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*I write about intoxicating elixirs and the business that makes them.*

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## How To Buy A Barrel Of Bourbon



David Moritz (left) hard at work sampling barrels with Buffalo Trace Master Distiller, Harlen Wheatley.

Anytime my bourbon-obsessed buddy, David Moritz, comes calling, it usually involves whiskey. On one particularly dreary day last year, he called about *a lot* of whiskey.

“I’d like to buy a barrel of bourbon,” he announced. “And I need your help.”

As a spirits writer, I am often invited to—and frequently decline—press trips, high-end tastings, and lavish booze-sponsored events. It’s not that I don’t enjoy them, I simply don’t have the time or stamina to party five nights a week. So I say no to things, especially things that require large chunks of my time. But as a loyal friend and degenerate boozehound, I decided to accept this assignment and join Moritz in delving into the world of barrel programs. An adventure was born.

You’d be right to wonder why *anyone* might need that much hooch, but in fact, demand for bespoke barrels is big business and growing. Drinking clubs, bottle hunters, bars, restaurants,

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and retailers line up to get in on the action, and competition for certain brands can be stiff. Moritz, an entrepreneur whose infatuation with bourbon compelled him to build a 300+ bottle “library” inside his Long Island City, New York headquarters, was looking for a cool gift for his customers in celebration of his design firm, [Society Award's](#), 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

“My clients know I’m a fanatic, so I decided to create a link between the quality and innovation of bourbon and my company,” he says. “But to be honest, I’ve always wanted to buy my own barrel, and this was the perfect excuse.”

Moritz applied for the Single Barrel Selection Program at the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky, who release a handful of Buffalo Trace and 1792 bourbon barrels to program members each year. But we called in a few favors to finagle a barrel of Eagle Rare 10-Year-Old, which is typically reserved for commercial accounts, from a retailer’s allocation. (A story for another day.) We were on our way to Louisville.

Buying a barrel isn’t as easy as pulling up to the distillery and rolling one home. There’s a process. Federal regulations, liquor allocations, and customer demand create a tangle of red tape and often long waits. Larger brands like Jim Beam Single Barrel Select and Jack Daniel’s Single Barrel Personal Collection have robust programs with stock readily available, while others, like Buffalo Trace, sell out immediately, to the frustration of thirsty fans. But then again, the thrill is in the hunt.

“We don’t have a waiting list for barrels. It’s more like buying tickets to a hot concert we know will sell out,” says Buffalo Trace Barrel Select Manager Beau Beckman. “In January, Single Barrel Select members placed barrel orders for 2017, and we hit our limit in just a few hours. The next date to order is December 4 for a chance to purchase a barrel next year.”

The next hurdle is distribution. Unless you have a liquor license, you’ll need to buy through someone who does, thanks to a federal law called the three-tier system. All spirits sold to the public must flow from the distillery to a wholesaler and finally to your retailer, who ultimately sets the price of the bottle, and in this case, your barrel. Even the distilleries themselves are required to buy back their products from a distributor to legally sell them in their own gift shops.

Despite the hassles, barrel programs are in full-blown growth mode, and companies are investing big-time. In 2016 Beam-Suntory owned Maker’s Mark completed a 14,000 square-foot whisky cellar, blending facility, and tasting room to accommodate their newly launched Barrel Select program. Buffalo Trace has been increasing production almost every year since their program began in 1999, but in the past five years, demand for private barrels has spun out of control.

“We’re seeing an increase in consumer interest plus the expansion of retail stores,” says Master Distiller, Harlen Wheatley. “We are producing more whiskey based on our brand growth, but I think supply will start balancing out once the number of new establishments begin to level off.”

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Select programs typically fall into two camps—single barrel and small batch. The former is the contents of an individual cask, dumped and bottled, usually at the brand’s standard proof, though some distillers bottle at cask strength. The evaporation of liquid that naturally occurs in the aging process, known as angel’s share, will dictate your yield, which ranges between 130–220 .750 liter bottles. A small batch is a combination of two or more barrels combined to create a custom bottling that you can blend or have an expert create for you. Prices typically range between \$4,000–\$15,000, depending on the brand, taxes, retail markup and volume.

### **Back to Kentucky**

We were greeted at Buffalo Trace’s visitor center by Beckman and Harlen Wheatley, who escorted us to Warehouse K for the tasting. Inside we found five aromatic barrels of Eagle Rare, a host of Glencairn glasses, water, crackers and a thief (the tool used to draw the liquid from its cask) and got down to business. We took turns popping the bung from each barrel with a mallet, and plunged the thief into each cask, filling up the glasses with the golden, amber liquid. After tasting through the lot at a cask strength, about 125 proof, Beckman added water to lower the alcohol to its bottling level of 90 proof (45% ABV), and we tasted again. We sniffed, swirled, and sipped in reverent silence, careful not to influence each other’s thoughts, and when we finally cast our votes, the winner, Barrel-A, was unanimous.

Barrel-A was filled with 53 gallons of white dog (unaged whiskey) in 2005 and 31.5 gallons, or about 198 proofed bottles, were dumped in January 2017, losing 42% to angel’s share. The overall balance of oak, vanilla, and spice is what set it apart, but the distinct accents of dried fruit and chocolate on the palate and a sweet, mile-long finish put it way over the top. Sold!

After the selection, we had lunch and took a private tour of the distillery, still buzzing happily from the tasting, and had arranged for Mint Julep Tours to drive us home. The rest of the weekend entailed hitting distilleries during the day and checking out Louisville’s hopping food and whiskey-bar scene at night. A definite bucket-list trip for hard-core whiskey nerds.



*The Eagle has landed.*

Three months later, the Eagle finally landed. The bourbon arrived in a combination of bottle sizes affixed with personalized, gold foil Single Barrel Select stickers, and one sip brought me back to that frigid day in Frankfort that was to become one of my great whiskey experiences. As for the barrel itself, they usually ship it to the customer with the bottles, but our Barrel-A was destined for another life.

“How about a little experiment?” asks Beckman. The man knows us well. “Your barrel made a nice bourbon, so maybe it will make a tasty single-barrel tequila. Let’s send it to Tequila Corazon, our partners in Jalisco, Mexico, and if you like, you can buy it back as an añejo in about two years.” Then who knows? Maybe we’ll send it to Scotland.”

“Why wouldn’t I,” says Moritz.

And just like that, an adventure is born. See you in Mexico.

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