

Barrels of bourbon sit aging in rick houses at Heaven Hill Distillery. The aroma inside and around the building is evaporation, the "angel's share."



Employees in the Maker's Mark gift shop show visitors how to dip their own bottles of bourbon to give them the distiller's famous red wax seal.



Steve Beam offers visitors tastes of moonshine at his Limestone Branch Distillery.



Mash bubbles as it ferments in big wooden barrels at Limestone Branch Distillery.

# Bourbon run

Get into the spirit of this increasingly popular liquor with a tour of Kentucky distilleries

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## travel

BARDSTOWN, Ky. — "Welcome to Heaven." Lynne Grant opens her arms as she greets our group seated in the barrel-shaped tasting room at Heaven Hill Distillery. A native of Scotland, the director of guest services knows her whiskey and shows us the best way to sniff the aroma of the amber liquid in our glasses and detect its subtle flavors as we sip.

All bourbon is whiskey, but not all whiskey is bourbon, says Grant. An act of Congress in 1964 designated bourbon "America's Native Spirit" and stipulated that whiskey can only be called bourbon if it is made in the U.S. of at least 51 percent corn, is free of additives and is aged for at least two years in new, white oak barrels that have been charred inside.

We're sampling two of Heaven Hill's bourbons, Evan Williams and Elijah Craig, whose aroma of vanilla and oak first greeted us on our tour of rick houses where barrels are stacked seven stories high. That's the "angels' share" you smell, says Grant, the 3 to 5

percent that evaporates from the barrels every year. The fragrance permeates the air around Heaven Hill, the second-largest bourbon producer in the world with 900,000 barrels aging in its rick houses.

She wishes it were more. "We sell as much as we can make," Grant says.

### The bourbon boom

Sales of bourbon have risen sharply in the last decade, not just at Heaven Hill, but across Kentucky where 95 percent of the world's bourbon is made. Sales increased 115 percent since 1999, according to the Kentucky Distillers Association. One distillery, Maker's Mark, was running so low on raw materials that last spring it announced it would begin watering down its product, reducing the proof from 90 to 84 to increase the amount it could bottle. That sparked a run on its bourbon, forcing it to reverse its decision and stop the hoarding.

As the taste for bourbon has risen, so has interest in

seeing it made. To guide visitors, the distillers association created the Kentucky Bourbon Trail of seven distilleries that offer tours. Pick up a passport at your first stop and have it stamped at each distillery for

a free T-shirt. You also can collect stamps at seven small, craft distilleries to earn a classic Kentucky julep cup. The distilleries lie south and east of Louisville in the heart of Kentucky bourbon country near communities such as Clermont, Lebanon and BardstOWN, named most beautiful small town in America in a USA Today/Rand McNally contest last year. Maps and a free app on iTunes help you plan a self-guided trip.

Each tour, like each distillery, has its own characteristics. Maker's Mark is noted for its red wax seal, the neck of each bottle dipped by hand in hot wax. You can purchase a bottle in the gift shop and dip it yourself, a process created by the owner's wife using her crockpot.

The Maker's Mark Distillery is a National Historic Landmark with a story that begins in 1784 when Robert Samuels came to Kentucky. Like many Scots-Irish immigrants who settled the area, he brought his whiskey-making skills with him and set up a still. In 1952, the sixth generation of Samuels burned the family recipe and started over, creating Maker's Mark by using winter wheat in place of rye. As you sip samples in the tasting

room, see if you agree that it gives this bourbon a different flavor.

### It's in the water

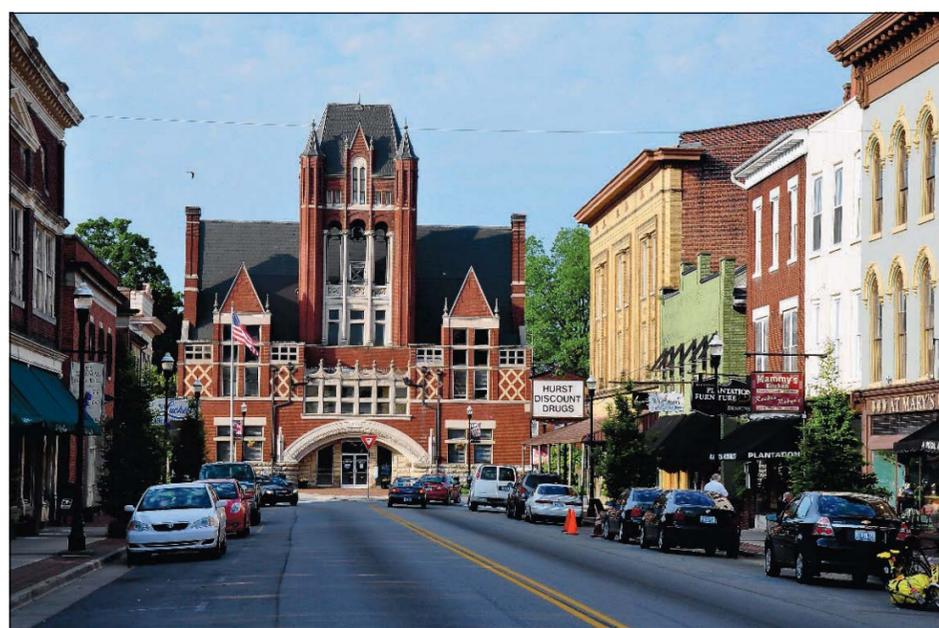
A pure, natural product, the only additive allowed in bourbon is water. Every drop in Maker's Mark, for example, comes from its own limestone spring.

The presence of limestone under the Kentucky soil is one reason so many bourbon distilleries operate in the state, which last year had more barrels of bourbon aging in warehouses, 4.9 million, than people, 4.3 million. The limestone naturally filters iron from the water and adds calcium that aids fermentation. Some believe the calcium also works its way into the Kentucky bluegrass, giving the racehorses that graze on it strong bones.

You'll find the process of making bourbon pretty much the same at each distillery, big or small. For a clear picture of just how it's done, Jim Beam, the world's largest bourbon maker, opened a new tour center a year ago with the Mash House, a small-scale distillery



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER  
Jim Beam opened its new visitor center about a year ago to give guests an intimate look at the bourbon-making process of the world's largest bourbon distiller.



BardstOWN, in the heart of Kentucky Bourbon Country, has been named the most beautiful small town in America.

## Kentucky's Bourbon Trail

**Getting there:**  
BardstOWN is about 370 miles from suburban Chicago and about 37 miles from Louisville International Airport where United, American and Southwest Airlines have nonstops from Chicago airports.

**Where to stay:**

- Old Talbott Tavern, 107 W. Stephen Foster Ave., BardstOWN, established in 1779 as a stagecoach inn, has five guest rooms from \$69. (502) 348-3494 or talbotts.com.
- Best Western Plus, 211 S. Lakeview Drive, Shepherdsville, rooms with complimentary breakfast in Denny's classic diner next door, from about \$86. (877) 543-5080 or bestwestern.com.

**Where to eat:**

- Old Talbott Tavern, 107 W. Stephen Foster Ave., BardstOWN, serves an Old Kentucky Hot Brown, Southern Fried Chicken, sandwiches and salads along with bourbon flights in the bar. (502) 348-3494 or talbotts.com.
- Mammy's Kitchen, 114 N. Third St., BardstOWN, is where locals gather for big breakfasts and down-home Southern cooking. (502) 350-1097.
- Kurtz, 418 Stephen Foster Ave., BardstOWN, began serving Southern cooking in the family home in 1937 and is known for chicken fried in a cast-iron skillet, fried cornbread, country ham and biscuit pudding with raisin-bourbon sauce; say hi to the owner, Toogie. (502) 348-5983.

**Age restriction:**  
You must be 21 to participate in bourbon tastings.

**Guided tours:**  
If you prefer to leave the driving to someone else, consider a Bourbon Trail Tour with Mint Julep Tours in Louisville. (502) 583-1433 or mintjuleptours.com.

**For more information:**  
Kentucky Department of Travel and Tourism: (800) 225-8747 or kentuckytourism.com  
Kentucky Bourbon Trail: (502) 875-9351 or kybourbontrail.com



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

**Antique Jim Beam bottles, in a variety of shapes and figures, are displayed in a room in the distillery visitor center.**

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that allows tour members to lend a hand turning out its Knob Creek bourbon one barrel at a time. You pour the grain into a tub where spring water is added to make mash. After yeast is added it begins to ferment. Jim Beam has been using the same strain of yeast, the DNA of its bourbon, since 1935. Every night, Beam family members take portions of it home and return it with them the next morning to ensure this precious ingredient is never lost.

After fermentation and distillation, you may volunteer to pump clear distillate into barrels for aging. In another building, you help empty the aged barrels into a trough to be filtered and then rinse empty bottles before filling. Your work is rewarded in the tasting room where you help yourself to three of Beam's 13 brands from self-serve dispensers.

### **Bourbon in their blood**

The Beam legacy began around 1787 when Jacob Bohm, or Boehm, passed through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky with his copper still strapped to his back. Seven generations and a name change later, the Beam family tree has spread across bourbon country with branches growing in several other distilleries.

Steve and Paul Beam opened Limestone Branch Distillery in 2011 and will release their first batch of bourbon next fall. Until then, the brothers' micro distillery is selling legal moonshine. Take a tour and sample Sugar Shine, infused with a variety of

flavors, such as blackberry.

At Willett Distillery, another craft distillery on the Bourbon Trail, tour groups gather around stainless steel fermentation tanks. Dip a finger into the bubbling mash for a taste before moving on to sample the finished product. An exhibit of bourbon barrel staves shows the char layer, the burned surface inside the oak barrel. In the summer heat, when temperatures at the top of rick houses can exceed 100 degrees, the bourbon expands through the char into the oak, then contracts when temperatures drop in winter. This back and forth through the char gives bourbon its color and flavor, deepening as it ages.

Though it's not on the Bourbon Trail map, you won't want to miss a free tour of Kentucky Cooperage in Lebanon, Kentucky. Many bourbon distillers buy their barrels from this factory, a branch of Independent Stave Co. Watch as oak staves come from a 180-degree steam tunnel to be bent into barrels and then fired to four char levels specified by individual distilleries. Since 70 percent of the taste of bourbon comes from the barrel, these white oak containers are key to the process.

And what happens to the used barrels? They're sold to whiskey distillers in Canada, Ireland and Scotland. Because only new barrels can be used for bourbon, they'll never hold "America's Native Spirit" again.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by the Kentucky Department of Travel and Tourism.*