

Title:

Maker Mark American Whiskey

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Summary:

Makers Mark

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Article Body:

Makers Mark

The Samuels, like the Beams, are part and parcel of Kentucky's history. The family has been a distillers since 1780, and their TW Samuels brand was an early classic. One of their ancestors, Rueben Samuels, married Zerelda James, whose sons became better known for a less peaceful way of life. Bill Samuels, current boss of Maker's Mark, still has Jesse's and Frank's pistols hanging on the wall of his office.

A discussion of the human influence on whiskey leads Bill to muse on his father, Bill Samuels Sr, who was something of a visionary in these parts. He bought the run-down Happy Hollow distillery in 1953 and started making a new kind of bourbon his way, in a different, softer style. After consulting another legend of the industry, Pappy Van Winkle, he created a new mashbill using winter wheat instead of rye, aged the whiskey for longer and sold it at a higher price. Not the standard approach in post-war Kentucky.

'In 1953, Dad was talking of how people were looking for a more refined version of bourbon,' recalls Bill. 'He knew the things that he wanted to preserve, the ones he wanted to throw out. He was going to create a bourbon to suit his taste: it had damn-all to do with the market! He just thought bourbon should taste better'.

The industry is full of such purely personal likes and dislikes dictating the taste of a brand. Bill Sr simply didn't like aggressive whiskey, so he changed everything. His was a gentle crusade. The family may be related to the James

gang, but coming out guns blazing just ain't their style. Bill Sr may have had the vision, but it was his son who took Maker's Mark across the world, talking up high-quality, premium-priced liquor at the time the industry was at its nadir. Still, the Maker's Mark crusade must have seemed doomed. Tn the 1960s there wasn't a nickel's-worth of difference between bourbon and bourbon-flavoured vodka', says Bill.

'The industry was at the end of the road because no-one could afford the \$100 barrel. Bourbon can never be a mass-market commodity, because we have that high cost legally built in'. Having to buy new barrels is less problematic when the product is selling for a higher price.

You can list the differences in production that set Maker's Mark apart: the mashbill; the yeast strain created by Bill's great-great-grandfather; the double distillation; the charcoal added to the white dog as a filtering agent; the air-dried wood; the way the barrels are rotated in the high-rack warehouses. All these give the product its character, but ultimately Maker's Mark is about the stubborn Samuels family and the people who work in the distillery.

Bill Sr has been proved right. These days premium bourbon is one of the most exciting areas in world whisky, but Bill refuses to take the credit for this turnaround. Like all great whisky men he realizes he's part of a team. 'If I could do one little thing, I'd bring out my ancestors to see that bourbon is finally no longer a wilderness product. The six generations before me did the heavy lifting,' he says. 'Dad said he'd change the face of bourbon. When he started no-one gave him a chance, but by the time I retire bourbon will be the talk of the town'.

He believes the new premium sector will be a major factor in restoring pride to the industry. 'Higher margins fire up the creative juices,' he says. 'The industry is improving and the products are infinitely better, because they are high price. Now there's an opportunity for the talented people in the industry to practise their art and not just produce a low-cost product. The question is whether we have sufficient discipline not to disappoint people's high expectations ... that's what Dad would have said.'

TASTING NOTES

Maker's Mark 90°proof Lovely, complex mix of flowers, cumin, cinnamon, marzipan/anise, vanilla and light honey. A soft start, then great interplay between silky-soft honeyed fruit, vanilla-toffee and balanced oak flavours. Some chocolate on the finish. Gentle, easy and complex. *****