Castle & Key is a new distillery reconstructed from the Old E.H. Taylor Distillery, abandoned in 1972.

Shrouded in the woods in an unincorporated town outside of Frankfort, Ky., a 19th-century distillery rumbles back to life. Abandoned in 1972, the workers walked out, leaving coffee mugs and office memos on their desks, not knowing when or if they might return. In the passing decades, the Old Taylor Distillery, with its "Sleeping Beauty" castle, was crumbling, cloaked in ivy, an unintended casualty of an unloved spirit.

Now the sprawling compound stands resurrected as Castle & Key, a massive and mercurial passion project of former Kentucky lawyer Will Arvin and hedge funder Wesley Murry. The reborn distillery began producing bourbon and gin in November under the energetic oversight of Marianne Barnes, the first female master distiller in bourbon country since Prohibition. "Since the first time I laid eyes on the historic site that would become Castle & Key, I knew that it was important," she says. "It is a lost bourbon icon, built by a man who was not shy to say he made the best bourbon in the world." But for all its history, Castle & Key isn't just a relic of the past. It's a vibrant glimpse at the future of bourbon—and bourbon country.

Witnessing the brick buildings at Castle & Key, with their monumental scale and manicured gardens returning to the grandeur of their prime feels like the realization of an impossible dream. In truth, a project like Castle & Key, which aims to open to the public in July or August, could not have occurred even ten years ago. The increase in bourbon sales and prices over the last few years fuels this sort of optimism and opens the door to ambition. Bourbon sales hit 20 million cases in 2016 for the first time since 1985, with production near a 50-year peak. Kentucky now has 52 distilleries, compared to just 19 in 2009. This bourbon renaissance isn't news to many of us, but the American whiskey boom is more than just a sales windfall. It's a transformation of what bourbon can offer and a new vision for what makes bourbon unique. This is the beginning of a glorious new era for our American spirit.

On The Bourbon Trail

Visitors used to come to Kentucky for horses and Mint Juleps, preferably enjoyed together. Those who did drink bourbon gave little thought to how it was made. But now, with bourbon's return to its proud place as America's native spirit, ever more enthusiastic drinkers are venturing outside the racetrack and through the rolling blue-green hills of Kentucky, bourbon's spiritual home. Distilleries along the Kentucky Bourbon Trail racked up a record million visits in 2016, up 300 percent in ten years.

Southern hospitality demands that the distilleries accommodate these new guests, and that's transforming the landscape in bourbon country. The older distilleries, for all their beauty, were mostly utilitarian endeavors. That has now changed, as distilleries like Wild Turkey, Four Roses, and Buffalo Trace have built gleaming new visitor centers or expanded existing ones, offering bourbon lovers curated and in-depth experiences, more frequent and intimate tours, and gift shop rarities.

The state of Kentucky—seeing which way the winds are blowing—has been happy to help. For years, distilleries could legally offer just two half-ounce samples of their product. Kentucky Senate Bill 11, passed in 2016, nearly

A Bourbon Timeline

Bourbon was born on the American frontier and came of age on Madison Avenue—and everything about its history reflects the nation that invented it. The story is cast with immigrants, industrialists, farmers, and hustlers, and set in fields, factories, boardrooms, and back rooms. Inextricably intertwined, America shaped bourbon and bourbon shaped America. And no matter how hard marketers try to embellish the history, they'll never top the real thing.

—Reid Mitenbuler

7000 BC

A-maize-ing

Early Native Americans domesticate a weedy Mexican grass called teosinte, ultimately transforming it into the primary ingredient of bourbon and a grain that feeds and fuels the United States.

1622

Dying for a Drink

George Thorpe, a colonist who had been experimenting with making alcohol beverages from corn, is killed during the Powhatan Uprising in Virginia.

1776

Revolting Developments

As the war with the British hinders the sugar trade, and therefore rum production, Americans resort to distilling from native grains like rye and corn to make spirits.

Bourbon at a Glance

Produced anywhere in the U.S.

FACT Around 95% of bourbon comes from Kentucky.

Made from at least 51% corn

FACT Rye and wheat are common secondary grains, but any grain is permitted.

Distilled to no more than 80% ABV

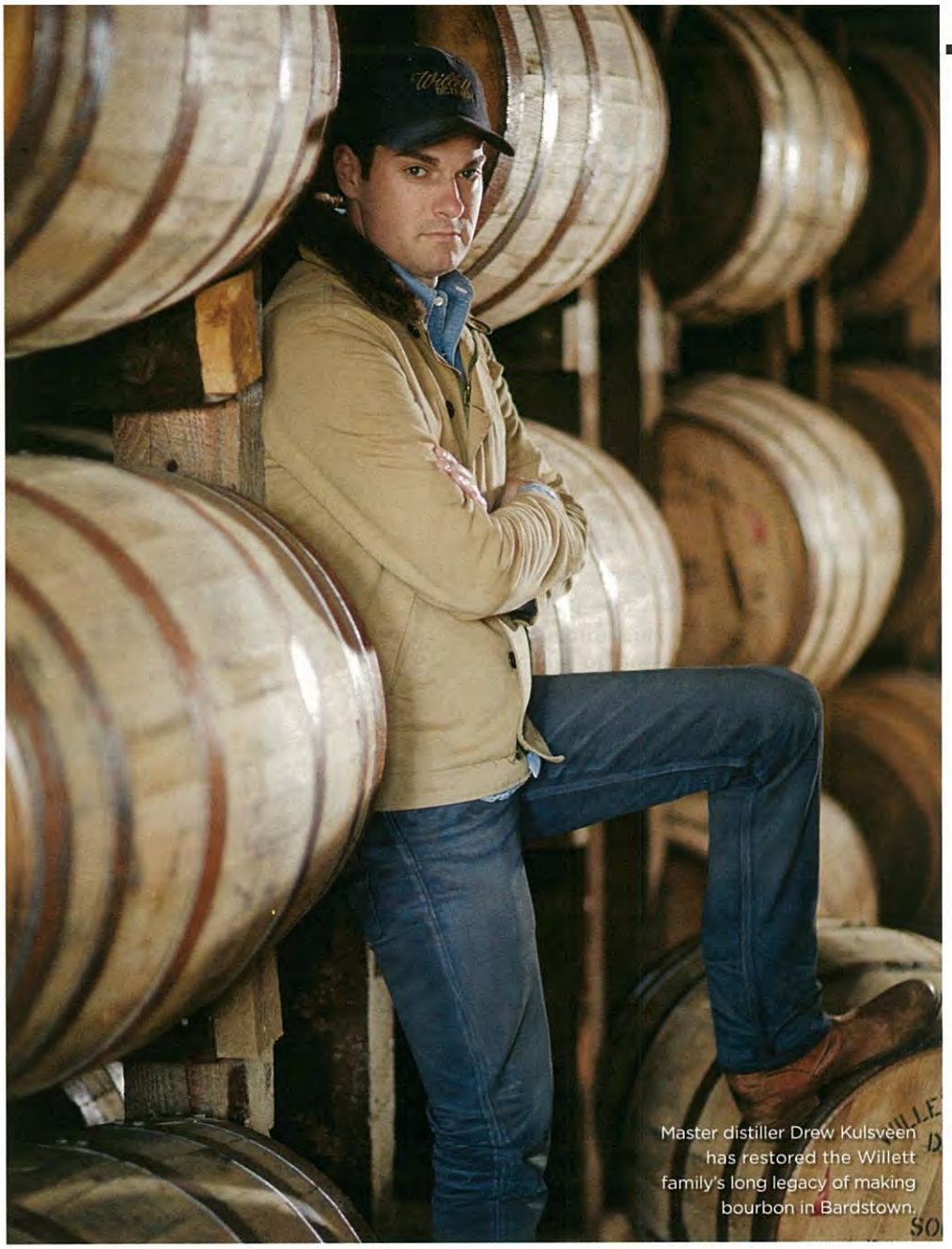
FACT Bourbon can be produced in column or pot stills.

Enters the barrel at no more than 62.5% ABV

FACT There is no minimum aging requirement. (Bourbon less than 4 years old must state its actual age; bourbon labeled "straight" must be aged at least 2 years.)

Matured in new charred oak barrels

FACT After aging bourbon, most barrels are repurposed for scotch, rum, and other spirits.



Master distiller Drew Kulsveen has restored the Willett family's long legacy of making bourbon in Bardstown.

doubles that limit while easing restrictions on distillery sales. It even provides for a license to run an on-site bar and sell drinks by the glass. Jim Beam has already opened a cocktail bar at the distillery, and several craft producers—including Angel's Envy in Louisville and Jeptha Creed in Shelbyville—have followed suit. Soon enough, distilleries will be community meeting places, where locals and visitors convene over cocktails. Another expected legal change will allow Kentucky restaurants and retailers to buy and sell vintage spirits from private collectors.

Many of the next generation of distillers have built their enterprises from the ground up with the guest experience in mind. Bardstown Bourbon Co. is taking full advantage of the new hospitality opportunities. "We're trying to create a Napa Valley experience on the Bourbon Trail," says president and CEO David Mandell, who adds that the facility is the largest new distillery in Kentucky and, indeed, the whole country. Bardstown Bourbon Co., which aims to open later this year, is building what Mandell hopes will be the largest whiskey bar in Kentucky. A café, gift shop, wraparound patio, events space, and educational classrooms round out the experience. There are plans for a full restaurant and even

1792

15th State

As Kentucky joins the Union, more Americans move into the Ohio River Valley region where corn grows particularly well, paving the way for the Bluegrass State to eventually become the epicenter of bourbon.

1794

The Whiskey Rebellion

Frontier distillers in western Pennsylvania resist payment of the "whiskey tax," the first tax on a domestic product from the new government. George Washington and his army suppress the insurgents, enforcing the federal government's sovereignty.

1797

Distiller in Chief

Working at Mount Vernon, George Washington becomes the nation's largest distiller, specializing in rye whiskey, bourbon's close cousin.

1802

Tax Break

Thomas Jefferson—who strongly dislikes whiskey, much preferring wine—eliminates the hated whiskey tax, thwarting an illicit moonshine market while promoting innovation and craft.

a boutique hotel—which would be a welcome addition in still-sleepy Bardstown.

For a long time, distillery visits have been predictably similar: a tour followed by a tasting. New legislation, new investment, and new creativity are changing this, too. At Castle & Key, the guest experience will include cocktail classes, botanical and historical tours, live music, and—eventually—whiskey. Bardstown Bourbon Co., with its admittedly brief history, is putting the craft of bourbon making at the forefront. Backed by a veteran whiskey making team led by former Maker's Mark master distiller Steve Nally, the company devotes around 85 percent of its production to distilling whiskeys for other companies through its Collaborative Distilling Program, not unlike MGP in Indiana.

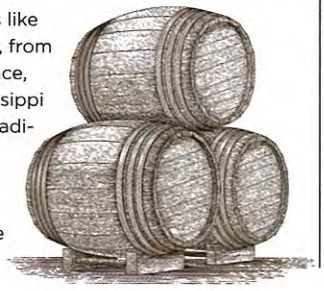
New bourbon producers have confidence that—as long as you're truthful—today's savvy bourbon drinkers will judge a spirit on its merit more than its marketing. "We have built this modern distillery that has no hidden legends, no stories," says Mandell. "It is just a transparent approach to making great whiskey." Floor-to-ceiling glass windows line the Bardstown distillery, and guests can see the production still behind glass in the atrium. Even the grain silos are visible through windows from the catwalks on the tour. To get this close to the process in traditional industrial distilleries is almost impossible without safety vests and hardhats.

Is bourbon country becoming the next Napa Valley? The question is on many lips in Louisville and hopes are high, but in truth, Kentucky is emerging as something truly distinct from American wine country. After all, Napa is the land of $75 wine tastings, luxury hotels, and high-end auctions. American whiskey is more egalitarian. Many fantastic bottles of bourbon can still be had for under $30, and distillery tours are modestly priced or even free. The well-heeled can freely enjoy chasing pricey gift shop exclusives or downing elusive uni-

1807

Barrel Role

Middleman merchants like the Tarascon brothers, from south of Cognac, France, settle along the Mississippi River, bringing their tradition of aging spirits in charred barrels to whiskey for the long voyage to markets like New Orleans.



1821

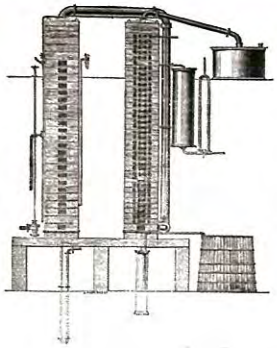
Naming Rights

First known advertisement using the word "bourbon" to describe whiskey appears in Kentucky's Western Citizen newspaper, when a firm known as Stout and Adams offers it for sale by the barrel.

1831

Coffey, Please

Irish inventor Aeneas Coffey patents a more efficient version of the continuous still, capable of producing spirits faster and cleaner than traditional pot distillation.



1830s

Burning Desires

Distilleries burn their names onto barrelheads, giving rise to the term "brand names," and indicating that people are growing more interested in a whiskey's source, quality, and style.

6 Bourbons You Must Try Now

Eagle Rare 10 year old 45%, $30
The perfect bottle to start dipping your toes into older bourbon. It tastes like Buffalo Trace with a few more years on it—because it is.

Elijah Craig 18 year old 45%, $120
After a long disappearance, this Heaven Hill flagship is back. Impressive structure with balanced oak and spice make it a classic teenage bourbon.

Four Roses Single Barrel 50%, $45
A reliable classic. Upgrade pick: exclusive private barrels at bars and liquor stores kick up to cask strength and can be made from any of the distillery's ten unique recipes.

Michter's 10 year old Single Barrel 47.2%, $120
New master distiller Pamela Heilmann approved this year's release, a great balance of proof, age, and price for a single barrel.

Old Grand-Dad 114 57%, $33
Rumors of Grand-Dad's retirement have been greatly exaggerated; this venerable old dram isn't going anywhere. In fact, more will be hitting shelves this summer.

Old Forester 1920 Prohibition Style 57.5%, $60
The best of Old Forester's Whiskey Row series and, unlike during Prohibition, you don't need a prescription to buy it.

Wild Turkey Master's Keep Decades 52%, $150
A mix of 10 to 20 year old whiskey released for master distiller Eddie Russell's 35th anniversary at Wild Turkey. Older bourbon like this won't be around forever, at least not at this price.

1835

A Sour Note

The "father of modern bourbon," Dr. James Crow, begins experimenting at a distillery along Glenns Creek in Kentucky's Woodford County. In freely sharing his scientific discoveries, he helps to popularize the sour mash process.

1847

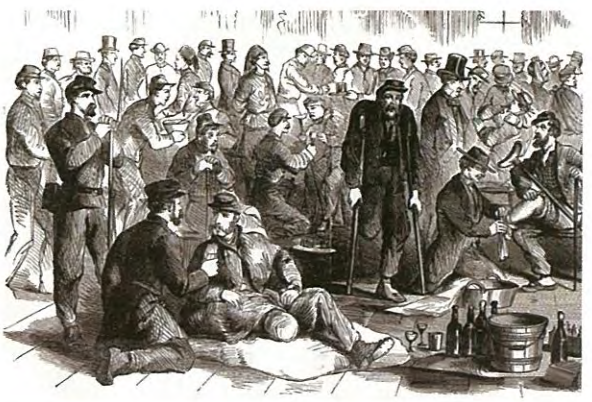
Ice, Ice, Baby

From his Walden Pond outpost, Henry David Thoreau rhapsodizes about America's ability to improve ice harvesting, transportation, and storage. Now, Clinebell machines mimic the cold, dense ice once provided by nature.

1865

A Local Anesthetic

By the Civil War's end, countless soldiers have been treated with whiskey. Some are given a pint a day, others "as much whiskey as [they] could take," according to The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion.



Willett still embraces its historic roots. Half of the company's six different mashbills (fermentation pictured left) are old family recipes, and all of Willett's eight warehouses (top right) date to the distillery's original incarnation. Operations (bottom right) are still done primarily by hand.

corn whiskey by the glass in Louisville, while everyday aficionados enthusiastically share great value finds while wearing T-shirts and hats promoting their favorite bourbons. Bourbon is the melting pot of spirits lovers.

What's New Is Old Again

Bourbon producers new and old are rediscovering the past, returning to their roots, and making bourbon the way it used to be made. Making bourbon by hand using artisanal ingredients and less-efficient equipment is expensive, but the rising interest in American whiskey has resulted in a new cohort of drinkers happy to pay for quality. That's now fueling initiatives that never would have been feasible before.

The restoration project at Castle & Key is emblematic of those changes. "The site had been abandoned basically since 1972. It looked almost Chernobyl-esque," says Brett Connors, a consultant on the project. Such was the legacy of bourbon's collapse in the late 20th century. The distillery complex spreads over 113 acres and includes roughly 20 structures in various states of disrepair and rehabilitation. The garden blooming among the ruins, the restored gazebo, the limestone spring capped by a Victorian rotunda, the castle itself: these are not the trappings of a site dedicated to maximally efficient industry, not now and not in the 19th century. Built for beauty and built to last, it's fair to say they don't make them like this anymore. Much of the distillery's surviving equipment, like fermenters and grain scales, was still functional and has now come roaring back to life.

Castle & Key plans to produce bourbon and rye that evokes what was made a century ago—and that's not mere guesswork. "The inspiration behind the recipe was a bottle of 1917-distilled pre-Prohibition bourbon that was produced at Castle & Key by our original proprietor in its glory days," Barnes says. "I nearly shed blood to open this antique metal screw cap, but what we found inside—a beautifully rich 16 year old bourbon that has sat in the warehousing on our property all throughout Prohibition—completely changed my mind about the quality and complexity of historically produced bourbon." She ultimately plans to produce four bourbons using two different mashbills and two yeast strains, as well as a rye whiskey made with rare Kentucky-grown rye. Castle & Key is also working with a Kentucky

1875

Whiskeygate

A Republican scheme to bury political opponents using money skimmed from whiskey taxes is traced all the way to Orville Babcock, personal secretary to President Ulysses S. Grant, exposing whiskey as one of America's most corrupt industries.

1881

Whiskey for my Cattle

Whiskey baron Joseph Greenhut opens the world's largest distillery, Great Western Distillery in Peoria, Illinois. At its peak, the trust he forms is so enormous that the spent grain provides food for 28,000 cattle.

1886

Newly Old Fashioned

Bartenders have begun dressing up the basic Whiskey Cocktail with extra ingredients, causing purists to launch a back-to-basics movement dubbing the drink an "Old Fashioned," as it appears in the publication Comment and Dramatic Times.

1897

Bottled in Bond

Problems with mislabeling and adding dangerous adulterants spark the landmark Bottled in Bond Act, establishing standards of identity and making the U.S. Government the guarantor of a whiskey's authenticity.