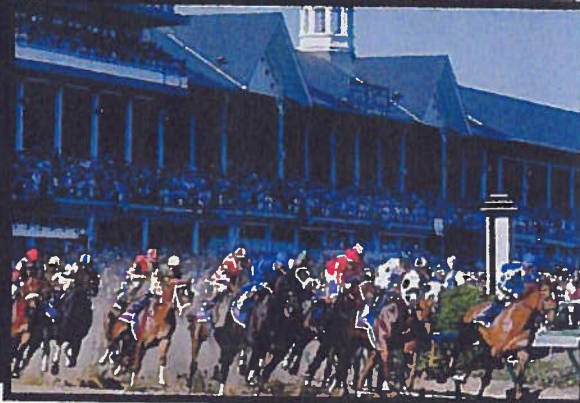
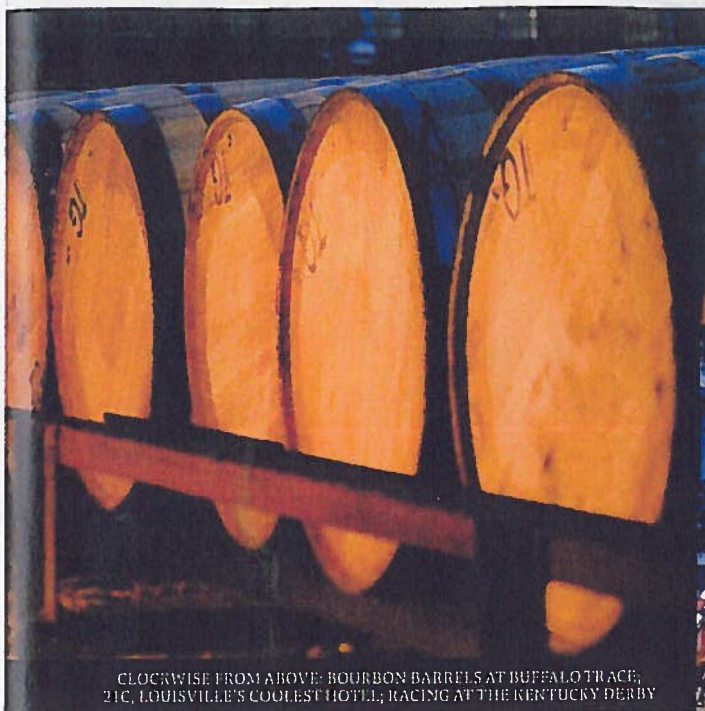


# spiritual home

If you want to sample the best bourbon, then look no further than the Bluegrass State of Kentucky. **Stuart Peskett** hits the distillery trail in the American south





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: BOURBON BARRELS AT BUFFALO TRACE, TIC, LOUISVILLE'S COOLEST HOTEL; RACING AT THE KENTUCKY DERBY

**K**entucky is a place of contradictions. It's a quiet, conservative state, firmly embedded in the US Bible Belt, yet the three things it is perhaps best known for are alcohol, tobacco and gambling. Around 95% of the bourbon distilled in the US comes from Kentucky; it is the key state for growing tobacco; and it's the horse capital of the US, home to arguably the most high-profile race in the world – the Kentucky Derby. At this year's event 125,000 mint julep cocktails were quaffed and a staggering \$24m (£15m) was wagered by visitors.

This backdrop of debauched merriment sits rather awkwardly with some residents of Kentucky, a state that, amazingly, has more 'dry' counties than 'wet'. A dry county is one where the sale of alcohol is either restricted or banned completely – yet several distilleries (including Maker's Mark) are located in dry counties.

But visit this beautiful 'gateway to the South', as the locals describe it, and you will get a far warmer welcome than in many a US tourist hotspot. You may not know much about it – indeed, you cannot even fly here direct from the UK – but its roll call of famous names includes Abraham Lincoln, Muhammad Ali, George Clooney and Johnny Depp; it's also the home of the Corvette.

And if you're a whisky fan – or whiskey, as the Americans and Irish spell it – then a trip to Kentucky is an absolute must. While there aren't nearly as many distilleries to visit as there are in, say, Scotland, the best ones are open to the public for tours and tastings, and their visitor centres knock spots off most foreign counterparts.

Take Heaven Hill, for example, home to some of Kentucky's top bourbons including Evan Williams and Elijah Craig. You can taste inside a gigantic tasting barrel, and if you ever fancied sampling bourbon chocolate syrup, hot wing sauce or bourbon garlic sauce, now's your chance.

Some of the major bourbon distilleries form part of the 'Bourbon Trail', a circuit of producers, encompassing the large (such as Jim Beam, responsible for three-quarters of all bourbon made in Kentucky) and the small (Woodford Reserve, the oldest operating distillery in the state). You could easily visit the eight main producers in two or three days, and you don't have to drive: companies such as Mint Julep Tours will gladly ferry you around.

#### AGE IS NOT A NUMBER

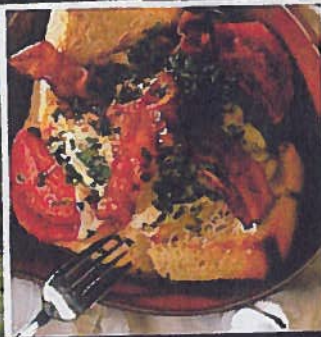
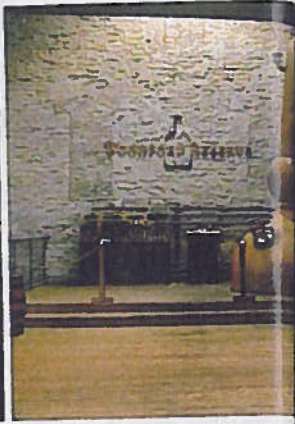
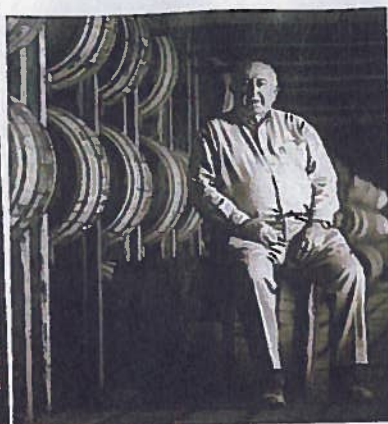
One distillery well worth a visit is family-owned Buffalo Trace, home of the multi-award-winning George T Stagg bourbon. Like many bourbon producers, Buffalo Trace does not put any age statement on its main product. The reason for this is that the majority of bourbon blenders go about their work by aiming for typicity, rather than a fixed minimum age.

Bourbon is made from a mix of grains, at least 51% of which must be corn; the remainder is usually a mix of rye and malted

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barley, although wheat is also permitted. The grains are ground, and heated with water to make a 'mash'. 'Spent' mash (containing yeast) is then added to ensure consistency. The liquid ferments to 8-9% abv, and the liquid ('beer') goes into a still, where it is distilled twice, to 60% abv. The new spirit (called 'white dog') then goes into new, charred oak barrels, where it ages for at least two years, but usually eight or more. Once ready, it is then 'cut' to 40-50% abv with demineralised water before being bottled.

Bourbon matures much faster in the muggy humidity of Kentucky than Scotch whisky does in the damp, chilly warehouses of Scotland. Fred Noe, Jim Beam's master distiller, says that one year's ageing in Kentucky is equivalent to between three and five years' ageing in Scotland, not just due to the climate, but because



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: THE BELLE OF LOUISVILLE; JIMMY RUSSELL OF WILD TURKEY; THE STILL ROOM AT WOODFORD RESERVE; FOUR ROSES DISTILLERY. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: SHADWELL STUD FARM; THE FAMOUS HOT BROWN SANDWICH; KEENELAND RACECOURSE; BUFFALO TRACE BARREL.

bourbon, by law, must be aged in new oak barrels, which impart far more flavour to the spirit inside them than the older barrels generally used for Scotch maturation.

Next up on the trail is Wild Turkey, with its vast warehouses overlooking the Kentucky River. The main man at Wild Turkey is Jimmy Russell, who turns 77 this year. He started working at the distillery in 1954, and explains the secret to good bourbon: 'You've got to have good water, good limestone water. For example, if you go to eastern Kentucky, which is full of coalmines, that'd be no good. And somewhere like Florida? No good.'

This top-notch H<sub>2</sub>O is the reason why Kentucky is the home of bourbon. You can make bourbon anywhere in the US, but all the good stuff comes from KY – and, as locals are quick to point out, Jack Daniel's is not a bourbon. The rules are very strict: bourbon must be aged in new oak barrels, and no flavourings or additives are allowed; JD goes through an extra stage of charcoal filtering, so that relegates it to mere Tennessee whiskey.

The bed of limestone that Kentucky sits on filters iron from the water, but imbues it with minerals, one of them being calcium, which is important for equine nutrition. Apart from hosting the world-renowned Derby, Kentucky is home to more than 500 stud farms. All those Kentucky gee-gees grow up big and strong chomping on the lush green grass throughout the state. And yes, green grass, not bluegrass – the music genre takes its name from a type of grass that develops blue flowers in spring if allowed to grow.

### URBAN BOURBON

Even if you don't hit the Bourbon Trail, you can still immerse yourself in bourbon culture in Kentucky's two major cities: Louisville and Lexington. The former takes its name from Louis XVI, who provided help to soldiers battling against us Brits ('Sorry 'bout that,' chuckles our guide).

## FACT FILE



### GETTING THERE

Return flights to Louisville via Chicago O'Hare start from \$503pp with American Airlines ([americanairlines.co.uk](http://americanairlines.co.uk))



### WHERE TO STAY

[21chotel.com](http://21chotel.com), [galthouse.com](http://galthouse.com), [gratzparkinn.com](http://gratzparkinn.com), [seelbachhillton.com](http://seelbachhillton.com)



### WHO TO TRAVEL WITH

Holiday packages can be booked through America As You Like It ([americasyoulikeit.com](http://americasyoulikeit.com)), Vacations Group ([vacationsgroup.co.uk](http://vacationsgroup.co.uk)), or American Round-Up ([americanroundup.com](http://americanroundup.com))



### WHERE TO EAT

[bourbonsbistro.com](http://bourbonsbistro.com), [gratzparkinn.com](http://gratzparkinn.com), [lynnsparadisecafe.com](http://lynnsparadisecafe.com), [metropolfinedining.com](http://metropolfinedining.com)

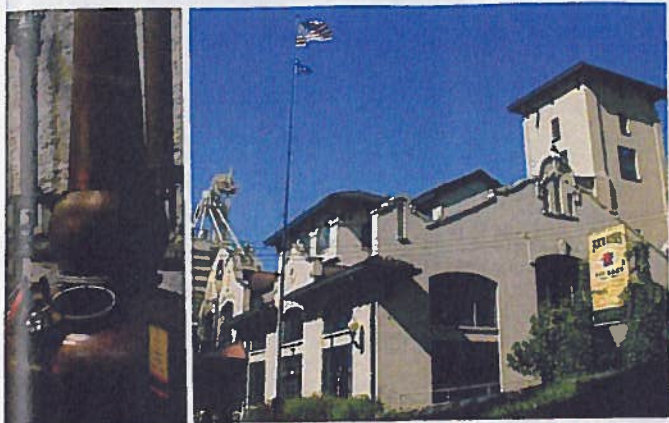


### FIND OUT MORE

[kentuckyderby.com](http://kentuckyderby.com), [kentuckytourism.co.uk](http://kentuckytourism.co.uk), [kybourbontrail.com](http://kybourbontrail.com), [mintjuleptours.com](http://mintjuleptours.com)

Louisville has an easy-going feel, but with a modern side: it boasts 21C, recently voted best hotel in the entire US. It doubles as a funky art gallery and has a buzzy bar serving modern takes on classic cocktails, including a fantastic bourbon Negroni. For something more traditional, head to the 100-year-old Seelbach Hilton, which has counted Al Capone among its guests, as well as Elvis and JFK, while F Scott Fitzgerald used the Seelbach as inspiration for a hotel featured in *The Great Gatsby*.

Louisville's bars and restaurants are wise to bourbon's charms, too. More than a dozen have signed up to become part of the 'Urban Bourbon Trail'; 'passports' are available to visitors, with



information on where to drink while they're in town – a venue only qualifies if it stocks a minimum of 50 bourbons. A good bet is Bourbons Bistro, which serves up bourbon-and-cider-braised short ribs and bourbon-baked salmon, and also sells three-strong bourbon 'flights', allowing diners to sample some serious single-barrel shots, including Elmer T Lee and Blantons. For those with a sweet tooth, a Bourbon Ball Milkshake (vanilla ice cream, Woodford Reserve, chocolate chips, walnuts and whipped cream) is the drink to try at the fabulously kitsch Lynn's Paradise Café.

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After eating, head for the Ohio River, which separates Kentucky from Indiana, and take a ride on the beautiful *Belle of Louisville* or visit the Louisville Slugger museum, where nearly two million baseball bats are made each year.

Lexington, about 50 miles east of Louisville,

is smaller and a lot more compact, with a cool downtown area packed with a string of great bars and restaurants. Harry's Bar, part of Metropol restaurant, serves up classic cocktails with a bourbon twist; while Jonathan's at Gratz Park is where head chef Jonathan Lundy serves up his classy take on local classic the Hot Brown (a variation on the traditional Welsh rarebit), as well as beef fillet wrapped in Maker's-Mark-smoked bacon.

If you're after a glimpse of the 'real' America, then Kentucky has an awful lot going for it: great food, fantastic bourbon, plenty to see and do, and very friendly people. Just don't order a Jack Daniel's when you get there...

## a taste of Kentucky

### **BUFFALO TRACE (45% ABV)**

Fresh, sweet, inviting nose. Very clean. Oak and spice apparent. Hints of citrus, liquorice and honey. Well-balanced taste, everything in proportion.  
£19.97, Asda

### **WILD TURKEY 101, 8 YEAR OLD (50.5% ABV)**

Scotch lovers will enjoy this. The level of rye is much higher than in other bourbons, creating a drier, spicier feel. Characterful and persistent. Alcohol is quite high, so it needs a touch of water.  
£25.99, [whiskyexchange.com](http://whiskyexchange.com), [drinkshop.com](http://drinkshop.com)

### **FOUR ROSES SINGLE BARREL (50% ABV)**

Another bourbon with a high rye content, the Four Roses displays a lovely spiciness wrapped around some classy oak, with good complexity.  
£85.99, [whiskyexchange.com](http://whiskyexchange.com)

### **WOODFORD RESERVE (43% ABV)**

The official bourbon of the Kentucky Derby, and with good reason: this is a beautifully balanced bourbon, with soft, peppery spices and woody notes, with a touch of coffee and cereal in the background.  
£28, Waitrose

### **HOW TO DRINK IT**

Bourbon is perfect sipped neat, but the addition of a little mineral water (not tap) will bring out the aroma. Wild Turkey's Jimmy Russell recommends 'a cube of ice – but only if the ice is good'. And if you want to serve it long, ginger ale is his mixer of choice.