
The Bourbon Country Reader

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Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage Is Critical & Popular Hit.

In the autumn of 2006, Heaven Hill's Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage series got a bit more interesting. That's when they unveiled the 1997 vintage. The 1997 was the first one not made at Heaven Hill's Bardstown distillery (DSP-31).

Thus began an odyssey for Heaven Hill of several years in the wilderness, making whiskey in other people's plants, then acquiring and settling into a new home at Bernheim in Louisville. It is a journey we can taste in the 1997 and subsequent vintages, many of which are still on retail shelves.


Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage is both a status project and a popular hit. Each new vintage produces news that reflects on the distillery's capabilities, self-confidence, and recognition of the enthusiast community; the purposes of a status project. It also generates enough sales volume at a premium price to be commercially successful, which is the type of status project Heaven Hill prefers.

Soon the 2002 vintage will be unveiled. Typically, a new vintage is introduced at a big October to-do in Kentucky, and begins to appear in stores in January.

Two-thousand-and-two was Heaven Hill's fourth year in the Bernheim distillery. They had made some modifications and pretty much settled in by then, although the recently-completed distillery expansion was still in the future.

The series began 16 years ago, a remarkable feat in its own right. It

*Little sips of news,
history and other
information about
America's unique spirit
and the people
who make it,
for people
who enjoy it.*



*Always Independent
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(No distillery affiliation.)*

anticipated the bourbon renaissance and probably helped to bring it about. No other producer has done anything quite like it.

The concept was innovative and sophisticated, especially for its time. Each year they bottle, in single barrel format, whiskey distilled nine years

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In This Issue:

Sixteen Years With Evan Williams, 201 With Abe Overholt, And A Few More With Some Micros.

The Old Overholt Story; Straight Rye's Grand Old Man.

Seldom mentioned in all of the talk about the rye whiskey revival is the granddaddy of them all: Old Overholt.

The old man depicted on the very retro Old Overholt label is Abraham Overholt, a real person, who made rye whiskey in western Pennsylvania from about 1810 until his death in 1870. The brand was created after his death, by the company he founded, and the whiskey was made at the distillery he built until the industry began to contract in the 1970s and production was moved to Kentucky.

'Overholt' is an Americanization of the German name Oberholtzer. The Oberholtzers were members of the oft-persecuted Mennonite faith who came to William Penn's New World colony because it promised religious freedom. They settled originally in Buck's County, in the eastern part of the state.

Abraham Overholt was born in 1784, the tenth of twelve children. While the older children helped their father in the fields, the younger children performed other household tasks. Such a large family required a lot of clothing and other textiles, and Abraham spent most of his time at the family's loom, weaving wool and linen into cloth. He and his brother, Christian, also tended the family's still.

In 1800, Abraham's father decided they were all moving to western Pennsylvania, to a farm about 40 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. Abraham was only 16 and Christian was 14, but some of their older siblings were married

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EW Single Barrel ...

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before. Although by law age statements just reflect a minimum age, Heaven Hill was committed to dump dates that reflected at least nine years but less than ten in wood, and they put the barrel's exact fill and dump dates on the label, along with an identifying barrel number.

The idea was that there would be slight differences from barrel to barrel within a vintage as well as between vintages, but there would always be a family resemblance.

Charged with creating the first release and each one since is Master Distiller Parker Beam, assisted by his son, Craig Beam. Parker resolved to pick what in his opinion were the best barrels of nine-year-old bourbon in their warehouses. He didn't try to match any profile except for the one he has in his head of the ideal bourbon.

People like different things and there are bourbons made for all tastes, but this is what Parker likes (Craig is presumably okay with it too) and, furthermore, it tastes the way they believe bourbon *should* taste, the way it shows best.

Give or take a year, most experienced distillers will tell you bourbon whiskey peaks at about nine years. That's subjective and you, as a consumer, are entitled to prefer something else.

This is different, this is a leading practitioners in the field proposing a standard for the type. Considering the source, you at least have to think about it. The Beams, like most distillers, have more than just a professional interest in the subject. They are bourbon drinkers too.

As the series evolved it came to represent what Heaven Hill felt was the best of their bourbon output, a calling card of sorts, a sample of liquid from their vast inventory that possessed all of the qualities they felt a first-rate bourbon should display. It represented

their best effort during a given period, a benchmark. Heaven Hill makes many different products for many different tastes, but they began in 1934 as a bourbon maker and have always been a bourbon maker most of all. Because the age was fixed at nine years it would not be their oldest bourbon, but it would be the bourbon that said, "this is who we are, this is what we're all about."

Buffalo Trace likes to say it is on a quest for the perfect bourbon. Heaven Hill takes a different approach. They say, "this is the perfect bourbon as nearly as the real world allows us to make it."

Drinkers who like to start with the best will always know where to start when they get to Heaven Hill.

Barrels of whiskey that are

"Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage is not a limited edition in the usual sense. They dump and bottle throughout the year based on how many orders they receive."

otherwise the same vary after aging because of their warehouse location. Distillers and their warehouse managers know the aging characteristics of various warehouses in their system and of different locations within each warehouse. When they want a whiskey with certain characteristics, they know exactly where to look.

Parker knew from long experience at Heaven Hill (he started there in 1960) that what he liked best was whiskey aged in the highest and hottest parts of the warehouses. The conditions at those locations maximize wood extraction. Whiskey aged there has strong flavors so the whiskey still tastes robust even after dilution to 43.3% abv.

Alcohol content was another variable fixed at the beginning of the series. It is axiomatic that premium bourbons must be above the baseline 40% abv, but otherwise 43.3% abv is arbitrary, a non-standard abv for

purposes of differentiation.

The only other point of interest about abv is that barrels stored in the hottest warehouse locations tend to have the most evaporation, so there is less whiskey in each barrel when it is dumped. They also have the highest abv levels. Each year a representative barrel is symbolically opened at the unveiling event and may be tasted at barrel strength, which on one occasion was 80% abv.

Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage is not a limited edition in the usual sense. They dump and bottle throughout the year based on how many orders they receive. They can run out theoretically but not practically, and scarcity is not the point as it is with a typical limited edition. On the changeover date, they simply stop bottling one vintage and start on the next one. They have flexibility as to when changeover occurs.

Heaven Hill launched a more typical annual release, limited edition series in 2007, called the Parker's Heritage Collection. Each year is something different and only about 4,000 bottles are produced. The 2011, which will be released soon, is a ten-year-old rye-recipe bourbon finished in cognac casks.

In the Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage series, any bottle with a barreled-on date after November of 1996 was distilled somewhere other than DSP-31. Initially, Heaven Hill contracted with Jim Beam, later with Brown-Forman, for distilling services. All of the contracted spirit was barrel-entered and aged by Heaven Hill at their own facilities. Even after they took over at Bernheim they continued to buy new make from Brown-Forman because Bernheim didn't have enough capacity, hence the expansion announced in 2007 and begun shortly thereafter.

Here are tasting notes for the five post-DSP-31 vintages released so far.

1997 – Made at Jim Beam, it is more white-doggy than you would

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expect from a nine-year-old whiskey. These were the first batches made after the fire and they seem star-crossed, a little hot and thin, with too many sharp edges. Still, it is good bourbon, just a bit out-of-step with the rest of the series.

1998 – This was the year they moved to Brown-Forman. It is an improvement, more cognac-like, with more chocolate and caramel, plus a little carob and wintergreen. It is still thin-bodied, like the 1997, but the series is moving in the right direction.

1999 – Still mostly Brown-Forman but possibly some Bernheim. Richer than the 1998, with more citrus, but still very thin in the body and a bit winey.

2000 – Bernheim, but possibly still some Brown-Forman. There is no way to really tell. Distillate from the two plants may even have been mixed together before barreling. This one reveals ginger and other cookie spices and is the best expression since the last of the DSP-31 (Bardstown) vintages. Well-balanced with just the right amount of char, which has been a hallmark of the series.

2001 – A pitch-perfect char note tells you the series is fully back on its game. All of the elements are here. Nice balance and drinkability, lots of flavor including licorice and clove. Could stand to have a little more body. The DSP-31 whiskey seemed stouter. Perhaps the distillery itself needs to age. DSP-31 was 72 years old when it was destroyed. In 2001, Bernheim was a mere 9 years old.

2002 – Coming soon.

The Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage series will always be interesting because more than any other whiskey on the market, each bottle represents a snapshot of a moment in time. It reflects the grain harvest for that year, the oak timber harvest of the year before, and the weather during those and each subsequent year until the barrels were dumped. It reflects how

Old Overholt Rye ...

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with children of their own. Nevertheless, they all went west together.

Ten years later, Abraham was 26 and married. Their father had died several years before, most of their siblings had moved on to their own farms, and the two youngest boys were

“One of Abraham’s grandsons, by his daughter Elizabeth, was Henry Clay Frick, known to us today as one of the greatest of the late 19th century ‘robber barons.’”

left in charge of the homestead. They decided to expand the distillery and make whiskey as their principal occupation.

The country around them was just barely civilized and transportation systems were still crude, but the hated excise tax on spirits was a distant memory, having been abolished in 1802, and the population was growing. Grain was plentiful and cheap, so was good water, and whiskey could always find a market.

Christian sold out to Abraham early on. Other family members had interests at various times, always by informal, verbal agreement with Abraham. The business thrived and Abraham brought his sons and then his grandsons into it. The A. Overholt

well the distillery was operating that year, perhaps even the moods of Parker and Craig Beam, during both the distillation year and the selection year. And there really are differences from year to year and bottle to bottle. That’s the fun of it. Not just time but all of its intricate ripples affect how the whiskey looks, smells and tastes. And it’s always changing, just like life itself.

That’s a lot for \$25. ←

Distilling Company was making he and his family rich.

One of Abraham’s grandsons, by his daughter Elizabeth, was Henry Clay Frick, known to us today as one of the greatest of the late 19th century ‘robber barons,’ who took early and often ruthless advantage of opportunities engendered by the burgeoning industrial revolution.

When he was about 19, Frick went to work for his grandfather at the distillery, as a bookkeeper. He stayed just two years, until Abraham’s death in 1870. With the money he made he began to invest in coal mines, but instead of selling the coal, he built ovens to convert it into coke, an essential ingredient in steel production. He had capital problems at first, but made good alliances, and soon was making money hand over fist. By age 30, Frick’s wealth had surpassed that of his grandfather.

He didn’t get there by being a nice guy. After muscling out his cousins, he became sole owner of A. Overholt & Co. in 1881. He ultimately became one of the richest men in the world, primarily through his steel and railroad interests. He sold a partial interest in the Overholt company to his friend, Andrew Mellon, whose family’s bank had been one of Frick’s early backers. Under their ownership, Old Overholt became the best selling brand of rye whiskey in the country.

Frick died in 1919 and his whiskey business was shut down by Prohibition. The company did, however, obtain a medicinal whiskey license, which made it attractive to Seton Porter when he began to accumulate medicinal permits, whiskey, distilleries, and brands in about 1927 for what became the National Distillers Products Corporation.

After Prohibition, Old Overholt took its place in the National portfolio as the company’s primary rye. Since National was one of the ‘big four’ that dominated the post-Prohibition industry, that automatically made it once again the top rye whiskey in the

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Old Overholt Rye ...

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country.

But rye whiskey never regained the share of market it had enjoyed before 1920. Drinkers in every region except the Northeast preferred bourbon. The ratio of bourbon-to-rye sales kept shifting in bourbon's favor until rye was almost extinct. National Distillers eventually closed all of its Pennsylvania distilleries and shifted Old Overholt production to Kentucky, to the Forks of Elkhorn distillery outside of Frankfort where it also made Old Grand-Dad bourbon.

The collapse of the American whiskey industry hit National very hard. Burdened with tired brands, and old and excess distilleries, it shrank to a fraction of its former size.

Jim Beam inherited Old Overholt when it merged with National Distillers in 1987. Beam immediately stopped distilling at Forks. When the rye whiskey made there ran out, Beam simply used whiskey it was already making for Jim Beam Rye. Beam has done little with the Overholt brand except continue to make and distribute it.

Today, although it is widely available, Old Overholt sells fewer than 20,000 cases a year.

You would expect Old Overholt to taste like Jim Beam Rye and it does. It tastes like it may be selected for more tannic barrel notes, because it has a bit more bite.

Rye production in Kentucky didn't begin when the last of the Eastern rye distilleries shut down. Even before Prohibition, Kentucky distilleries like the ones operated by Beam family members routinely made both bourbon and rye, so the Beam rye recipe probably has an old pedigree within the family. The whiskey has its detractors, who find it muddy and flat, or just bland, but it is a legitimate style.

Its modest price makes trying some a low-risk proposition.

REVIEW: Three Recent Micro-Distillery Whiskeys.

As promised, some of America's craft distilleries have begun to sell aged whiskey. They aren't necessarily trying to emulate the majors, which is good, but they often don't reach the basic standard of something that is enjoyable to drink and worth its price.

Here are three that do.

First, Smooth Ambler Yearling Bourbon. As the name implies, it spends just over a year (14 mo.) in ten gallon barrels. It comes in a 375 ml bottle, at 46% abv, and sells for \$24.00.

Second, New Holland Double Down Malt 'Brewers' Whiskey.' It spends six months in five gallon barrels. A 375 ml bottle, at 45% abv, is \$34.99.

Finally, Kinnickinnic Blended Whiskey from Great Lakes Distillers. It is a blend of Kentucky straight bourbon with several malts made at Great Lakes. A 750 ml bottle, at 43% abv, is \$29.99.

In all three cases, something unusual is done to compensate for the whiskey's youth.

In Smooth Ambler's case it's the mashbill (60% corn, 20% wheat, 20% malt) and the small barrel aging. Wheat is much milder than rye and small barrels provide more wood extraction, so while a white dog taste is vaguely there, it is mostly masked by sweetness and a remarkable minty-ness.

The New Holland does the same thing, albeit less successfully, with the small barrel. Here too, sweetness and

In reaction to the rye revival, Beam has updated (slightly) the label on Jim Beam Rye and launched an upscale super-premium rye called (ri)1 (Rye One). It hasn't touched Old Overholt, but the brand remains in the company's portfolio. ←

mint are the main compensations.

With Kinnickinnic it is, of course, the straight bourbon, which blended with the malt produces a unique taste.

All three work better in cocktails than they do neat, where the other ingredients can take the masking even further. The whiskey doesn't need to be covered up, it just needs a little smoothing of its rough edges with good choices of complimentary flavors.

You won't confuse any of these with a fine six- to eight-year-old Kentucky bourbon, but they're not without their pleasures and they don't scream 'white dog' with every sip. That's their main accomplishment.

The value proposition is harder to make for the New Holland and Smooth Ambler than it is for the Kinnickinnic, but all pass muster as better than merely 'interesting.' ←

Contact *The Reader*.

Address all suggestions, comments, computations, and allegations to:

Charles Cowdery, Editor
The Bourbon Country Reader
PMB 298, 3712 North Broadway
Chicago, IL 60613-4198

E-mail *The Reader* at
cowdery@ix.netcom.com

Visit us on the web at
<http://bourbonstraight.com>.

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