**

Few Kentucky Bourbon brands are as storied as Pappy Van Winkle, the barrel-aged, small-production run whiskey starting at \$120 a bottle and soaring to \$5,000 or more on collector sites. Just as rare are company caretakers who are beloved by their community, protective of their brand's heritage, and humble about their journeys.

In **Pappyland**, acclaimed author and journalist Wright Thompson tells the story of Julian Van Winkle III and the steps he's taken to save his family's bourbon legacy. By spending time with the popular figure-head, Thompson finds surprising similarities between Julian's story and his own. He shares insights he's gained about embodying a legacy, knowing and honoring your roots, and valuing your craft, all while living according to your values.

A BRAND WITH ROOTS

The Pappy Van Winkle story began in the late 19th century with a determined and visionary man. Julian "Pappy" Van Winkle entered the realm of Kentucky Bourbon as a traveling salesperson for W.L. Weller & Sons. His hard work and diligence working for the Louisville whiskey wholesaler didn't go unnoticed. In time, Pappy, who developed extensive industry knowledge and demonstrated an unparalleled commitment to quality, became a partner in the business.

Through a series of stories, Thompson illustrates the years that followed as times of both success and hardship. In good times, the new partners acquired the A. Ph. Stitzel Distillery, which enabled them to produce their own whiskey. This new Stitzel-Weller Distillery opened on Kentucky Derby Day in 1935

and was revered from the start. The brand quickly amassed loyal customers who were delighted by the smooth, rich bourbons, including Weller bourbon, which the new team offered.

Tough times hit the company, too. Prohibition, which went into effect in early 1920, forced many whiskey distilleries to shutter, and the ensuing Great Depression was especially difficult for the brand.

Fortunately, Pappy found a way for his company to endure. Securing a license to produce “medicinal whiskey,” he found an inroad to continue selling his product, though sometimes at a loss. Still, Pappy and his team remained committed to quality and craftsmanship, hoping their efforts would be rewarded in future years. Their gamble paid off: The Stitzel-Weller Distillery flourished with products such as wheated bourbon and Old Fitzgerald, their flagship bourbon.

Though the Prohibition era and the Great Depression took a toll on Pappy and his company, Thompson explains that the brand’s toughest times were still ahead. Pappy died in 1965, leaving the company to his son, Julian Van Winkle Jr. His son didn’t take the reins during a period of prosperity. He took charge as consumer tastes were shifting from classic bourbon to clear spirits like gin and vodka. The company faced significant financial difficulties that were too great to overcome. The Van Winkle family had no choice but to sell the distillery.

A NEW HEIR

Even after the company’s sale, the family continued to prize their legacy and believe in the culture and craft of the small-batch bourbon industry. Pappy’s grandson, Julian Van Winkle III (“Julian”), grew up believing in the quality of their product and felt he could remind the market of the bourbon they once loved. In the early 1990s, he decided to revive the Pappy Van Winkle brand and produce small batches of top-shelf bourbon.

The move was risky; bourbons and whiskeys hadn’t yet seen a resurgence. Still, Julian felt a strong internal drive to proceed and honor his family’s legacy. He began sourcing barrels from the Stitzel-Weller Distillery and others that met his perfectionist standards. He then created a bourbon that Thompson believes captured the Van Winkle tradition of being rich, complex, and meticulously crafted.

Whiskey critics raved about the product, and by the early 2000s, the demand for Pappy Van Winkle bourbon far outpaced its supply. From that time forward, prices have soared on the secondary market as Julian remained committed to small-batch production.

Demand for the bourbon brand continues today, and many factors contribute to its continued appeal. First is certainly the quality and craftsmanship of the brand, which results in the consistent product many bourbon drinkers know and love. Next is its scarcity, which transformed the company into one synonymous with luxury and exclusivity and has driven many collectors to seek it out and pay high prices. Behind the scenes, other factors have contributed to the brand’s comeback story. Thompson highlights Julian’s perseverance through setbacks and a wavering market to honor his family’s legacy. Many find the story of Pappy and the hardships and successes the brand faced to be compelling and part of the brand’s mystique, which only adds to its allure.

A STORY THAT BINDS

While Thompson set out to tell the story of Julian and his family’s namesake brand, he felt a connection to the legacy, formed a true respect for Julian, and found that they shared experiences in loss, legacy, and the pursuit of purpose.

The two men connected over having a weighty family heritage that created expectations and burdens. Both had complicated relationships with their fathers, and both look ahead to the legacy, values, and memories they want to leave through their work, life, and families.

The connections allowed the writer and subject to transcend the typical interviewer-interviewee relationship that's often behind a biography to one where the two could talk openly about carrying forward traditions, staying true to oneself, making personal sacrifices in the name of what matters, and the ways in which struggles and triumphs shaped them. This unconventional approach helped Thompson reveal Julian's human side along with the results of his business acumen.

BOTTOM LINE

Readers will be pleasantly surprised that **Pappyland** is more than a history lesson on a single Kentucky Bourbon brand. Instead, it's a recounting of the family's journey to build the brand, adapt to circumstances, and pursue excellence by holding fast to their values. Julian, the company's third leader, speaks openly about the adversities he's faced and the commitments he made to himself and his family to restore the Van Winkle brand. Thompson's telling of this family story doesn't make for a quick read. He takes detours and marries in tidbits from his own life, which add to the power of the story. However, the added information makes takeaway lessons a bit tougher to find. Still, those who enjoy hearing accounts from leaders who humbly and openly share their trials and tribulations will enjoy Thompson's take on the story and may come to love the Pappy Van Winkle brand even more.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Katie Fleming is a professional writer from Ohio who specializes in content creation for small business leaders. She's also the cofounder of www.owneractions.com, an online platform that helps entrepreneurs work through the challenges of starting, growing, and exiting their ventures.

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