

Title:

Four Roses American Whisky

Word Count:

612

Summary:

This bizarre lemon-coloured confection of a Mexican-style ranch seems incongruous with Kentucky's gentle rolling grasslands and tree-lined hollows. Thankfully, master distiller Jim Rutlege is more hospitable than the patriarch in Sam Peckinpah's violent film classic.

Keywords:

food, drink, alcohol, recipe, whisky

Article Body:

Driving up to Seagram's Four Roses distillery makes you feel strangely like Warren Gates at the start of Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia. This bizarre lemon-coloured confection of a Mexican-style ranch seems incongruous with Kentucky's gentle rolling grasslands and tree-lined hollows. Thankfully, master distiller Jim Rutlege is more hospitable than the patriarch in Sam Peckinpah's violent film classic.

This is the last remaining Kentucky outpost of the mighty Seagram empire: in fact, until the firm's Lawrenceburg plant in Indiana reopened it was the only Seagram distillery in the United States - stark evidence of the decline that beset the American whiskey market from the 1970s. That hasn't stopped Jim making a pretty classy whiskey at Four Roses, with 'pretty' being the operative word.

It's a given that every distiller has his or her own technique, but Four Roses stands apart from its colleagues in Kentucky. Perhaps it is Seagram's Canadian roots showing through, but no other distillery in the state makes such a range of different base whiskies.

With five yeast strains being used on the two mashbills—one with 75 per cent corn, the other with only 60 per cent—Jim has 10 subtly different whiskies to blend into the Four Roses style. When you drop in different distilling strengths and different ages you've got a pretty complex package of flavours.

'We feel that you get most of the flavour from the small grains,' says Jim. 'In our case that means rye and some malted barley.' He then explains that, contrary

to popular belief, bourbon-makers don't use malted barley solely for its enzymes, but for flavour and another little-known property. 'Malt does two things,' he says. 'There's the enzyme conversion which begins to break down starch molecules and change them into soluble and therefore fermentable, sugars, and also liquefies the corn slurry by breaking down its molecular structure'.

Jim therefore adds malted barley twice during cooking (mashing). First, the corn is cooked at a high temperature with some malt, to help liquefy the thick gloop; then the temperature is dropped and rye is added (this stops rye balls forming and cuts down the risk of bacterial infection in the ferment). Then the temperature is reduced once more and the malted barley (along with some backset) is added for its enzyme.

The mention of backset triggers a long and patient explanation about pH levels, consistency and soleras. 'The backset comes from the bottom of the still and is high in acidity,' says Jim. 'It is put into the cooker and the fermenters to get the correct pH. As the ferment proceeds, the pH drops and turns sour.

You know by the smell and taste how far it is advanced. It is science and art combined'. Jim places a priority on careful monitoring of the process, from smelling the grains as they arrive, right through to the end of the distillation - and on to maturation. 'I'm looking for a rich, sweet aroma from the new spirit,' he says. '

But to do that you need to have built-in good flavours to begin with, and they are first generated in the ferment. You can run a still wrong, but you can't make your basic material any better'.

Even the maturation is different here; in a single storey palletized warehouse, rather than the traditional racks. But, hey, who is to say what is right and what's wrong? The end results - the precise, pretty, spicy Yellow Label and the richer, complex Black Label -are bourbons of the first order.

## TASTING NOTES

### Four Roses Yellow Label

Gentle and lightly oaked, with fragrant lemon notes. A great mixer. \* \* \*

### Black Label

Firmer and smokier, with hickory wood, honey and a crisp rye-accented finish