

Chris Morris

Master Distiller, Woodford Reserve

By Hope S. Philbrick

By unanimous vote, the U.S. Senate recently declared September as “National Bourbon Heritage Month,” to celebrate the family heritage, tradition and deep-rooted legacy that the bourbon industry contributes to our nation. The timing is excellent: Bourbon consumption is up and consumers are more often asking for high-end, super-premium and ultra-premium small-batch bourbons. In 2006, the global bourbon market grew by 3%; high-end bourbon revenue in the U.S. has grown from \$450 million to over \$500 million since 2003, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. In honor of National Bourbon Heritage Month, *Restaurant Forum* recently met with Chris Morris, Master Distiller of Brown-Forman’s Woodford Reserve.

A Kentucky native, Morris joined Brown-Forman in 1976 at age 18 as an intern working at the distillery. It was a natural place for him to begin his career. “Both my mother and father were Brown-Forman employees,” he says. “Dad was at Brown-Forman for 41 years.” Morris became a protégé of the master distiller, but he left the company to get additional distillery experience at Glenmore Distilleries Company and United Distillers. He returned in 1997. “I worked with the master distiller, and upon his retirement, I was the successor,” he says. “No coursework was involved. It’s all being there, working and learning how everything is done.” In terms of a career, he’s found his perfect match: “I love what I do. I’m really in love with the business, with bourbon.”

Morris is the custodian of a long tradition. “The Woodford Reserve distillery was founded by the Pepper family in 1812,” he says. The Pepper family owned and operated the distillery for three generations before it was sold and resold, eventually acquired by Brown-Forman in 1940. “During the tenure of Oscar Pepper and his Master Distiller James Crow, history was truly made,” Morris says. “They were literally defining what bourbon whiskey was and is today. They did not invent bourbon — no one really invented bourbon whiskey; it evolved — but they put it all together and put it down in the books according to science.”

In 1964, Congress declared bourbon to be



the “official native spirit” of the U.S. To be defined as a bourbon, several conditions must be met: The spirit must be made in the U.S. (and only bourbon produced in Kentucky can bear that state’s name), the grain recipe must be at least 51% corn but cannot exceed 79%; it must not exceed 160 proof at distillation and has a 125-proof cap when placed into barrel; it must be aged in new-charred oak barrels for a minimum of two years, and when bottled, only pure water may be added to the spirit.

Within these legal bounds, it is possible for Morris to get creative. Unregulated factors impacting bourbon flavor include the number of distillations, individual barrel characteristics, water mineral content, the climate in the storage warehouse and more. While guarding specific secrets about the production of Woodford Reserve, Morris reveals that he uses limestone water and a specific strain of yeast, ferments for seven days and distills three times in copper pot stills.

Though he says that his “everyday job is to make Woodford Reserve the best we can make it,” Morris finds time to experiment. “We’re still trying to push the bounds of whiskey making, to make it ever more interesting for the consuming public.”

Sometimes innovation means looking back: Last year, Morris was part of the team that distilled the first whiskey at the reconstructed

Mount Vernon Distillery. “The goal of the partnership with Mount Vernon was to bring back an awareness of George Washington,” he says. “At time of his death, Washington was second largest distiller in the U.S. I think that’s more important for people to know about him than what his teeth were made out of.” That whiskey was based on a recipe from 1799.

History was also the root of Morris’ first Master’s Collection release, the Four Grain. “We used an old 1903 recipe,” says Morris. “It tasted like a slice of pecan pie.” The innovative Master’s Collection whiskeys are released periodically and meant to honor the spirit industry’s pioneers.

The second Master’s Collection whiskey is finished in California chardonnay barrels. Morris was inspired to experiment with wine finishes by the single-malt scotch industry. After tasting results from dozens of wine barrels, he selected Sonoma-Cutrer barrels because the end whiskey product “really struck me as special and distinctly different. There’s that big, fruity character.” Bottled July 9, only 900 cases will be sold in 18 states, including Georgia.

What Morris says about the unique wine finish is true of whiskey: “We didn’t invent it, but we put a nice American twist on it.”

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