



What is Bourbon?

As with French-appellation wines, there are strict laws governing just what a Bourbon must be to be labeled as such. At least 51 percent of the grain used in making the whiskey must be corn (most distillers use 65 to 75 percent corn). Bourbon must be aged for a minimum of two years in new, white oak barrels that have been charred. Nothing can be added at bottling to enhance flavor, add sweetness or alter color. Though technically Bourbon can be made anywhere, Kentucky is the only state allowed to put its name on the bottle. And as Kentucky distillers are quick to point out, Bourbon is not Bourbon unless the label says so.

A single-barrel Bourbon, of which there are precious few, is a whiskey actually taken and bottled from one barrel. Small-batch Bourbons are whiskeys from a "batch" of barrels that have been mixed or mingled, as the distillers say, prior to bottling. For a common brand, the mingling batch could be as many as 200 barrels or more. In contrast, a mingle for a small batch might be 20 barrels or fewer.

Today, Bourbon barrels are charred to different degrees, ranked from one to four, depending on the depth of the burn. Single-barrel and small-batch Bourbons are usually aged in a three or four char barrel (moderate to heavy). The charring not only darkens the wood but also caramelizes some of the natural sugars in the oak.

During the aging process, the whiskey is said to "breathe" in the barrel, expanding into the wood over the hotter months and contracting out of it in the winter. Since color and flavor are transferred to the Bourbon while it is in the wood, summer is the most important time in the warehouse. Distillers often refer to it as the "aging" season. Naturally, the longer Bourbon is aged, the more flavor it takes from the wood.

Whiskey Glossary:

Terms to help you interpret the information on text and labels.

- Bourbon:** Whiskey that by law must contain at least 51 percent corn as the fermented grain and be distilled at no higher than 160 proof. It must be aged in unused, charred white oak barrels; it usually is aged for six to eight years.
- Kentucky whiskey:** Whiskey that has the same corn and proof requirements as bourbon, but the barrels can have been used before.
- Proof:** The strength of alcohol by volume. The proof number is twice the percentage of alcohol in the bottle. So 80 proof is 40 percent; 100 proof is 50 percent. Usually adjusted by diluting with water before bottling.
- Barrel proof:** Whiskey bottled at the desired proof while aging in the barrel. No, or very little, water is added before bottling, so these bourbons are higher proof than others.
- Straight:** Whiskey that hasn't been modified with neutral spirits, color additives or flavor additives.
- Blended:** Whiskey that has had neutral spirits, color additives or flavor additives mixed into it.
- Bonded or bottled in bond:** Whiskey that was simply "bonded" by the government while it was aging and not taxed until it was matured and bottled.
- Single barrel:** Most bourbons are a mixture of liquor from several barrels, allowing the distiller to control the consistency of flavor. (Do not confuse this with "blended.") But premium single barrel bourbons are bottled from one barrel only.
- Small batch:** "Everyday" bourbons are produced in large quantities. For example, some bottlers produce 17,000 cases daily. Small batch is a flexible term, but usually means a bottling from 1,000 gallons or fewer.
- Tennessee sour mash whiskey:** A bourbon cousin...mash bill, proof and aging requirements are the same as for bourbon, but the liquor is leached through sugar maple charcoal before being put in oak barrels.