

Forget the Cake: Here's How to Make Your Wife Happy and Have Your Bourbon Too

The wife of one of The Bourbon Guys shares some secrets for a vacation to Bourbon Country that will result in a week of matrimonial bliss.

When you're married to one of The Bourbon Guys, vacation often means even more bourbon than usual. Sometimes, that means taking along a special bottle to sip after a day at the beach. Other times, it means splurging on a glass of Pappy at a nice restaurant. But when the stars align and both of your kids are away at summer camp during the same week, vacation means a trip to the famous Bourbon Trail of Kentucky.

Listen up, guys, especially those of you whose wives don't necessarily share your love for America's native whiskey. You might even share this blog with her. This is a recipe for a week that *both* of you will long remember.

First, what you must know about me is that despite my husband's impressive collection, I don't drink straight bourbon. I know that the spirit has gained popularity among women lately, probably even more so than it has among men. A new organization called Bourbon Women, founded by Peggy Noe Stevens (who is related to some of the great bourbon families of Kentucky and is the first female Master Bourbon Taster) boasts nearly 500 members in its first two years. The taste buds of some of my closest friends can rival those of any man sipping a flight. But my palette just isn't there yet. So you might wonder why I would choose to spend my only vacation alone with my husband traversing Kentucky like contestants on the "Amazing Race" to visit seven bourbon distilleries. Lest you assume that my Bourbon Guy was the only one who enjoyed this trip, let me tell you about three of my favorite parts: *sipping* some of the more feminine bourbon renditions, *shopping* in charming gift shops with products catered to a female audience, and *sightseeing* among the breathtaking hills, streams, and horse-strewn farms of the Bluegrass State.

We decided to tackle an ambitious three distilleries on our first day, so we drove to nearby Woodford Reserve, picked up our passports, and earned our first stamp. We had toured Woodford Reserve on a previous trip, but I remembered it well. The grounds of Woodford Reserve are a mix of rustic and stylish. Not surprisingly, there's a lot of wood, but it's balanced with tones of the hallmark Woodford copper. Woodford Reserve is a small distillery comparatively speaking, easily toured in a couple of hours or less. They have a nice café called Picnic on the Porch with many selections, including bourbon white cheddar cheese spread and crackers, a warm soft pretzel with bourbon mustard, and a veggie picnic roll. They even serve Kentucky's own Ale-8-One, the ginger ale seen on TV's "Justified." Hint: wives love to sit outside on a romantic porch and share cheese and crackers with their husbands, especially when there's zero chance that they will be interrupted by children.



Next we moved on to Town Branch Distillery, the newest stop on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. Unlike Woodford Reserve, which sits among trees and lines its barrels up on a scenic track that winds through the grounds, Town Branch is smack in the middle of Lexington and is

surrounded by little if any scenery. The most foliage they have is an experimental display of hops growing outside one of the buildings. Town Branch is currently best known for its Kentucky Bourbon Barrel Ale beer. I don't like beer, but some might be disappointed that the ale isn't included in the tasting at the end of the tour. What was included, to my delight, is Town Branch's version of an Irish coffee, the delectable Bluegrass Sundown. It's literally concentrated coffee, bourbon, and sugar in a bottle – with the recipe printed right on the back label. Add hot water and top with heavy whipping cream (I was assured that fat-free cream won't work), and you have the finish of a dinner party with friends or the start of a cozy winter night with your spouse. I definitely bought a bottle of Bluegrass Sundown, and I can't wait until the first snow!



Our final stop on day 1 of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail was my favorite: Four Roses. If I'm being honest, they had me with the name – and the romantic story of how the distillery got that name. According to the website and the tour, the founder of Four Roses fell in love with a Southern belle and proposed to her right before both attended a grand ball. If she desired to answer “yes,” then she was asked to wear a corsage of roses on her gown. Of course she wore a corsage of four roses, and founder Paul Jones named his bourbon Four Roses “as a symbol of his devout passion for the lovely belle, a passion he thereafter transferred to making his beloved Four Roses bourbon.” OK, by this point, I was ready to devote myself to drinking *nothing* but Four Roses bourbon.



But the legend isn't all Four Roses had to offer. The Spanish-inspired architecture combined with the iconic image of the four roses made it one of the most beautiful of the distilleries on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. From the chandelier to the park bench, those roses are everywhere, and they are further highlighted by the yellow décor to make the whole place reminiscent of springtime in Spain. The tour is similar to those in other distilleries, but it ends in a gorgeous, wood-appointed tasting room where my husband was thrilled to taste Four Roses small batch and single barrel. I spent a fortune in the gift shop, which has premium bourbons, a good selection of apparel, and a wife's favorite souvenir: candles. My friend Cynthia once said that if someone could bottle a cologne that smelled like bourbon, women would flock to any man who wore it. The same applies to candles, a divine mixture of many of the same flavors found in the tasting notes of bourbon: vanilla, caramel, honey, and more. (If you tour the distilleries without your wife, you'd better be toting a candle for her when you get home.) The Four Roses gift shop is one of the most elegant of the entire Bourbon Trail, and I bought a candle, a book, and a Tervis cup (my vacation addiction). All in all, I left Four Roses feeling like a Southern belle myself! What wife wouldn't adore a distillery based entirely on true love?



That night, we had a good night's sleep in the hub of the Bourbon Trail, Rand McNally's “Most Beautiful Small Town in America,” Bardstown, Kentucky. The next day, we were determined to add two more BIG stamps to our passports: Wild Turkey and Maker's Mark.



Upon arrival at Wild Turkey, we were treated with quite a surprise. Let me set the scene: We are greeted by barrels dressed as horse-like creatures with turkey heads and tails. We are acting like teenagers, posing on the turkey-horses and taking each other's pictures, when someone exiting the gift shop says two magical words: "Jimmy Russell." My Bourbon Guy whips his head around and asks, "Is Jimmy Russell in there?" to which they reply emphatically, "yes!" He takes off to see the master distiller like a kid who just learned that Santa Claus is in the mall only for the next hour, leaving me straddling a turkey-horse. Sure enough, when I catch up with him, he is greeting THE Jimmy Russell. Ever the ladies' man, Jimmy hugged me, posed for pictures, and proceeded to win my heart by chatting with me about my favorite beverage in the world. You see, I was excited to visit Wild Turkey for just one reason: American Honey.

It's true that American Honey received a 91-point rating from *Wine Enthusiast*. But many bars, including my own, do not carry it. As my favorite bartender at the Old Kentucky Bourbon Bar (in Covington, Ky.) once explained to me, American Honey is not "real bourbon" and therefore can't take up space on the crowded shelves that more worthy bourbons deserve. And I know that he's right, because any additive disqualifies a beverage from being legally categorized as bourbon. I'm grateful that my bartender does mix Wild Turkey 81 with local, organic honey for me! But I was even more delighted to learn that Jimmy Russell – JIMMY RUSSELL – keeps American Honey in his freezer and drinks it straight, puts it in his tea, and pours it over ice cream!



We tore ourselves away from Jimmy Russell long enough to take the tour, which required a bus ride to get around the expansive grounds. Our guide, Stuart, a hilarious guy who resembled a slightly older John Elway, showed us where Wild Turkey is distilled, tested in the "Sensory Lab," and aged in rickhouses overlooking a bridge spanning the beautiful Kentucky River. The tasting included two samples of our choice from among Wild Turkey's best, including 101, rye, Rare Breed, and Kentucky Spirit. I chose to have two samples of American Honey. My Bourbon Guy bought a barrel head and Jimmy signed it for him. I bought a black T-shirt with American Honey written in sparkly silver letters, and – wait for it – an American Honey candle.

Next up was Maker's Mark. I had already heard from friends that the Maker's Mark campus was among the most beautiful. Having already toured Woodford Reserve and Four Roses, I was doubtful, but was I wrong! Not only is Maker's Mark easily the most scenic of distilleries, but they rightfully give The Mrs. the credit that she deserves for creating that beauty. The tour actually begins in a mock-up kitchen where Margie Samuels, wife of founder Bill Sr., experimented with the now-iconic red dipping wax in a crock pot. Margie's influence wouldn't stop there. She designed the black and red color scheme still evident in all of the buildings on the Maker's campus, including cutouts of the distinctive square bottles in the red shutters of every building. Our tour guide informed us that the black paint also helps hide



the classic “bourbon fungus” that grows on the outsides of rickhouses. Margie also designed the logo, comprised of an S for Samuels, IV for the fourth generation, and the star for the family’s farm, Star Hill. Margie wanted her husband to be known for his invention, and thus the logo became the “maker’s mark” of this bourbon. The black buildings, particularly the rickhouses, stand out among the bridges, trails, creek, stones, trees, and shrubberies of the grounds. As beautiful as the grounds were, I found myself hypnotized by the wax dipping and I had to tear myself away for the tasting portion of the tour.

The tasting at Maker’s Mark took place in a state-of-the-art room with rows of tables and tastefully appointed (no pun intended) art on the walls. Maker’s offered easily the most generous of all the distilleries’ tastings. Most offered two – Maker’s offered four: white, fully matured,



over matured, and 46. More a cocktail connoisseur, I dutifully passed most of my samples to my Bourbon Guy. I finished my Maker’s Mark experience by purchasing another Tervis cup and a jar of Maker’s cherries for my cocktails. (I know that you can get them anywhere, but it was cool to buy them at Maker’s Mark.) I left with much more than two souvenirs, but with an appreciation for the natural beauty of the place and for the distillery’s respect for its maternal founder Margie Samuels. (I later learned that Maker’s Mark employs Victoria MacRae-Samuels, the only woman to

hold the title of vice president of operations in a bourbon distillery, which made me like the place all the more.)

On the final day of our adventure – and don’t let anyone tell you that you can truly enjoy the Kentucky Bourbon Trail in fewer than three days – we had just two distilleries left: Jim Beam and Heaven Hill.

I’ll admit: I have never been a Jim Beam fan. The snobbish sophisticate in me has always associated Jim Beam with good old boys. The minute we entered the grounds, I suspected that I was getting ready to be taken down a notch. Like Maker’s Mark, the Jim Beam campus has a thing for color coordination. The newly designed American Stillhouse welcomes visitors with an enormous logo in the well-known Jim Beam font. The inside features a “stillevator” that takes visitors from the first floor gift shop to the second, and a two-story family tree showing the achievements of the Beam family (though not one woman is pictured). One of my favorite features was a lifelike sculpture of Booker Noe sitting in a rocking chair with a glass of bourbon and his dog, Dot. The beloved Booker reminded me of everyone’s favorite grandpa.



The Jim Beam tour, at \$7, is the most expensive of the basic tours, but it’s also the longest. Since this was our sixth distillery visit, I wasn’t in the mood for a 90-minute tour, though I might have been had this stop been earlier in our trip. Instead, we did the free self tour, which culminates in an interesting tasting experience. Beam offers many of its bourbons for tasting, ranging from premium brands such as Knob Creek, Booker’s, and Basil Hayden’s, to the Red Stag flavors of cinnamon, black

cherry, and honey tea that appeal more to women. Visitors get a card with two “credits” upon entering the tasting room. We then swiped our cards, held glasses up to a spout, and watched as a machine dispensed each tasting. While there, I thought the machines were innovative. But when we returned home to tell friends about the experience, one lamented that machine tastings took the personal element out of the tasting and a bartender couldn’t accurately explain the notes of each bourbon. That’s a good point, though my Bourbon Guy said more than once how much he’d love to have one of those machines in our house!

Finally: the prize (meaning a full passport and a free T-shirt) was in reach. We were ready for our final distillery visit, Heaven Hill. Probably the least attractive campus, Heaven Hill “missed the memo” as one tour guide from another distillery put it, and left their rickhouses

white. As a result, the buildings are covered at the bottom by a black fungus. However, I found them to be rather quaint and traditional. Heaven Hill has a trolley that many find to be fun, but we were nearing the end of our trip and didn’t want to wait for the next ride. We took the basic tour, which was a bit disappointing in that a tour guide walked us through a series of exhibits that we could have read



on our own. Currently, Heaven Hill does not distill on the grounds near Bardstown, so the tour doesn’t include most of the features that other tours do. However, what the tour lacked the guide made up for in the tasting room – this woman knew her bourbon. She allowed us to taste Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage and Elijah Craig 12-year, and joked that our cups had holes in the bottom when she repeatedly refilled our glasses. The gift shop was also something to behold, with several hard-to-find bourbons, many scents of candles (that I bought, of course), spices, rubs, sauces, condiments, and cookbooks. In addition to all of that, I also bought a Kentucky Bourbon Trail women’s cut T-shirt. To end our trip, we bought a miniature jug of Evan Williams Master Distiller Select and had our names and the year personalized on the label.

It was actually a bit bittersweet when we took our fully stamped Kentucky Bourbon Trail passports to the Bardstown Welcome Center. There, we received our T-shirts with the congratulations of the friendly city employee who must do this every day but still acted like it was her great honor to bestow us with our rewards. We *had* to head back home because our kids would return soon, but part of me wanted to stay as long as possible. In fact, the next day we ventured to a local mall near our home and had lunch at the popular Cheesecake Factory restaurant, when in the middle of it all we suddenly looked at each other and admitted that we felt overwhelmed. We missed the peace and quiet of bourbon country with its slow pace and inviting atmosphere.

So, what did I get out of this trip and what can you learn from my story? Well, I came home with several scented candles, some shirts, food and drink, hundreds of pictures, a new appreciation for the history of our native spirit and the beauty of the land that I call home – oh, and one happy husband. And you now have the recipe for a method that will invigorate your marriage and allow you to drink bourbon all day, every day for the duration of your vacation.

As for me and my Bourbon Guy, we’re anxious to see next year’s summer camp schedule. The Kentucky Bourbon Trail Craft Tour? Maybe the Urban Bourbon Trail? Perhaps. But you’re probably more likely to find us sittin’ in the turkey-motif rockers on the porch at Wild Turkey, my Bourbon Guy chattin’ with Jimmy Russell and me sippin’ on some American Honey.