



# LIQUID GOLD

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## Spirits are high on Kentucky's Bourbon Trail.

Exploring the birthplaces of some of the world's greatest spirits often means distant and expensive travel. For example, if you want fine wine, you head to France. If you want smooth Scotch, you fly to Scotland. But if you want genuine bourbon, you only have to hop in your car and head southwest to Kentucky.

That's right. The Bluegrass State, renowned for its stunning horse farms and Churchill Downs, is also the home of the best bourbon on the planet. And there's no better way to learn about this time-honored corn spirit than taking a tour along the Kentucky Bourbon Trail.

### AN AMERICAN SPIRIT

While tales of bourbon production in Kentucky date back to the 1700s, the Kentucky Bourbon Trail is quite a bit newer. Formed in 1999 by the Kentucky Distillers' Association (KDA), the trail was designed to provide a firsthand look at the art and science of crafting bourbon and to educate visitors about the rich history and tradition of this American-born libation.

Just as the mint julep is the official drink of the Kentucky Derby, bourbon is the official spirit of America. In 1964, Congress declared it our "Official Native Spirit," and 95 percent of it is produced in Kentucky. In fact, the state has more barrels of bourbon than it does people, with more than 5 million barrels resting in its warehouses.

So what exactly is bourbon? The first thing you learn while touring the Bourbon Trail is that every bourbon is a whiskey, but not every whiskey

is a bourbon. To legally call itself bourbon, whiskey must be

- made in the U.S.;
- made from at least 51 percent and no more than 79 percent Indian corn;
- aged for at least two years;
- matured in new, fully charred oak barrels; and
- distilled at no more than 160 proof, entered into the barrel for aging at no more than 125 proof and bottled at no less than 80 proof.

In addition, nothing can be added to enhance the flavor or sweetness or alter the color. That's why Jack Daniels, for example, is a Tennessee whiskey, not a bourbon. It is filtered through maple wood charcoal before being aged. This extra step, which gives the drink its unique flavor, is not allowed in the bourbon-making process.

These reasons are also why Kentucky was the ideal state for the bourbon industry. When Scots-Irish settlers first arrived in this country and began to migrate west, they wanted to bring with them the whiskey-making traditions of their homeland. But in Kentucky, neither rye nor barley grew easily. Corn, however, thrived. And water from the region's mountain-fed springs, filtered through the iron-free limestone, is credited with giving bourbon its smooth taste.

By the late 19th century, Kentucky was home to hundreds of distilleries. But in 1919, Prohibition put the distilleries out of business. It wasn't until the 1950s that bourbon again became plentiful—and the 1980s that the market rebounded—but by then, the damage was done. Only a handful of distilleries survived.

### THE GOLDEN AGE OF BOURBON

Thanks to the creation of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail, interest has once again picked up for this tempting tippie. In recent years, it has seen an upswing in popularity in trendy bars and restaurants, with expensive premium bourbons—with prices ranging upward of \$300 and more a bottle—leading the charge; and each year, the trail welcomes an ever-growing number of visitors. According to the KDA, about 750,000 tourists visited at least one Kentucky distillery in 2013, and that number was expected to rise for 2014.

The past year saw some great advancements for the trail, as well. There are now nine official stops on the Bourbon Trail, which stretches about 70 miles between Lexington and Louisville. They are, in geographic order, Town Branch in Lexington, Woodford Reserve in Versailles, Wild Turkey and Four Roses in Lawrenceburg, Maker's Mark in Loretto, Heaven Hill in Bardstown, Jim Beam in Clermont, and two new additions in Louisville: the Bulleit Frontier Whiskey Experience and the Evan Williams Bourbon Experience.

The highly anticipated Evan Williams Experience, which officially opened in November 2013, celebrates the legacy of Kentucky's first distiller. Located along downtown Louisville's historic "Whiskey Row," just two blocks from the iconic Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory and across the street from where the original Evan Williams distillery stood in the late 1700s, the multimillion-dollar artisanal distillery features high-tech displays and a state-of-the-art pot still distillery.

Also eagerly awaited was the grand opening of Wild Turkey's new \$4 million, 9,140-square-foot visitors center, complete with a gift shop and the Angel's Share tasting room overlooking the Kentucky River 275 feet below. Shortly after, Four Roses debuted its new visitors center in Cox's Creek, its second destination on the trail. The \$500,000, 2,500-square-foot center north of Bardstown features memorabilia displays, enhanced tours and a premium tasting bar.

Last year also brought a special treat to visitors to the Maker's Mark Distillery. In celebration of its 60th anniversary, the distillery teamed with legendary glass artist Dale Chihuly to present *The Spirit of the Maker*, a stunning 36-foot by 6-foot ceiling installation inside a rickhouse—a barrel warehouse—that connects to the tasting room. Resembling the artist's more famous installation in the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, the creation is made of about 1,300 individual pieces of glass. Its colors represent both bourbon and Maker's Mark—blue for water, amber and green for corn and wheat, and red for the distillery's signature wax.

So are you ready to sample some of those down-home Kentucky spirits? As with any great drink-related excursion, don't forget your passport. The Kentucky Bourbon Trail offers an official passport. Fill it with stamps from all of the member distilleries to receive an exclusive Kentucky Bourbon Trail T-shirt.

For more information, including distillery hours and locations, maps and suggested itineraries, visit [kybourbontrail.com](http://kybourbontrail.com).

### 7-Day Deluxe Kentucky Bourbon Trail October 17–23, 2015

AAA member price from \$2,595

*Visit the land of "America's Official Native Spirit,"  
and leave the driving to us!*

During AAA Travel's 7-day excursion along the Kentucky Bourbon Trail, you'll enjoy stops at The Greenbrier, Kentucky Horse Park, Keeneland Race Park and Churchill Downs, home of the Kentucky Derby.

Tours and tastings at well-known distilleries include:

- Town Branch Distillery
- Woodford Reserve Distillery
- Maker's Mark Distillery
- Evan Williams Bourbon Experience
- Jim Beam American Stillhouse
- Heaven Hill Distilleries Bourbon Heritage Center
- Kentucky Bourbon Craft Distilleries including
  - Barrel House Distilling Company
  - Limestone Branch Distillery
  - Willett Distillery

Call 866.222.1357 or visit your AAA travel agent for details.



Jim Beam American Stillhouse



Maker's Mark



Woodford Reserve Distillery