



See where this *passport* will take you...

by Tom Bentley

Passports seem like tickets to travel and adventure dreams—should it be Rick’s Bar in Morocco? Or maybe Harry’s Bar in Paris? Of course, there are other historical sites a passport can take you, like Louisville, Kentucky, where a district called Whiskey Row once had 50 pre-Prohibition distilleries and bottling plants simultaneously operating as part of its high-proof past. But enough of the past: right now, you can get an Urban Bourbon Trail Passport in Louisville that provides you a map to nine city restaurants and bars specializing in the heady spirit.

These establishments are no slouches in the bourbon department: all of the bars must have selections of 50 or more, and one, Jockey Silks, has 165 choices—a bourbon Niagara! The Passport program was launched in 2008 by the Louisville Visitors Center to cater to visitors who perhaps didn’t want to venture out of the city to visit the many statewide bourbon distilleries, and voila! Urban Bourbon was born. Bourbon has a long history in Kentucky, and many of the Louisville bars have history to match. One of the Passport bars, the Lobby Bar in the Brown Hotel has, over its 87 years, hosted the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herbert Hoover, George Bush senior and junior, Jimmy Carter,

the Queen of Romania, and Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul.

Neal Ward, the Brown’s restaurant and bar manager (and unofficial historian) says, “The program is a huge, wildly terrific success, and people have a great deal of fun. For those who want to experience bourbon, it’s a great experience. They see all these distinct places where bourbon is served, they can discuss the drinks in depth.”

Some of the bourbons available for sampling in the program are rare or small-batch varieties only available for short periods. The Lobby will advise novice bourbon drinkers on where to start and where to explore. “For beginners, we often recommend Basil Hayden, a great starter bourbon: not too sweet, not too smoky, but fills the mouth very well. From Maker’s to Woodford to Jefferson Reserve, they’re all different. I like Noah’s Mill, which has a port-like finish. The same maker makes Rowan’s Creek, which is a ‘hot’ bourbon. There are as many nuances in bourbon as there are in wine,” says Ward.

Visitors who collect a stamp from a food or drink purchase at each bar can return to the Visitors Bureau to collect a prize. Sadly, it’s not a bottle of bourbon, but the sharp bourbon-colored T-shirt does make a style statement. In

case the bourbon has made you a bit too blissful, there’s even an Urban Bourbon Trail iPhone app with an interactive geolocation map to direct you on to the next drinking establishment.

Of course, if you’re already in Kentucky and need to go directly to a distillery to put a direct notch on your passport, Kentucky has a profusion, among them Woodford Reserve, Makers Mark, Buffalo Trace and the world’s largest, Jim Beam. If you’re worried about driving, you can always engage the Southern hospitality of Mint Julep Tours (www.mintjuleptours.com) to guide you on your merry way. And if bourbon barrels are your thing, you can even tour a couple of Kentucky cooperages. At the Brown-Forman Cooperage you can see the lumber yard, view the artful selection of staves and barrel assembly, and witness charring and finishing. There’s no point on bringing a cup—you can’t dip directly into the barrels.

Go to JustAddBourbon.com and click Urban Bourbon Trail under the Plan a Visit menu to see a listing of all of the participating establishments on the Passport program and info on the Passport stamps. •