

Blazing the Bourbon Trail

For 50 Years, Maker's Mark Has Defined America's True "Spirit"

By Alia Akkam

Back in the 1950s, when Bill Samuels, Jr., president of Kentucky's famed Maker's Mark bourbon, was in middle school, he only missed one day of school. The reason? To join his family in witnessing the production of their first barrel of bourbon. At the time, Maker's Mark was simply a hobby of his father's; Bill Samuels had no idea that what started out as a mere pastime would grow to become an American icon.

When one asks Samuels, Jr. why he thinks Maker's Mark, now part of the Beam Global Spirits & Wine portfolio, has remained on top of the bourbon category, he won't tell you it's because of any smart marketing tricks. "We manage to stay focused and disciplined," he says. "We stay connected with our friends and fans and depend on them to get the message out to the world."

And, the message is clear: Maker's Mark, known for its squat, square bottles sealed in red wax (the creative packaging was the brainchild of Samuels, Jr.'s mother), is a quality product that has not wavered for half a century. Made with yellow corn, red winter wheat, malted barley and water from a spring-fed lake, Maker's Mark is the epitome of Kentucky bourbon, America's only true spirit. Undoubtedly, it also helped pave the way for the other bourbons that comprise today's now-popular Bourbon Trail.

The New Kid On The Block

After Prohibition, bourbon was met with resistance. Maker's Mark struggled to shed the spirit's unfairly tarnished reputation. It wasn't until 1980, when the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece on Bill Samuels, that the brand garnered instant credibility. "It really put us to work and moved premium bourbon in the fine metropolitan centers of the

country," Samuels, Jr. notes. "When Mom and Dad started the company there wasn't a bourbon connoisseurship; we had to create an environment first and then stick a brand inside the culture. My father had tremendous amounts of faith in bourbon that tasted good."

Thanks To The Cocktail

Samuels, Jr. acknowledges that today's bourbon drinker is "not the old line one of the 1930s and 1940s." The average age of Maker's Mark customers has dropped by 25 years and he says the company hasn't done anything in

particular to attract this demographic. Instead, he thinks the brand has benefited greatly from the country's cocktail renaissance. It has allowed consumers who might have been skeptical of bourbon in the past to sample it in new, surprising ways.

Stephen Dennison of Z's Fusion in Louisville, KY, says that Maker's Mark is the restaurant's top seller at the bar. "There are a lot of bourbons that are high proof and high aggression and lack the light sweetness of Maker's Mark," he says. "You don't even have to add simple syrup." Maker's Mark also lends itself well to cocktails made at Z's, including a "Tobacco Manhattan" which infuses Maker's Mark with black cherry pipe tobacco. "It has the character of a Manhattan, but because we use Maker's Mark, we get that natural bit of sweetness you get from vermouth", Dennison points out.



Maker's Mint Julep

- Fresh mint
- 2 tbs. simple syrup
- 1-1/2 oz. Maker's Mark
- Splash of distilled water
- Powdered sugar

Mix together simple syrup muddled with mint, Maker's Mark and distilled water. Fill glass with crushed ice and pour mixture over top. Sprinkle top of ice with powdered sugar. Garnish with a mint sprig.



The Future Of Maker's Mark

Given the rising popularity of Maker's Mark at the bar, one might think a logical next step for the brand would be diversifying its portfolio. Yet Samuels, Jr. disagrees: "Ninety-five percent of the reason Maker's Mark has managed to be successful is that we haven't gotten into vodka and line extensions. We listen to our customers. Our little niche is tight and we're very fortunate these folks like Maker's Mark". ■