

# Drinking with the Duke

ETHAN WAYNE, JAYSON WOODBRIDGE AND CHRIS RADOMSKI ARE LITERALLY KEEPING THE SPIRIT OF JOHN WAYNE ALIVE

by Richard Carleton Hacker



During my almost three decades as a spirits writer, I've tipped many a glass with members of royalty, captains of industry and entertainment celebrities. But one of my few regrets is that—although I met him on numerous occasions—I never got to belly up to the bar at The Grand Saloon on the Old Tucson movie set with John Wayne and share a bottle of “Who-Hit-John,” a colloquialism for bourbon the Duke picked up from hanging out during his early years with Hollywood icons like Raoul Walsh and John Ford.

So you can imagine my enthusiasm when I was invited to meet Ethan Wayne, the Duke's youngest son and President of John Wayne Enterprises and the John Wayne Cancer Foundation, along with his partners, winemakers Jayson Woodbridge and Chris Radomski, producers of the ultra-premium Hundred Acre Cabernet Sauvignon and their Layer Cake and Cherry Pie labels. However, the lure wasn't their award-winning wines. It was the enticing fact that these three men had created an updated version of the bourbon John Wayne used to drink and were about to launch it nationally.

Walking into the offices of John Wayne Enterprises in Newport Beach, California is like entering a mini-museum devoted to someone who went from being a studio prop man to top-grossing motion picture star, and finally becoming a symbol of America itself. Western memorabilia, bronze statues of the Duke, a few of his countless awards, and displays of licensed merchandise fill the conference room. But my attention was riveted by the cork-stoppered 1880s-styled bottle of Duke Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey. The silver label was emblazoned with the bright red word “Duke,” along with John Wayne's signature over an illustration of this western legend caught mid-stride in his distinctive walk, wearing his Red River D belt buckle and carrying his loop-levered Winchester. The words “Small Batch” told me that while this wasn't a limited edition, it would be in relatively short supply.

THE DUKE



AN AMERICAN LEGEND

Winemakers Chris  
Radomski and  
Jayson Woodbridge  
with Ethan Wayne.



PHOTO: LEIGH CASTELLI





**An early photo of Ethan Wayne with his legendary father.**



"When my dad died in 1979," Ethan recalled, "I was 17 years old and we were living in Newport Beach. I remember they took everything in the house, scooped it up, and put it in

storage. Years later, I started thinking, 'I'd better find out what we have in that warehouse.' One of the first things I found was an old rag wrapped around something heavy. It turned out to be

Dad's Oscar for Best Actor in *True Grit*. That's when I started going through everything in his archives."

Not surprisingly, one of the treasures Ethan found were boxes marked Wine & Spirits. Ethan took a crowbar, pried open the lids and discovered unopened bottles of the Duke's favorite Kentucky bourbon. With him that fateful day were Jayson Woodbridge and Chris Radomski, both of whom had been introduced to Ethan by their mutual friend, Richard Howell. The whiskey, according to the tax stamp, had been bottled in 1972—the same year John Wayne was working on *Cahill U.S. Marshall* and *The Train Robbers*. Ethan, Woodbridge, and Radomski decided—after toasting the Duke with his favored libation—that, as a tribute to John Wayne's bourbon, they would recreate

it, albeit in a slightly refined version for today's tastes, but still acknowledging the Duke's preference for quality.

"I'm not a craftsman at that level," says Ethan, "but I am in charge of doing something appropriate with John Wayne's name. I remember hearing my father say, after having an especially good drink, 'I wish I could own a distillery and make great whiskey.' So when I was introduced to Jayson and Chris, and realized the magnitude of their craftsmanship, I thought it was a great opportunity to collaborate with people who were at the same level in their industry as my father was in his movie-making profession."

Thus, Monument Valley Distillers was born, a partnership between Wayne, Woodbridge, Radomski and Howell. Its name pays homage to one of John Ford's favorite movie locations. And just as Ford kept returning to that majestic spot in Arizona, Wayne, Woodbridge, and Radomski returned to Kentucky to test and taste a wide range of whiskeys to find one worthy of the name "Duke." They finally found it "where the aromatics really kicked in, and gets back to John Wayne's timeless reliability and quality," says Ethan.

This carefully honed blend of barrels, containing whiskeys that range from five to ten years old, results in a roundup of vanilla, cherry, cinnamon and slightly smoky citrus nuances, with a gentle pinch of spice in the finish. Appropriately, the 88 proof is double that of the .44 caliber Winchester the Duke carried. But even more surprising is the price; even though Duke tastes like an \$80 bourbon, it will retail for \$34.95,



PHOTO: LEIGH CASTELL



which, in my opinion, is dramatically underpriced.

"It's a great quality product and it's over-delivering at that price point," agrees Ethan. "But we do John Wayne limited editions all the time and we often price people out of the market.

**Inside the bottle, the Duke's famous phrase, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."**

John Wayne was accessible—he wasn't exclusive, he was inclusive. He was an approachable guy, answered all his fan mail, and we wanted this product to represent that. Of course, later on, we'll have programs where we can deliver something special at a higher price point. But we wanted Duke bourbon to be accessible to everyone, like he was."

That's why, taking his Dad's teaching to heart, the inside label of Duke bourbon reads, "A Man's Gotta Do What A Man's Gotta Do." You can't see it until a third of the bottle is gone.

So I guess it looks like I finally will have that drink with Duke after all. ■■

[www.dukespirits.com](http://www.dukespirits.com)

PHOTO: LEIGH CASTELL

