

Back to school

Mark Gillespie backs his satchel
and reports for assembly

He doesn't need to ask twice: "I need a couple of volunteers...somebody who doesn't mind maybe getting a little dirty."

Chris Morris, the master distiller at Woodford Reserve Distillery in Versailles, Kentucky, has command of the class and only needs to ask once even though he's standing before a barrel filled with leftover "sour" mash and holding a water hose in his hand on a chilly March day.

Two students of the Woodford Reserve Bourbon Academy quickly step up to answer the call and grab the rake and paddle to start stirring and adding in ground corn, rye, and malted barley.

"What we're making here is a very

watery mash," Morris told the class of 35 students, ranging from longtime Bourbon lovers to an Atlanta woman who won her spot in the class through a charity auction.

Four times each year, Woodford Reserve's Bourbon Academy breaks down the basics of America's native spirit in a day-long session. Morris takes students through the entire process of making whiskey from grain to glass, with more inside knowledge than the typical distillery tour provides. The Academy's program focuses on the five different variables that affect a whisky: water, grain, fermentation, distillation, and maturation.

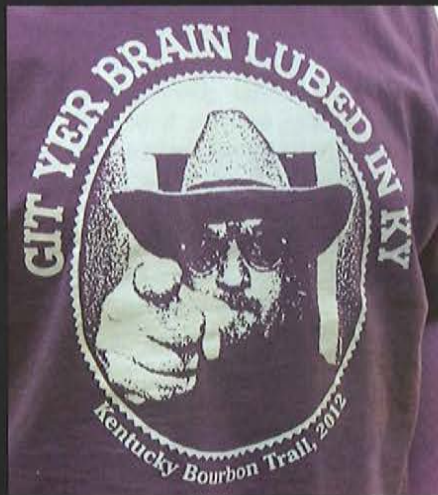
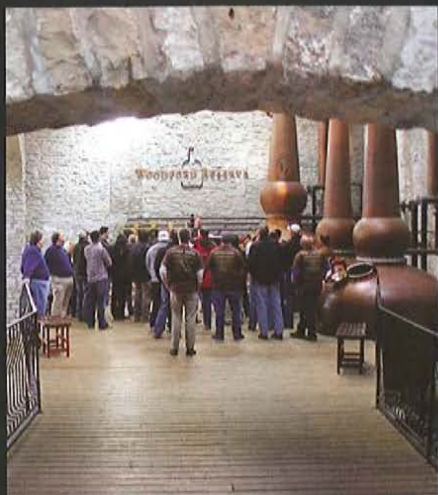
"He doesn't hold anything back," said Jack Raftery, who travelled to Kentucky

with his son to attend the class. Raftery had been wondering about the difference yeast strains make in the distilling process, but hadn't been able to get any solid answers in the past.

Using new make spirit from Woodford Reserve, Old Forester and Early Times (all owned by Brown-Forman), Morris showed Raftery and the other students exactly how different yeast strains and grain mashbills combine to produce spirits with a wide variety of flavour characteristics.

"What's the experience? What flavours are you getting now?"

Tim Knittel heads up the culinary program at Woodford Reserve, and together with the distillery's chef-in-





residence, Ouita Michel, teaches a segment on picking out the flavours that food can bring out in a whiskey. Each student is given a glass of Woodford Reserve and a plate with a piece of aged parmesan cheese, a hazelnut, an orange slice, a piece of dark chocolate, a dried cherry, and a spoonful of sorghum syrup.

"Most people's palates and olfactory senses are pretty much off all of the time," Knittel told the students. "You're not consciously aware of nuances in flavours or nuances in aromas. In fact, most people aren't even aware of the aromas in their environment at all. Part of the design of this wheel is to help you turn on your brain and turn on your senses."

Lunch follows the flavour lesson, and all of the courses feature Woodford Reserve in one form or another – from the dressing on the salad to the orange/Bourbon glaze on the roasted chicken and the mint julep bourbon cream-filled cookies for dessert.

Michael Veach of Louisville's Filson Historical Society leads a post-lunch session on the history of Bourbon whiskey. Veach, a member of the Bourbon Hall of Fame, breaks through many of the myths surrounding Bourbon including the development of barrel charring. He then channels his inner pyromaniac for an outdoor demonstration of how early

distillers likely charred their oak barrels. Veach stuffs an empty cask full of straw, then pours some new make spirit over it while Morris explains the process.

"You would not want to use oil or kerosene, and of course, they didn't have gasoline in those days, because those would penetrate the wood and leave a character...but new make, good enough."

Veach lights the straw with a match, and seconds later, a bright red fire is burning inside the cask. A couple of minutes later, they place a barrel head over the top of the cask to extinguish the flames. Left behind –

No less an equal to Scotch and Irish whiskies

the equivalent of a #1 or #2 char from one of today's cooperages.

"We're just having fun," Morris said later. "I like to interact with consumers and connoisseurs to see what they have on their minds and what questions they want to ask. All whiskies are whiskies, and Bourbon is a type of whiskey that has its own individual character that we think should be held as no less an equal to Scotch and Irish whiskies."

The final exam puts together the result of all five flavour sources, with side-by-side

tastings of Early Times Kentucky Whisky and Early Times 354 Bourbon, Old Forester 86 and 100 Proof Bourbons, Woodford Reserve's Distillers Select Bourbon, and the newest release from the distillery, Woodford Reserve Double Oaked.

"Don't go up to the distillery shop and expect to find this one," Morris tells the students. "We had 600 bottles here last week when it came out and they're already gone. I had to go shopping just to find this bottle for today's class."

At the end of the day, students receive their diploma. In this case, it's a Woodford Reserve barrel head personalised with each student's name and signed by Morris and Veach. Chris Chattin's barrel head carried an extra inscription...wishing him a happy 40th birthday. He and seven friends travelled from Birmingham, Alabama to attend the Academy.

"We get together once a year and have a little trip and usually share some Woodford Reserve," he said.

"This year, I was online looking at the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and saw this event, and I convinced them to come."

There are two remaining Academy classes in 2012, but both are sold out. Dates for the 2013 classes will be released later this year at the Woodford Reserve web site (www.woodfordreserve.com). **W**