

Title:

Jim Beam An American Whiskey

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810

Summary:

Jim Beam is one of the big names of bourbon, so there's no surprise to find a big man behind it all. Booker Noe isn't just physically huge, he is one of the foundation stones of the modern industry. Booker is Jim's grandson and still lives in Jim's old house in Bardstown.

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Article Body:

Jim Beam is one of the big names of bourbon, so there's no surprise to find a big man behind it all. Booker Noe isn't just physically huge, he is one of the foundation stones of the modern industry. Booker is Jim's grandson and still lives in Jim's old house in Bardstown.

Talk to him and you are tapping straight into the history of bourbon itself. Today, Jim Beam is the world's biggest selling bourbon, but in 1934 things weren't so rosy. Prohibition had been in force for 13 years, and there was no stock left. To start up again would be expensive and risky. But this didn't deter Jim who, aged 70, built a new distillery in Clermont in just 120 days. What else could a Beam do? Whiskey making runs in their veins. After all, Booker's great-great-great grandfather Jacob Beam started making whiskey commercially in 1795.

This was the distilling capital of the world before it was put out of business by the government,' says Booker. 'Why did he start it up again? Remember, he'd been in the whiskey business for 40 years before Prohibition. Beams have now been making bourbon for 205 years.'

Booker has now passed the reins to Jerry Dalton, the first non-Beam to be appointed master distiller. The fact that he lived in the house directly behind Booker's is pure coincidence. 'Well, even a blind hog finds an acorn every so often!' he laughs. For all his modesty, Jerry is a highly respected distiller and, though reluctant to give away too many company secrets, will take you deep into the process.

There's a sequence of special quirks at work in Beam's two plants, but it's yeast that Jerry zooms in on. For Scottish distillers, yeast is merely a catalyst that converts sugar to alcohol and CO₂- However, for bourbon distillers it has almost mystical properties and each firm guards its own strain(s): Beam is still using the yeasts propagated by Jim in his kitchen in the 1930s.

'Different yeasts produce different levels of fusel oil, which will ultimately have an effect on the flavour,' Jerry explains. 'In ageing, the fusel oils form esters with whatever acids are present. Each yeast will give different proportions of these fusel oils, so you get different flavour profiles.

When you combine the special yeasts with the higher-than-average percentage of backset (which produces what Jerry calls Beam's 'bold' flavour), and the two-and-a-half times distillation (the vapour from the beer still passes through a thumper before being redistilled in the doubler) the signature Beam character is taking shape.

But if Jim Beam White Label is the world's best-known bourbon, it's the firm's small batch range which is rightly making waves. The four-strong selection is clear evidence of how complex a spirit bourbon can be, but the one closest to Booker's heart, not surprisingly, is the one which he selects personally and which carries his name.

'Booker's is the only one that's bottled at the same proof at which it went into the barrel,' he says, with considerable relish. 'It's whiskey like it was a hundred years ago'.

If the style hasn't changed, the methods certainly have. Does today's high-tech approach of distilling make Jerry less of an artist and more of a scientist? 'I'm a bit of both,' he says. 'There's an art to making bourbon that has evolved over two hundred years, but I'm also a scientist who wants to find better ways to control the process and preserve the mystery behind it all'.

The techniques may be space-age, but the small batch range signals a return to a time when bourbon meant big, bold and flavoursome whiskey. 'People just kinda got away from flavour,' muses Booker. 'After Prohibition they cut the proof or blended it to make it go further. Now flavour's coming back. The industry's been badly beat up, but now it's rolling again. It'll be back now that people are tasting this super-good whiskey. Hell yes, bourbon's back.

TASTING NOTES

Jim Beam White Label 4-year-old

80°proof Lightly oaked, with some light spicy notes. Clean and sound. * *

Small batch range

Basil Hayden 8-year-old

80°proof Light and rye-accented, with plenty of lemon and tobacco leaf notes. Clean, with crisp rye mixing it with dark, ripe, nutty fruit. * * *

Baker's 7-year-old

107°proof Richer, with a leather armchair kind of nose and lots of overripe fruit. Slightly biscuity to start with, then good sweet vanilla fruit. * * *

Knob Creek 9-year-old

100°proof Rich and sweet with honey, blackberry and spun sugar. Elegant and super-ripe, with a hint of vanilla and some light cinnamon spice on the finish. * * * * *

Booker's 7-year-old

126.5°proof Amazingly complex without water, for such a powerful Bourbon - and a bit like a grizzly bear dancing. Huge and flavour-packed with raisin, chestnut honey, black cherry, pepper, cinnamon and toffee. Rich and immensely powerful, mixing orange peel, creme brulee and tobacco/cigar blown along by a hickory wind. Immense. ***** *