

Meet The Maker: Four Roses' Master Distiller Brent Elliott

 vinepair.com/articles/meet-maker-four-roses-master-distiller-brent-elliott/

Brad Japhe

Making one of the world's great bourbons sounds like a dream job. And it is. But for Brent Elliott, assuming the role of Four Roses Master Distiller in 2015 wasn't exactly a walk in the clouds. He inherited the reins from Jim Rutledge, an industry legend who worked with the brand for nearly a half century. These were big shoes — and storied barrels — to fill. Over the past two years, Elliott has convincingly demonstrated that he's up to the task. In an arena dominated by elder statesmen, the world of whiskey has taken note: The kid is all right.

Few folks get the opportunity to grow with a brand the way that Elliott has. When he started at Four Roses more than 12 years ago, bourbon was a mere shadow of what it is today. Back then, the elegant brown spirit of Kentucky was typically reserved for formal parlors and cigar lounges. Four Roses enjoyed the majority of its visibility in Asian markets, having recently been reintroduced to the U.S. after an over-40-year absence. Nowadays, its graceful, rounded bottles are instantly recognizable, stationed along the backbar of any reputable watering hole. The distillery, a fully restored Spanish Mission-style hacienda, is an iconic fixture along the revitalized Kentucky Bourbon Trail, attracting hundreds of thousands of thirsty guests each year.

Elliott has enjoyed the ride. He pays homage to the 130-year history of this whiskey while keeping an eye on an ever-shifting horizon. That means continuing to do things as only Four Roses can — a bourbon crafted like none other, from fermentation to maturation — while also figuring out ways to keep things interesting for future generations of drinkers. He has an opportunity to check both boxes with his annual Limited Edition release. Proud enough was he of his first in 2016, that he attached his own name to the title. Elliott's Select was big and bold, brimming with glints of vanilla and burnt caramel. Less than 8,000, 120-proof bottles hit the shelf. This September, Elliott readies his 2017 Limited Edition Small Batch for release. In advance of the occasion, he spoke to VinePair about his journey, living the dream.

Talk to us about your background in bourbon and how you eventually landed the gig as Master Distiller for one of the world's premiere bourbon producers.

My bourbon career began right here at Four Roses in 2005 as the Assistant Quality Control Manager. The primary reason I was hired was to set up the new analytical laboratory. My background in chemistry got my foot in the door... and from there I just grew with the company.

I was with the right company at the right time, and I believe my love of the brand and willingness to learn carried me to where I am today.

What have been the biggest changes you've seen in the world of whiskey since you started your career?

The popularity of bourbon has driven a lot of change in the world of whiskey. You can see it in the number of new distilleries, the number of premium labels, the emergence of a secondary market, and the evolution of bourbon tourism as an industry unto itself.

There has also been a lot of innovation as brands try to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace. The bourbon shelf at retail looks a lot different than it did a decade ago.



Can you recall your first sip of Four Roses? What struck you about the flavor profile?

I remember it clearly. It was the day before my job interview with Four Roses. I lived in Tennessee at the time and Four Roses was only available in Kentucky, so I had to pick up a bottle of Single Barrel in Bowling Green, Kentucky on my way up.

When I arrived in Frankfort the night before my interview, I tried it and was immediately floored. Having lived in Kentucky most of my life, I was familiar with bourbon and I recognized the unique and exceptional character immediately. I recall enjoying the dominant rye flavor and the delicate complexity. I had never had a 100 proof Bourbon that was so smooth. I knew immediately that Four Roses was something special.

What are the main elements of Four Roses production that separates it from other bourbons?

Our fermentation and distillation practices are both designed to create a very crisp, rich, and clean distillate. Because we use five different yeast strains to create a range of specific, delicate flavors, it is very important that we create a distillate that is not too grainy or heavy, which could mute those delicate flavors.

Four Roses famously distills 10 separate bourbons which can be theoretically mixed into virtually infinite permutations. Aren't you tempted to play with these limitless possibilities?

Yes, and I actually have that opportunity every year with our Limited Edition Small Batch. For the standard products, we use the various recipes to maintain the consistency that consumers have come to expect. For the Limited Editions, the concept is to showcase our versatility by creating something totally unique every year by utilizing different combinations of the recipes.

I mentioned innovation in the bourbon industry earlier. Because we have 10 different recipes, we have the ability to innovate and offer consumers something new and exciting without having to change any aspect of our production processes.

Using five different yeast strains is very atypical in whiskey production. Talk to us about that process, and

why it's so important in creating a unique bourbon.

If you try our different expressions, you will taste that they all possess the typical “Four Roses” character: elegant, smooth, and mellow. However, you will also notice remarkable differences between them. These differences arise from the different recipes that are used to create our different labels.

We start with two different mashbills, or grain recipes, and ferment each of these with one of five different yeast strains; resulting in 10 distinct recipes. Each mashbill/yeast strain combination creates its own flavors and aromas... from fruity, spicy, floral, herbal, etc. We age these 10 recipes independently and pull the barrels at the peak of maturation for use in our products. Four Roses Bourbon utilized up to all 10 recipes, Small Batch utilizes four recipes, and Single Barrel utilizes one recipe.

Talk to us about your predecessor, [former Master Distiller] Jim Rutledge. What, specifically, did you learn from him? How long did you work under him? And what do you hope to continue that he had established... what are some things that you think will change under your stewardship?

I worked with Jim from the time I started until his retirement in 2015. It's impossible to recount all that I learned from him in that time, but I think the most important single thing I learned was to value the consumer.

Jim's respect for the consumer is what really set him apart and impressed me the most. He always made time to talk to anyone who was curious about bourbon. He was just as focused and generous with one person as he was with a group of 100.

Since Jim's departure, we have begun the process of expanding our distillation, bottling, and warehousing. For now, I consider my biggest challenge the continuation of the quality that got Four Roses to where it is today. We'll see... when we have the production capacity and more time, we may look into creating something new.



Talk to us about the 50th Anniversary [brand ambassador] Al Young release. What makes it unique? What does Al Young mean to the brand? What has his role been over the past half century?

Each of our Limited Editions is unique because of the different combinations of ages and recipes that we utilize, but this one is special because it commemorates Al and his 50 years with the brand.

When we began the process of formulating this release, I approached Al to see what type of bourbon he'd like for his bottling. I didn't want to release anything that he was not absolutely satisfied with.

Al wanted to incorporate something older into this batch, and wanted it to be unique...so we started there. It took a lot of test blends and tweaking, but eventually we decided on a final formula.

Ultimately, we used a small portion of a 23-year-old batch which contributes a nice oak undercurrent. There is also a nice amount of "F" yeast which creates a unique, minty, mouth-coating character that plays very well with the other recipes. I think Al is very happy with this release. I certainly am.

Al is a huge part of our brand today. When I met Al in 2005, he was winding down his career in production as Distillery Manager. Shortly afterward, Al transitioned into the role of Brand Historian and Senior Brand Ambassador. Al literally wrote the book on Four Roses, "Four Roses: The Return of a Whiskey Legend," and continues to travel and educate consumers on all things Four Roses.

What's next in terms of major releases?

We will release our 2017 Limited Edition Small Batch this September.

How do you feel about extended age bourbons? Unlike most other major whiskey producers, Four Roses seems to avoid overt age statements. What is the philosophy behind that?

It bothers me a little when people automatically equate age with quality. That seemed to be more prevalent five to 10 years ago, but today I see bourbon consumers who are more knowledgeable and confident in their own palates. Consumers today are better at judging products on their own merit, regardless of price or age.

There absolutely are excellent, extended aged bourbons, but I usually prefer younger, more vibrant whiskeys...age does not necessarily make a great bourbon.

We have internal age guidelines that we adhere to for our products, but we don't put these on the labels. Four Roses Bourbon is at least five years old, Small Batch is at least six, and Single Barrel is at least seven. Our approach is that a Bourbon is ready when it is ready.

How do you like to drink your bourbon? Are there any unexpected cocktails that you enjoy it in?

Neat or with a cube. I enjoy cocktails, but not as much when I make them. I leave the cocktail creativity to the bartenders.

Talk to us about the visitor's experience at Four Roses. What can someone expect to see there that they won't find elsewhere?

People always seem to enjoy the experience at both our locations. We have visitor's centers and tours at the Distillery in Lawrenceburg and at our Bottling & Warehousing facility in Cox's Creek, just outside Bardstown [Kentucky].

Our entire team has a lot of passion for the brand and takes a lot of pride in our products. I think that creates sincere excitement and makes a great experience for our guests

You can visit the Four Roses Distillery, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, year round. Tours are

offered Monday through Saturday, on the hour from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; on Sunday from noon to 3 p.m. Summer months feature enhanced, behind-the-scenes experiences. A \$5 admission fee includes tasting, though if you want to sample the goods sooner, a trip to any quality liquor store will find you face to face with the fruits of Elliott's labor.