

Title:

Wild Turkey American Whisky

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746

Summary:

One of the more intriguing aspects of bourbon's revival is the way in which its stubborn old guardians have been proved right. None more so than Wild Turkey's Jimmy Russell. A glance at the Wild Turkey distillery confirms that this place doesn't abide by convention.

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Article Body:

One of the more intriguing aspects of bourbon's revival is the way in which its stubborn old guardians have been proved right. None more so than Wild Turkey's Jimmy Russell. A glance at the Wild Turkey distillery confirms that this place doesn't abide by convention.

As other firms are tidying up their plants, the iron-clad, black-painted Wild Turkey sits teetering on the brink of a gorge, steam rattling out of various chimneys. It is one of those places which feels alive, as if the plant is humming with the measured rhythm of the staff. And, overseeing it all, is the avuncular Jimmy.

Take a walk with Jimmy through his distillery - it may be owned by Pernod-Ricard, but this is Jimmy's place - and it comes alive. The swirl and changing colours of the ferment; the wheeze, hiss and whistle of the still - these are not inanimate functions, but part and parcel of a creative, living process.

No surprise, then, that he's a firm believer in the human touch. 'People are one of the most important things in making bourbon,' he says. 'It's people who are doing the work here, people with generations of experience. All these proud people feel that Wild Turkey is part of them'.

He talks of understanding the meaning in the weird music of the still. 'You have to have a stillman there, watching and listening to it. The sound tells him what is going on. We can hear a funny noise and know what's happening. You can't have that hands-on control with machines'.

Jimmy is no technocrat. His pride in his distillery and his whiskey springs from the heart. 'There are things which you cannot prove scientifically. You can't prove why copper works better than stainless steel, but you sure can taste the difference. So, for me, making whiskey is a craftsman's process, an artistic process if you like. That artistic element is coming back as bourbon's image improves, and small batch and single barrel brands appear. People are coming back to an old-fashioned way of making whiskey and old-fashioned flavours'.

This belief in flavour is a crucial factor in making Jimmy's the tastiest bourbon of all. 'Old-fashioned' is often used in a derogatory sense, but when distillers such as Jimmy Russell use the term, they're talking of a style of bourbon made before the 'light is right' brigade began to throttle the industry to death. These days, people like him have been vindicated, as the whisky-drinking world (re)discovers flavour and complexity. They wanted us to go lighter and lighter, but we never did change,' he smiles. 'You'll see more and more flavoursome, top-end bourbons in the future: but we didn't have to change anything, we were already there!'

Everything in the production of Wild Turkey is done to maximize flavour. The mashbill is heavy on rye and barley malt, it's distilled to a lower proof than any other bourbon and aged for longer than average. Jimmy also insists on using 'the old, natural ageing process', by rotating the barrels in the warehouses - taking the barrels from the hot top floors and replacing them with those that have started on the cool lower floors. It gives a more even maturation profile for the Wild Turkey brands, though it's the middle floors which provide the whiskeys that go into the small batch Rare Breed and single barrel Kentucky Spirit.

Superb though they are, it's Wild Turkey 101° proof, 8-year-old which defines top-end bourbon. Uncompromising yet charming (like Jimmy himself), the fact that Hunter S. Thompson rates it as his favourite bourbon is no surprise, and speaks volumes about what to expect.

TASTING NOTES

Wild Turkey

80°proof Big nose, mixing geranium orange peel and dark fruit. Some smoke on the palate, which is rich with light cinnamon/perfumed notes, then a crisp vanilla/toasty finish. Solid stuff. ***

Wild Turkey 8-year-old

10Tproof Wonderfully rich and complex nose of acacia honey, caramelized

fruits/creme brulee, faded roses and dried spices. Starts sweetly then sits heavily in the mouth. Hugely rich, mixing tingling sweet spices, honeyed fruits, vanilla and some red fruit. Succulent, and a meal in a glass. * * * * *

Wild Turkey Rare Breed

108.6°proof Slightly sweeter than the 8-year-old 101 °: more barley sugar/candy notes. Big and honeyed, with a light floral lift. Lovely mix of roses, fragrant spice, plum, nectarine and cigar box. A slow, soft start in the mouth, then a lift of charred wood, honeyed wood and a mix of chocolate and lemon on the finish