



HARLEN WHEATLEY IS THE MOST RECENT HEIR TO THE BUFFALO TRACE MASTER DISTILLER THRONE

## The Chemistry of Good Taste

How Harlen Wheatley went from a small-town Southern boy to a worldwide bourbon legend

BY EMMA ENEBAK

**H**arlen Wheatley, Master Distiller of the centuries-old Buffalo Trace Distillery, was walking across the creaking floorboards of an 1847 Kentucky home this spring. Leafing through dusty books and exploring the grounds of the nearby farm, Wheatley tried to put himself in the boots of the home's original owner—Colonel Edmund Haynes Taylor Jr., the first Master Distiller of Buffalo Trace. The two, with generations separating them, may not have ever gotten the chance to meet, but they are undeniably connected.

“We keep a very close connection with the people who came before us,” Wheatley shares, “all the way back to when Buffalo Trace first started.”

And that is pretty far back. The iconic Kentucky distillery has a history nearly as old as the United States. Located on the site of the Buffalo Trace route—a path stretching from Illinois to Kentucky, carved centuries ago by herds of migrating bison—the distillery traces its beginnings to as early as 1771, when Daniel Boone passed through Leestown along the Buffalo Trace. Largely considered the founding father of bourbon, Colonel Taylor built the O.F.C. Distillery atop the grounds in 1870, which still stands today, and took to the helm as the first Master Distiller after the Civil War. In 2005, Wheatley became the company's sixth Master Distiller.

A chemistry major at Northern Kentucky University, Wheatley found work at a chemical company just out of school and wouldn't have described himself as a whiskey connoisseur of any sort. But he was a connoisseur of something else—the state of Kentucky. And there are few things as Kentucky-through-and-through as Buffalo Trace Distillery. Much like the distillery, Wheatley was born and raised in the Bluegrass State, and the fascinating historical relevance the bourbon institution holds to his home state was one of the things that drew him there in the first place.

“I was originally attracted to Buffalo Trace because of the history and the connection between bourbon and Kentucky,” says Wheatley. “We're able to take Kentucky pride, Kentucky-grown products—Kentucky corn and barrels made from Kentucky wood—and turn that into a global product that people enjoy all over the world.”

When Wheatley joined the distillery as a supervisor in 1994, his knowledge of whiskey was understandably limited. But his passion for the engineering and chemical side of the process drove him to fully immerse himself in the art of distilling. The technical steps involved in turning raw, natural materials into award-winning bourbon, from the vacuum systems to the fluid transfers, were really what excited Wheatley.

But his technical knowledge and efficiency soon evolved into a rich and invaluable understanding of the bourbon whiskey industry, prominent enough to name him Distiller Manager of the Year in 2014 at the Icons of Whiskey America Awards.

Wheatley modestly credits much of his success to honoring the original formulas and processes of those who came before him, aligning with the distillery's mission of preserving tradition. Some of the machinery used in the 1930s and '40s is still intact in the distillery today, and a full-time historian has even been hired with a sole purpose of gathering information on the history of the people at the distillery.

“One of the things I’ve come to appreciate is that our engineers 200 years ago didn’t have calculators. They were using pencils and rulers, and still figuring things out. The work they have done is essential to the product we make every day,” Wheatley says. “Whenever we want to optimize a process, the first thing we do is honor that tradition and say ‘OK, these guys designed it this way for a reason. Let’s try to understand why before we change it.’”

Buffalo Trace Bourbon retains a nearly identical flavor profile to what it was under Colonel Taylor’s lead over 180 years ago. A taste quite simply rendered timeless by the brand. But that is not to say there haven’t been advancements in the years since. Intricately balanced with the distillery’s mission to honor tradition is its ambition to simultaneously embrace change. And Wheatley has learned to master the balancing act. Under his guidance, Buffalo Trace is now producing more whiskey than it ever has in its 240-year history—a feat achieved through the implementation of new technology, expansion of operations, and experimentation with new recipes and flavor spinoffs, allowing the distillery to offer more variety at a higher volume than ever before.

Wheatley is at the helm of the experimental program that helps produce this variety, through which five recipes have already blossomed: Chinkapin Oak, Mongolian Oak, French Oak, Canadian Oak, and most recently, Spanish Oak. Harvested from the forests of northern Spain, the trees used in the latest Old Charter Oak experiment were made into staves that were seasoned outdoors before becoming the barrels that aged the whiskey, resulting in a spicy, dry bourbon with a robust wood input.

“We have literally thousands of barrels in inventory right now of experiments that we can create new products from,” Wheatley says. “We’re just trying to create some excitement in the industry and offer people something to look forward to trying.”

And the industry has certainly been more exciting. Wheatley recalls when he started teaching tastings in the late ’90s, and attendees would ask questions as basic as ‘what are whiskey and bourbon?’ But since the dawn of the internet, everything has changed.

“Now people are asking questions like ‘what kind of yeast are you using?’ or ‘what barrels are you aging your whiskey in?’” Wheatley says. “The conversations have gotten much more sophisticated.”

These questions are also coming from a more diverse crowd. Tastings that were once filled with predominantly middle-aged men are now teeming with both men and women, ranging in age from their 20s to 70s.

Industry changes have helped create a higher demand for the variety and refinement Buffalo Trace offers—a little something for everyone, without straying from its tradition of consistent quality—allowing the brand to soar to new heights. It has even recently paired up with the popular Paramount series “Yellowstone,” which has helped its products to reach an entirely new audience. And the audience is thirsty for more, made evident by the show’s raging success.

One of Wheatley’s favorite things to do these days is step into a bar and see how different bartenders are expressing his bourbon. “A really good cocktail needs a really good bourbon,” he states plainly. “It’s exciting to be able to offer that to bartenders, and see what they then create with it.” Buffalo Trace Distillery has a mixology affinity of its own, with favorite original recipes including the Buffalo Trace Old Fashioned and the Weller Paper Plane (see recipes at right).

But as for Wheatley himself, he enjoys a spicier bourbon, with higher concentrations of rye. You might find him sipping on a cocktail he calls The Godfather on his off days. A simple concoction of amaretto and bourbon, served up with just an orange peel for sweetness, because, as he says, “There’s nothing worse than a cocktail where you can’t taste the bourbon.” ■



## BUFFALO TRACE OLD FASHIONED

MAKES 1

- 1 sugar cube
- 2 dashes Peychaud’s Bitters
- 2 ounces Buffalo Trace Bourbon
- Orange peel, for garnish

In a mixing glass, muddle the sugar with the bitters. Stir until well dissolved, then add ice and Buffalo Trace. Mix well until chilled, then strain in a rocks glass with fresh ice. Twist the orange peel over the drink, then drop it into the glass as a garnish.

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## WELLER PAPER PLANE

MAKES 1

- $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce Weller Special Reserve Bourbon
- $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce Amaro Nonino
- $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce Bitter Aperol
- $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce lemon juice
- Lemon peel, for garnish

Add the Weller Special Reserve, Amaro Nonino, Aperol, and lemon juice into a shaker with ice and shake until well chilled. Strain into a coupe glass and garnish with a lemon peel.