

Growing appreciation for bourbon among SA whiskey drinkers

South Africa's growing numbers of Scotch whisky and Irish whiskey lovers are becoming increasingly appreciative of authentic American bourbon, says Marc Pendlebury, whiskey aficionado and co-owner of Johannesburg's first and only dedicated whisky bar, Whisky Brother.



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In light of American National Bourbon Day today, 14 June, Pendlebury said: “Bourbon has a rich and fascinating history, which adds to its allure. While it hasn’t been as well known in South Africa as Scotch whisky and Irish whiskey, well-informed and experienced whiskey drinkers appreciate what bourbon can offer, with some exceptional releases out there, and our discerning customers are keen to get their hands on it.”

Age ‘not the measure of quality’

The quality of a good whisky, like bourbon can’t be determined by its price, age or the colour of the drink – it has to be tasted, says Pendlebury.

“Bourbon gains its amber colour from the oak barrels it is aged in, so colour and age are not the only indicator of the quality of the drink. The best way to assess whether it’s a quality bourbon is quite simply to taste it.”

Pendlebury advocates trying as many different bourbon releases as possible, to learn to distinguish the tastes, aromas and textures of the various releases. A growing corps of South African whiskey aficionados are doing exactly that, he says, bolstering the emergence of whiskey bars in South Africa.

“There have probably been hundreds of thousands of whiskey releases around the world throughout history, and this is part of the excitement for aficionados, who covet the rarest and seek out opportunities to taste them,” he says. And bourbon, in a class of its own within the whiskey realm, deserves greater recognition among South Africans who appreciate whiskey, he says.



Why American whiskey sales are soaring worldwide

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The history of America's native spirit

Described as ‘America’s Native Spirit’, bourbon has a proud history and increasingly trending profile, thanks to its rich, mellow flavour drunk neat, and the complexity it lends to cocktails.

Bourbon is only produced in the United States – mostly in Kentucky, using at least 51% corn in the mashbill. Rye, barley and wheat typically makes up the rest of the blend in varying proportions. Bourbon must contain at least 51% corn and differs from Tennessee whiskey in that Tennessee whiskey is filtered through sugar maple charcoal – known as the Lincoln County process.

American rye whiskey is different again, in that it is made from predominantly rye. American whiskeys differ from Scotch whisky and Irish whiskey in more than just the spelling: Scotch and Irish whisky and whiskey are mostly distilled from malted barley. Only Scotch and Irish malts are made with 100% malted barley, while the blends (which outsell malts 9:1) are also made predominantly with corn or wheat.

The proportion of corn to other grains impacts bourbon’s flavour: a high proportion of corn and wheat typically makes bourbon sweeter and lighter, while Bourbon with a high rye content will be spicier with a full-bodied flavour. Ageing, barreling, blending, limestone levels in the water, and even the climate the bourbon is aged in will also impact the flavour, but bourbons are typically described as sweeter and smoother than Tennessee whiskey and rye whiskey, with notes ranging from toffee, caramel and vanilla through to nuts, spice, tobacco, fruit and leather.

Bourbon is distilled at 160 proof and aged in charred new oak barrels – usually for four to eight years – before being bottled at between 80 and 100 proof, which means contains 40 to 50 percent alcohol by volume. Unaged bourbon, known as ‘white dog’, is sharper, grainier, and gaining its own cult following as an interesting ingredient in cocktails.

Bourbon’s roots are tied to the migration of settlers west from the original colonies, in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Bourbon County in Kentucky, corn flourished, and scores of small-scale farmers began distilling their own whiskey, stamping the county name ‘Old Bourbon’ onto the barrels for shipping. By the late 1800s, there were hundreds of distilleries in Kentucky, but Prohibition from 1920 to 1933 changed the face of bourbon production. Following Prohibition, the number of distilleries has grown again, with both major distilleries and artisanal distilleries springing up to meet increasing local and international demand for the spirit officially declared the ‘Official Spirit of America’ by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Receptive new market

Bourbon is finding a receptive new market among millennials and cocktail lovers worldwide, and interest in its history is driving millions of people to visit the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. As demand for all American Whiskeys surges, a renaissance is taking place among American distillers. Major distillers are expanding their portfolios and new craft distilleries are

springing up, with over 1,315 craft distillers now active in the U.S.

American whiskey imports to South Africa grew by more than 17% from 2016 to 2017, from \$8.9 million to over \$10.5 million last year. The growth was in line with an upward trend on all American distilled spirits imported to South Africa over the past year, reports Christine LoCascio, senior vice president international issues and trade, at the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

Discover the rich complexity of Bourbon this American National Bourbon Day. Authentic American whiskeys and bourbons are available at all good liquor stores.

Source: [*Distilled Spirits Council of the United States*](#)

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