

# Fire Brands

AMERICA'S NATIVE WHISKEY SETS THE BOSTON BAR SCENE ALIGHT. BY BRANDY RAND

Chris Weld grinds corn grown by a farmer located a few miles down the road from his distillery in Sheffield, a bucolic Western Massachusetts town. He'll blend it with malted barley and rye, creating what is known as a mash bill (or recipe) for bourbon. Weld's Berkshire Mountain Distillers bourbon has become one of the finest craft bourbons on the market, and is the region's first legal distillery since Prohibition. "It's really neat to be able to showcase bourbon from a different terroir," Weld says. "We use granite-based spring water, which has minerality and viscosity that's nothing like the limestone water used in Kentucky bourbon."

Bourbon is perhaps more American than apple pie. In 1964, Congress named it the "native spirit" of the United States, a nod to the historical provenance of whiskey making that dates back to colonial times. Many of America's great bourbon families are still thriving today: The Beams have been around for more than 200 years, and the Samuelses—of Maker's Mark fame—have been distilling since 1783 and currently make their iconic red wax-dipped bourbon 49 weeks a year to keep up with rising demand.

Each bourbon is made distinct by its mash bill, barrel aging, blending, and, to Weld's point, the terroir. "There is an art and science to

creating a consistent formula from various barrels across various warehouses," says Greg Davis, master distiller for Maker's Mark. For example, the position of the barrel affects the flavor of the liquid inside; as heat rises, barrels racked high in a warehouse tend to age faster than those placed in a cool, dark corner. The caramel and vanilla notes in bourbon are drawn from the charred oak as the barrel expands and contracts through the seasons. Maker's Mark is the only

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distiller that still rotates its barrels, with three hot Kentucky summers at the top of the warehouse and another three at the bottom. Step into any restaurant around town, and you'll notice a growing collection of bourbons and other American whiskeys like rye, Tennessee whiskey, and white whiskey (aka moonshine) lining bar shelves. Kevin Mabry, bar manager at **JM Curley** (21 Temple Pl., 617-338-5333; [jmcurlieboston.com](http://jmcurlieboston.com)), says of the spirit's popularity, "It's nostalgic. It's American. It helps that it's delicious as well." Of the many bourbon cocktails he makes, the Whiskey Smash and the In Fashion (a play on an Old Fashioned) are among the most popular. But Mabry himself appreciates bourbon best when neat. He also encourages his customers—especially bourbon newbies—to taste it neat first, so "you can pull out those nuances, which would otherwise be lost" in a cocktail. Brown has emerged as the new black, with bourbon staging a comeback thanks to the resurgence of classic cocktails and "made in America" patriotism that have given rise to craft distillers and old-time Kentucky bourbons alike. **BC**



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