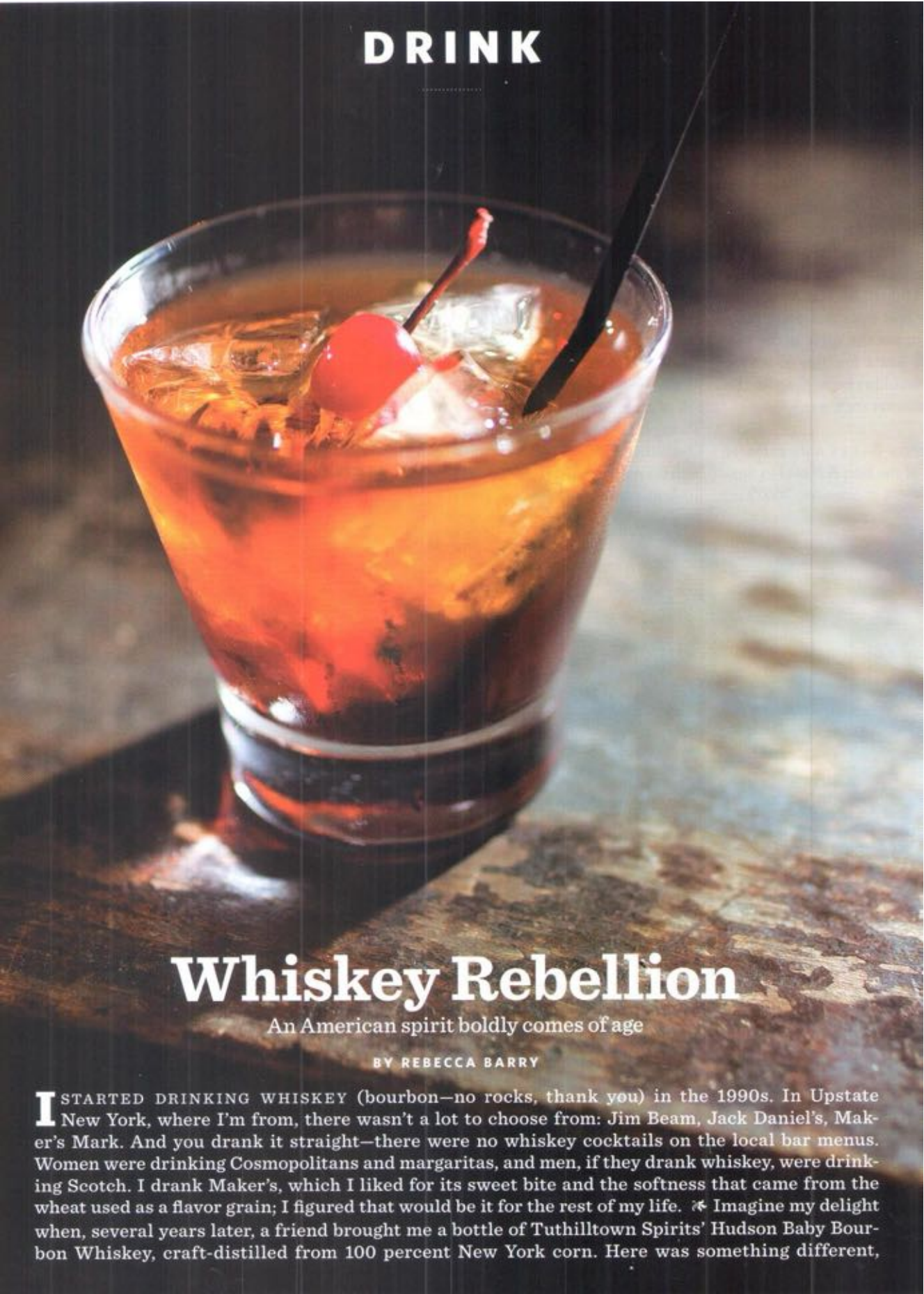

Whiskey Rebellion

An American spirit boldly comes of age

BY REBECCA BARRY

I STARTED DRINKING WHISKEY (bourbon—no rocks, thank you) in the 1990s. In Upstate New York, where I'm from, there wasn't a lot to choose from: Jim Beam, Jack Daniel's, Maker's Mark. And you drank it straight—there were no whiskey cocktails on the local bar menus. Women were drinking Cosmopolitans and margaritas, and men, if they drank whiskey, were drinking Scotch. I drank Maker's, which I liked for its sweet bite and the softness that came from the wheat used as a flavor grain; I figured that would be it for the rest of my life. ❧ Imagine my delight when, several years later, a friend brought me a bottle of Tuthilltown Spirits' Hudson Baby Bourbon Whiskey, craft-distilled from 100 percent New York corn. Here was something different,

a small-batch whiskey with a full taste—loads of vanilla and caramel with hints of honey—practically made in my own backyard.

Then, last May, I found myself at Finger Lakes Distilling's Kentucky Derby party, even closer to home. I was drinking a cocktail made with beet juice, apple cider, star anise simple syrup, and rye handcrafted by a third-generation moonshiner from Alabama, who had come to Upstate New York to be Finger Lakes' distiller. The earthy beet juice and sweet cider brought out the apple in the rye. It took just a few sips to realize that I wouldn't be settling for the mass-market stuff much longer.

REBECCA BARRY *is the author of* Later, at the Bar: A Novel in Stories *(Simon & Schuster, 2007).*

This is what whiskey looks like now. The spirit that fell out of fashion throughout most of the country in the 1970s is seeing a foot-stomping revival, the recipe for which goes like this: Take 300 years of U.S. whiskey-making history and add the creativity of new, small distillers. Mix in the locavore movement, which has instigated a return to traditional technologies and recipes and a desire to create spirits with a regional character; garnish with a revival of specialty cocktails, and cheers: American whiskey has never tasted so good.

It doesn't hurt that a lot of the people now making whiskey are full of character themselves. Take Thomas McKenzie of Finger Lakes Distilling. His grandfathers on both his mother's and father's sides made moonshine in Alabama, and their grandfathers before them, he told me when I visited him recently. "My granddaddy would sell it in Coke bottles."

McKenzie makes corn whiskey, bourbon, and rye. His bourbon is aged, like all bourbon is by law, in new, charred oak barrels that infuse it with toasty vanilla flavor, but he finishes it in local chardonnay casks, which add mellow hints of tropical fruit. His rich, applelike rye is aged in small oak quarter casks that accentuate its woodiness, and finished in sherry barrels from local wineries, which add sweetness.

In many ways, McKenzie is representative of the entire movement—someone with a personal connection to the drink's history, a predisposition to individualism ("I don't much care for government," he told me), a love of local ingredients, and who is making something new and traditional at once. He distills his whiskey "the old-fashioned way," he said, "using barley malt to convert the grain starch to sugar," rather than employing commercial enzymes to break down the starches.

And while it might seem odd to find a New York craft distiller making bourbon—Kentucky's signature corn-based, aged whiskey—in some ways it's exactly where McKenzie should be. Upstate New York, like much of the Northeast, used to be full of small stills—1,129 of them in 1825, according to one contemporary survey. Since widespread commercial refrigeration was still years away, there was an overabundance of local corn, rye, wheat, and

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Tasting Notes

Along with bourbon (corn-based, aged in charred barrels) and rye (made mainly from its namesake grain) are wheat-based and other corn whiskeys, as well as ones made from malted barley.

Dry Fly Washington Wheat Whiskey *($49.95; 750 ml)*
A subtle mix of honeyed vanilla and savory brine, balanced by delicate wood and wheat. Mint and cold tobacco on a long, complex, food-friendly finish.

Death's Door White Whisky *($34.99; 750 ml)*
This unaged wheat-based distillate from Wisconsin smells hay-like at first and then reveals fennel aromas, with a creamy palate and pepper and cumin flavors to round it out.

St. George Single Malt Whiskey *($70; 750 ml)*
Lovely quince and honey aromas pave the way in this California whiskey to an explosion of pineapple and coconut flavors on a base of pine, cedar, and vanilla.

Hudson Manhattan Rye Whiskey *($39; 375 ml)*
A discreet nose of strawberry-vanilla lollipop leads to aniseed, cherry, chocolate, and ripe peaches. Though the flavor is not as rich, it holds together well.

McCarthy's Oregon Single Malt *($50; 750 ml)*
Smoky and Scotch-like, this peated whiskey from Clear Creek Distillery has sweet, delicate vanilla undertones, with a well-balanced flavor and a nice, long finish.

Jefferson's Presidential Select Bourbon *($89.99; 750 ml)*
Marzipan, then grilled pineapple, coconut, and chocolate in this woody bourbon from Louisville's late, legendary Stitzel-Weller Distillery.
(continued on page 38)

apples. Farmers found that if they distilled their crops down to spirits and shipped them out on the Erie Canal, they could make their surpluses profitable. You could say that it was because of canals like the Erie, or rivers like the Mississippi, which runs between Kentucky's bourbon country and cities like New Orleans, that whiskey got good back in the day. The time it spent in barrels on the barges aged it, and people noticed the difference.

FINDING OUT about my region's distilling past and tasting some of the incredible whiskeys being produced now made me want to know more; I longed to sample craft whiskeys from other places in the country, and to hear the distillers' stories. So I packed a bag and flew out to Portland, Oregon, to peek in on the Great American Distillers Festival.

There I met more distillers like Thomas McKenzie, guys with a pioneering passion that evokes the history of a spirit that was first produced stateside in the 1700s by Scottish and Irish pioneers on the Pennsylvania frontier. Those early distillers used rye, which flourished in the Northeast's cool climate. After the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, many of them moved to Virginia's ungoverned western territory, called Kentucky, to escape taxation. That's where corn—the primary grain in bourbon—flourished.

By the 19th century, whiskey was considered patriotic, as it was made on American soil. People drank it neat, but also in drinks,

With its mouth-watering creaminess and smoky subtlety, you can enjoy this American whiskey with dinner, like a good wine

such as the mint julep and, later, bitters-enhanced cocktails like the manhattan (see recipes on page 44). In the 1830s, we were downing 88 bottles per person per year—more than two times what we drink now. You could say we loved whiskey too much, in fact. The problems that ensued from alcohol abuse—lost farms, suffering families—helped give rise to the temperance movement and, ultimately, Prohibition.

Prohibition changed the American palate—people got used to smuggled Canadian blends and lighter "bathtub" spirits like gin. Over the decades following Prohibition, much of the country's bourbon and rye was bought up by massive companies like Seagram's, ending up mixed with unaged grain alcohol into lighter, less flavorful blended whiskeys. By the mid-1970s, those blends had been eclipsed by an even lighter spirit: vodka.

Nowadays, as I found out in Portland, the darker spirits are hurtling back. The festival buzzed with excitement over new whiskeys, new distillers, and a new energy for traditional methods. Producing those complex spirits,

McKenzie Rye Whiskey
($39; 750 ml)
An initial aroma of fresh apple lapses to green banana and grass. Strong wood flavor and a sweet winelike finish. From Finger Lakes Distilling, this whiskey is great on ice.

Angel's Envy Bourbon
($49.99; 750 ml)
Straightforward vanilla and cherry with a hint of smoke and coconut on the nose. In the mouth, it's a peach and mango blast. Round, elegant, and creamy—despite a bit of heat.

Evan Williams Single Barrel (2001)
($24.99; 750 ml)
Pecan pie and apple over banana and butterscotch on a rich, sweet nose. Great balance with a delicate length; a bourbon for sipping from Heaven Hill Distilleries.

Parker's Wheated Bourbon
($79.99; 750 ml)
Wheat, instead of rye, along with the corn makes this cask-strength bourbon soft and sippable; notes of candied orange, white chocolate, mango, and smoke.

Breuckelen Whiskey
($39; 750 ml)
Banana and caramel aromas dominate in this wheat whiskey from a new Brookyn distillery. It tastes of mint and eucalyptus, with a sweet, assertive smokiness.

Woodstone Creek Single Peated Malt Whiskey
($118; 750 ml)
Made, like Scotch whisky, from barley malted over smoking peat, this meaty-smelling Cincinnati whiskey opens up to a palate with a hint of wine-cask sweetness.

Berkshire Bourbon
($39.99; 750 ml)
Tropical fruit salad: grilled pineapple, mango, guava, vanilla, and banana aromas in this Massachusetts bourbon. Assertive herbal, citrus, and spice flavors.
(continued on page 40)

TODD COLEMAN

Explore Our Delightful Culinary Secrets

1. *The Sugar Mill at Rosewood Little Dix Bay was host to one of the Winemakers Dinners in 2010*

2. *The British Virgin Islands National Culinary Team won five gold medals at this year's annual Taste of the Caribbean Culinary Competition*

YOU COULD GO to Burgundy for great wine. Or to Piedmont, or the Mosel... Or, this November, you could skip the ice and snow, heading instead to the white sand beaches of the British Virgin Islands. Here, the BVI star chefs are teaming up with celebrity chefs as well as with winemakers from the best wine regions to host the fourth annual Virgin Islands Winemakers Dinners.

These gastronomic events have brought together first-class food and phenomenal wine from around the world. It is one of the few events where award-winning, dedicated, passionate winemakers come together to share their favorite wines with the guests of the BVI over five course dinners that include various courses, each prepared and presented by a different chef.

This year's dinners will be held between November 16 and 20. Chef Mathayom Vacharat of St. John, US Virgin Islands, has been named the 2011 Executive Chef. He'll be joined by Chef Stephen Stryjewski, James Beard Award winner for Best Chef: South, Chef Roberto Trevino, a participant in Food Network's Iron Chef America, and Chef Julio Lazzarini, Chef and Owner of Vinotecha 902 and Orillas Tapas Bar. Each course will also be paired with different fine wines selected by the winemakers who will be in attendance. This year's winemakers include Michael DeLoach of Hook and Ladder Winery, Russian River, California, Regina Martinelli of Martinelli Vineyards, Philippe Marchal of Louis Jadot, France, Jim Bernau of Willamette Valley Vineyards, Oregon, and Gonzalo Lainez, of RODA, La Rioja Spain. The dinners will be held at iconic resort and villa locations throughout the BVI. As if great food and wine weren't enough of a draw, proceeds from these exclusive dinners will go towards charitable organizations in the BVI that support local youth. For more information and advance ticket purchase, visit winemakersdinners.com.

And winemakers dinners are only the latest evidence of the BVI as a culinary destination. This June, a team of the BVI chefs took home the gold medal in the 2011 Caribbean Culinary Competition, where teams of chefs from 10 Caribbean countries and territories engaged in "live kitchen" competitions. Their gold medal win demonstrates the high level of cuisine that can be experienced daily in the BVI's many fine dining establishments.

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British Virgin Islands

Doved/Daubed Pork

serves 4-6

pork:

- 2 lbs. pork cut into cubes with or without bones
- 2 cups medium diced onion
- 2 cups medium diced celery
- 2 cups medium diced peppers
- 1 cup medium red peppers
- ½ cup diced hot peppers
- ½ cup chopped fresh thyme
- ½ cup chopped fresh garlic
- 4 oz. tomato sauce
- 2-3 oz. vegetable oil
- 4-5 cups water
- salt and pepper, to taste

native seasoning:

- 1 cup rock/sea salt, grounded
- 4 tsp. black pepper
- ½ tsp. cloves
- 1 sprig celery
- 1 sprig parsley
- 1 tsp. mace
- 1 tsp. nutmeg
- 5 cloves garlic

method:

To make the native seasoning, combine all ingredients by putting them in a mortar and mash with a pestle until they are mixed well, then set aside.

Place a large frying pan on the stove. Add oil until the pot gets very hot, then add the pork and stir until brown. Remove all the oil from the pan then add garlic and native seasoning. Next add 4-5 cups water. Finally, add all the other ingredients and simmer until the pork is tender.

Recommended to serve with rice, vegetables and fried plantain.

said Chip Tate of Texas' Balcones Distillery, handing me a taste of his grassy Baby Blue corn whiskey, "is like impromptu poetry."

The poetry is in the choices distillers make that affect flavor. All whiskey starts the same way, with a mash of grain, yeast, and water. For rye, the mash is at least 51 percent rye, a spicy grain; for bourbon, it's the same percentage of corn, while corn whiskey contains 80 percent or more of that sweet grain. There are also wheat whiskeys, which tend to be soft and round, and smokey ones made from malted barley. The remaining grains in any mash bill, or recipe—rye, corn, barley, wheat, oats—add their own personalities, and craft distillers have been experimenting with recipes.

The mash is heated in a still, which releases an alcoholic vapor that's captured to make the spirit. Industrial producers use a continuous still that mechanically monitors temperature and proof, and removes congeners, impurities produced during fermentation. Yet it's these congeners that give the spirit much of its character. Distillers like McKenzie and Tate have gone back to using the less-mechanized copper pot still (or a hybrid version of it), which allows them to rely on their own senses to modulate flavors and aromas.

You can smell the difference, for instance, in a pour of High West's Double Rye!, a rye, corn, and malted barley whiskey made in Park City, Utah. There's peach, banana, and gooseberry jam on the nose—all from the esters left in the spirit after pot distilling. You can taste it in the peppery, minty bite of the all-rye spirit from the Bowling Green, Kentucky, microdistillery Corsair. The character of the mash bill shines through.

Once whiskey is distilled, it's barreled. Depending on how long it ages, its storage temperature and humidity, and the char and volume of the barrel, the whiskey picks up flavors, from floral and fruity to smoky and butterscotch. Every barrel is unique (see "Born in the Barrel," page 42). Industrial distillers, historically, have blended many barrels to attain consistency. The new craft distillers are experimenting with small-batch, single-barrel (a spirit not mixed with that from other casks), rebarreled (in used bourbon or wine casks), and even artisanally blended whiskeys (made with premium bourbon and rye, unadulterated by neutral spirits). Each of these whiskeys is defined by its uniqueness—and sometimes its potency. Whereas water is added to most whiskey before bottling to lessen the intensity of the alcohol, some of the newer ones are bottled at full barrel strength.

The results are thrilling for a whiskey lover like me: Never in the history of the spirit has there been such an exciting range of styles and flavors. Vibrant, spicy ryes; rich, chocolatey bourbons; edgy, sweet corn whiskeys and mellow wheat ones; Scotchlike single malts with their American-style wood. These are brazen, complex,

Edgefield's Hogshead Whiskey
($32.50; 750 ml)
A port-wine nose and a sweet, smoky palate with notes of cherrywood and vanilla. A Scotch-on-steroids benchmark for American single malts.

Prichard's Double Barreled Bourbon
($72; 750 ml)
A perfect bourbon: Barreled twice in charred oak, it's rich but not overwhelming; a rare balance of chocolate, vanilla, clove, and coconut aromas and flavors.

Corsair Artisan Distillery 100% Rye *($45; 750 ml)*
A fragrant, exotic fruit punch of a Kentucky whiskey that brings lemon, mango, pineapple, banana, and mint to the nose, with a flavor that's round and candy-like but balanced.

High West Bourye
($65.99; 750 ml)
At first tight and hot, this blend develops luscious aromas: bergamot, blackberry, vanilla, coconut, cloves. A ryelike start in the mouth, followed by rich bourbon characteristics.

Four Roses Small Batch
($29.99; 750 ml)
From a big, 123-year-old Kentucky distillery, this lovely, flowery, fruity bourbon shows almost like a great white wine from Burgundy, with a round and velvety palate.

Balcones Brimstone Corn Whiskey
($53; 750 ml)
Gunpowder meets barbecue, an explosive recipe for this powerful, yet well-balanced blue corn whiskey from Texas. It's delicious with a couple of ice cubes added, too.

Copper Fox Rye Whisky
($45; 750 ml)
Apple and pear, then cherry and peach aromas. This one-third malted barley spirit from Virginia tastes first of sweet vanilla, but smoky, spicy rye takes over.
—Flavien Desoblin

TODD COLEMAN

BORN IN THE BARREL

Char
Most barrels—particularly those used for bourbon—are set on fire inside for anywhere from 15 seconds to a few minutes. The resulting interior char contributes additional color and toasty notes, and works like a charcoal filter, drawing impurities out of the spirit. It browns the wood's sugars, producing a caramelized flavor, and helps release vanillin from lignin (a cellulose-binding compound found in wood).

Time
Over time, the porous barrels allow oxygen to penetrate and some of the whiskey to evaporate (known as the angel's share), concentrating flavors and potency. Warehousing of barrels is an art: Whiskey stored at the top of the building, where temperatures are highest, matures the fastest. Each distiller has its own method for rotating barrels through the warehouse for even aging.

Construction
The smaller the barrel, the more spirit is exposed to wood; the whiskey takes on characteristics of the wood more quickly. In a larger barrel, whiskey ages more slowly and, some argue, more completely, thereby preventing woody qualities from overwhelming it. It matters, too, what part of the tree the staves come from. Those from the bottom half impart deeper color and richer caramel flavors.

Wood
Some say more than 60 percent of a whiskey's flavor comes from the barrel. The spirit draws color, as well as sugars from the wood. American white oak (shown here)—the wood often used for whiskey barrels—contains other flavor-imparting compounds: Vanillin lends a vanilla flavor; amyl acetate, a fruity one. It is also high in coconut-flavored lactones, as well as mouth-gripping tannins. —*Beth Kracklauer*

History
By federal law, bourbon must be aged in new, charred oak barrels. Scotch-style American single malt whiskeys are often aged in used bourbon barrels, which imbue the spirit with some of the character of the barrel's original contents. Some craft distillers finish their whiskeys in used wine or sherry casks, too, which add their own flavors to the finished spirit.

and highly enjoyable spirits. Even bigger outfits like Jim Beam and Jack Daniel's are starting to bottle their own artisanal whiskeys made from exceptional barrels that have sat aging in their vast warehouses.

BACK WHEN I started drinking whiskey, U.S. craft distilleries—those making fewer than 65,000 annual proof gallons (measured in gallons of 50 percent alcohol), as opposed to, say, Jim Beam's tens of millions of proof gallons—were unheard of; now there are more than 300. One aide to this growth is a loosening, finally, of post-Prohibition state laws. Washington State's Craft Distiller's Bill, for example, lobbied for by Kent Fleischmann of Spokane's Dry Fly Distilling, allows distillers to have tasting rooms where they can circumvent expensive distributors and sell their spirits directly to visitors, like wineries do. "It was about agriculture," says Fleischmann of the bill. "It allowed craft distillers to sell out of their distilleries providing they use at least 51 percent ingredients indigenous to the state."

Dry Fly is one of the few distilleries making a 100 percent wheat whiskey—with Washington State wheat. With its mouthwatering creaminess and smoky subtlety, you can enjoy it with dinner, like a good wine—one that expresses the *terroir* of where it was made and its ingredients were grown.

Similarly, Balcones' Chip Tate makes his whiskeys using blue corn, a grain distinctly of the American West. Like other new whiskeys, his spirits represent a return to tradition and to the land, as well as a maverick departure from the status quo. Taking a cue from Scottish whiskey, which is traditionally made with barley malt dried over smoking peat moss, Tate makes his Brimstone whiskey by smoking not the grain, but the spirit itself, over native scrub oak; Brimstone screams of bacon and burning brush. Like others of the new spirits, it's a delicious experiment, one that whiskey drinkers can really raise a glass to.

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