



# FINISHING TOUCHES

Distillers explore new depth in flavor with secondary finishing.

BY TOM BENTLEY



**S**econdary finishing (or barrel finishing) has been used by distillers and their kin for years as a way of finessing the flavor-profile dial of a spirit a few degrees, tweaking the liquid in intriguing ways. But the practice has really come to the forefront in recent years, with producers trying all manner of finishes: hot sauce barrels, anyone?

Not only are spirits being house-swapped with the used barrels of different spirits to give a fresh tang to the finished product, some distillers are experimenting with introducing already-aged products into new wood, leading to exciting results in the glass.

Used and new barrel cooperages are busier than ever, and often fielding unusual requests. Kentucky Bourbon Barrel supplies used barrels, many of those U.S. whiskey and bourbon, with other spirits barrels procured internationally—and sometimes for producers of products not found on liquor shelves. “We have smaller [companies] that are making cider, mead, maple syrup, even tobacco products,” says Noah Steingraeber, global craft sales manager at Louisville, Kentucky-based Kentucky Bourbon Barrel. “There’s somebody that barrel-ages their chocolate cocoa beans in a barrel. And the chocolate is supposed to be phenomenal. I’ve even had inquiries to barrel-age marijuana,” he says.

Though the company does not make new oak barrels for initial aging, it processes up to 3,000 barrels a day to exacting standards. The company also imports rum, tequila and cognac barrels from international sources, as well as domestic wine barrels. Distillers or resellers are looking for different characteristics from the barrel finishes. “If they want to complement preexisting fruity flavors, or if they want a sweeter profile, or if they want some pepperiness, baking spice, cinnamon, things like that—that dictates what barrel they’re going to utilize for finishing,” says Steingraeber.

Kentucky Bourbon Barrel will sell customers as few as a single barrel to do a trial run with a spirit, though that’s chancy. “I always recommend getting three or four, just because in going one barrel from another, let it be a single-fill bourbon or something else, the tastes are always going to be a bit different. You want to get a foundation to sample from,” Steingraeber says. “I might recommend a tequila to somebody who wants a more earthy, mineral, or clay-like profile. Just like with wine, there are mineral qualities in wine depending



Jordan Via of Savage & Cooke





Small format barrels from Thousand Oaks Barrel Co.

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on where it’s grown.”

Some suppliers of secondary-finish barrels only use new wood, to further develop established flavors. “We’re the only people who make a small format or an accelerated-aging barrel that is an actual bourbon barrel, meaning it’s made out of new wood,” says Bryan Weisberg, CEO of Thousand Oaks Barrel Co. in Manassas, Virginia. “Our barrels are generally used for when distilleries are doing test batches. They contact us and say, ‘Hey, I want to send you some wood. Can you make 20 five-gallon barrels out of this particular wood?’”



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WV Great Barrel Co. crafts infrared-toasted barrels (inset) and has collaborated with other companies including Smooth Ambler Spirits (bottom right) and Bardstown Bourbon Co. (bottom left).



Besides working with wood from distillers, Thousand Oaks sources “short cuts,” recutting the split wood from full-size barrels to size for smaller barrels. Some distilleries then ship their spirits (often bourbon or other whiskey) in those small barrels to bars and restaurants, gaining marketing exposure from the branded barrel, which also further ages the spirit. Or the whiskey is mixed by the establishments for barreled cocktails, like Manhattans. “Distilleries will utilize the small barrel from a finishing perspective, specifically for the marketing component, helping to build their brand. Bar managers and bartenders become participants in interacting with the producer’s spirit,” says Weisberg.

Weisberg appreciates how distillers treat spirits in used barrels for many finishing effects, “... but with us, when they’re moving it into a small format barrel, they’re getting the same flavors as you would get in your new barrel for bourbon,” he says. “You’re just going to get more of your tobaccos and more of your oak, and more of your vanillas—all of those flavors just get enhanced even more.” He is also concerned that used barrels can sometimes generate *Brettanomyces* and introduce barnyard flavors in spirits.

For Brett Wolfington, general manager of Caldwell, West Virginia-based WV Great Barrel Co., working in concert with distilleries and other partners in finding the best methods for secondary finishes is a distinct pleasure. Smooth Ambler Spirits makes a number of whiskeys, and they collaborated with the barrel company and with a local retailer on a locally released product.

Smooth Ambler, WV Great Barrel Co. and retailer Spirits and Wine Lewisburg all worked with a 4-year-old rye, Old Scout Rye Single Barrel. “This was a very collaborative effort,” says Wolfington. “The Smooth Ambler team and retailer visited the cooperage to get hands-on during the production of the barrels, and our team later visited Smooth Ambler during the blending process.”

“Community is such an important part of our mission and of Smooth Ambler’s, so to collaborate on the first release of any product aged or finished in West Virginia barrels was really special,” says Wolfington. “We produced a range of toasting options, ultimately allowing Smooth Ambler to experiment with a wider diversity of samples and blend several together for added complexity,” he says.

The barrel company also partnered with Bardstown Bourbon Co., which came to WV Great Barrel Co. looking for something

special. The barrel company proposed a cherry/oak hybrid barrel and provided multiple toast profiles for experimentation. The teams tested a variety of bourbons and ryes and settled upon the blend of 6- and 7-year old 95% ryes finished in cherry/oak barrels with two different toast profiles.

“The exciting thing was that we really didn’t know what to expect, as there are so few examples out there,” says Wolfington. “Early results would indicate that the sweetness of the cherry is really going to come through in the finished product, and meld nicely with the spiciness of the rye.”

Wolfington says that Bardstown estimates they’ll keep the whiskey for six months in the finishing barrels, but that could change as the flavor develops. WV Great Barrel Co. focuses on a range of toasting options for its customers to make a variety of sampling barrels.

“We bring them out to the cooperage to observe and provide input on the barrel production process, and then contribute to the blending process through tasting sessions at the distilleries as well as virtually,” says Wolfington.

On the distillery side, many distillers experiment with wine and fortified wine barrel finishes. Scotch producers have worked with ports and sherrys, as well as Madeiras and Marsalas for some time. At Savage & Cooke in Vallejo, California, several whiskeys have second marriages in wine barrels, sourced through the expertise of the distillery founder, Dave Phinney, a star in Napa Valley wines.

Savage & Cooke’s master distiller, Jordan Via, built out all distilling equipment and devised the processes and formulations for three wine-influenced whiskeys, in partnership with Phinney. Burning Chair bourbon is barrel-finished with Napa Cabernet barrels, the Lip Service rye with French grenache, and an unclassified whiskey with a local Zinfandel.

“We tried a lot of different barrels, a lot of different finishes: Petite Syrah, Charbonneau grape, different types of Cabernet Sauvignon from different areas up and down Napa Valley, and the Central Coast,” says Via. “The French grenache added that top note of fruit character.”

To control the process on the rye, Savage & Cooke took 25% of its rye stock and aged it up to 60 days in the grenache barrels, and then blended it back with the remaining 75% of the rye.

The distillery must be careful with the wine barrel finishes because of the deep character of the wines. “The Cabernet is a very

intense, very dusty, traditional big Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon,” says Via. “The barrels are Limousin French oak barrels full of residual fruit tannin from this big, dusty, thick-skinned grape varietal that was in there. That can quickly get away from you in the sense of turning the whiskey into something unpalatable due to the grip—tannin and high alcohol don’t mix so well together. That component has to be managed,” he says.

Because of the potential for the more aggressive notes from the Napa Cab and Zin, those barrel finishes are closer to 45 days. The distillery also runs a restaurant that pours the wine-finished whiskeys, as well as a program for liquor stores and other restaurant groups in which it sends them small samples of the finished whiskeys and walks them through the process of crafting custom blends, which Savage & Cooke then supplies in larger amounts.

Occasionally customers ask Thousand Oaks Barrel Co. to cut small strips of unusual woods, like Hawaiian koa, and then have them toasted to specification to insert in a barrel for a finish. Since the company sells 200,000 to 300,000 barrels a year to the home consumer market, it does hear many requests. “Some could be very interesting and good. Many of them are terrible. I mean, you throw some cedar inside of a barrel. Cedar’s great as a plank to make fish, but it is terrible in whiskey,” says Weisberg.

Steingraeber from Kentucky Bourbon Barrel echoes that: “They want to use chestnut, ash, cherry, maple wood, amburana from Brazil,” he says. “Can we make barrels out of these different woods? Yes, we can. But they all have certain effects and they’re more prone to dripping or leaking because they don’t have the tyloses that oak barrels have. Everybody wants to be different and unique in the market, but there’s sometimes a cost to that.”

There are many aging innovations in the spirits world now. Ever hear of Jefferson’s Ocean whiskeys that cross the equator in barrels a couple of times to use the ship’s movements and temperature changes to temper the spirit? Or how about Metallica’s Blackened whiskey line, with the barrels exposed to loud—of course, it’s Metallica—recordings of the band’s music through an enhanced “Black Noise” speaker system?

However, like that new suit or new haircut that seemed like such a good idea at the time, and later turned out to be not so, weigh the costs before you put a hot-sauce barrel finish on your cask—it might not turn out so hot. ■