

BIG SHOTS

THE MEN BEHIND THE BOOZE



The Real-Life Stories of

JACK DANIEL
CAPTAIN MORGAN
JIM BEAM

and many more

A. J. Baime

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JACK DANIEL
CAPTAIN MORGAN
JIM BEAM

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A Note on the Text

This is a book about liquor. Though it was difficult, to say the least, I've omitted beer and wine, with the notable exception of Dom Perignon, whose fascinating story I couldn't ignore, and a short chapter on Martini & Rossi vermouth. A good portion of this book is about whiskey—American, Scotch, Canadian, Irish. To make matters easy, I've blown off the whiskey/whisky controversy, simply because no one really cares that much. And if you do, you should pour yourself a whiskey to take your mind off things. Throughout the book, the profiles of these men and their liquors are garnished with any number of cocktail recipes. Unless otherwise noted, these recipes have been distilled down from the million different available sources to suit my liking. In other words, the mixology is an informed suggestion. Try each recipe out, and tinker with them as you like.

Introduction

You cannot drown yourself in drink. I've tried. You float.
—John Barrymore

About twelve thousand years ago, or maybe closer to two hundred thousand years ago (who knows for sure?), someone discovered alcohol—by mistake. To this person, whoever he or she is, a toast should be raised, especially considering the strange particulars of how it probably went down. There are any number of theories, but the following is the most plausible:

It was a broiling hot day in the Mideast—very likely in what is presently Iran—and some tribesmen were foraging for fruit. They liked grapes in particular. The wild fruit balls were colorful and seductive, bunches of little orbs that exploded with sweet juice when you bit down on them, each with a seed that assured there would be more to eat tomorrow. As they toiled, the tribesmen grew thirsty. The sun burned above them like the sizzling yolk of a giant egg frying in the sky. Their lips cracked, and their tongues hung out of their mouths. Water was a scarce commodity. There wasn't enough to go around, and every drop counted.

At the end of the day, the tribesmen retired to where they kept their fruit. Tired and thirsty, one noticed that, in a large container filled with grapes, the weight of the pile had crushed the fruit at the bottom, and some juice had leaked out. The man reached down and scooped up some of the juice using a container of some sort, perhaps a cup whittled out of wood. First he sniffed the juice. The stuff gave off a strange smell—sickly sweet and pungent. There might've been insects crawling in it. But the guy was thirsty, so he sipped nervously. And then he sipped again. And again. Seeing that it was safe, he gulped down the whole lot.

Slowly a tender feeling began to overcome him. The tight sinews in his neck and back began to relax. A strange numbness spread into his limbs, as if tiny spiders were crawling through his veins. He felt dizzy—a soft, warm buzz. Hours later, he was busted for driving a stolen car while intoxicated, with a cross-dresser in the passenger seat who was later identified as Winston Churchill, the greatest drunk of all time.

Thus alcohol as we know it was born. Or that's my version anyway. There is at least one more commonly accepted theory—that a woman, a member of the harem of an ancient mythological Persian king named Jemsheed, discovered alcohol. Apparently, this king loved grapes so much that he collected and preserved them. Some of the grapes rotted, turned to mush, and fermented. Seeing that the fruit had turned sour, the king placed it in a vessel, labeled it poison, and lodged it in a vault. (Why he didn't just throw it out is anyone's guess.) Later, one of his harem, while suffering from a

devastating migraine, drank some of the poison in hopes of killing herself. After she drank the grape juice, the headache disappeared and the woman was overcome by a strange ecstasy. According to the legend, the king caught on and began cultivating grapes for wine production. To this day, wine in the Mideast is sometimes referred to as *zeher-e-khoosh*, or the delightful poison.

Whichever theory you accept, the facts remain the same. The dust on the fruit had yeast in it. When the fruit rotted, the natural sugars had mingled with the yeast on the skins and the juice had fermented—literally turned from water into wine.

From that moment in the Neolithic Period onward, ethyl alcohol (C₂H₅OH) would become a staple in nearly every burgeoning civilization across the globe. Later on, in the twelfth century (though some argue it was much earlier), European monks would have the bright idea to boil wine and collect the vapors—a process known as distillation. Since alcohol vaporizes at a lower temperature than water, the monks realized it was possible to separate it from other ingredients, to concentrate its strength. Then the fun *really* began.

It's no coincidence that, as different cultures around the world discovered the alchemy of distillation, many chose the same name for their drinks. The monks of the Dark Ages in Europe named their distilled spirits *aqua vitae*—"water of life" in Latin. Early Scottish distillers called whiskey *usquebaugh*—"water of life" in Gaelic. The Poles called their liquor *shiznennia vodka*—"water of life" in Slavic. The French called brandy *eau-de-vie*. You get the point. Wherever knowledge spread, alcohol followed, made out of whatever ingredients were on hand.

Now jump forward a few hundred years. You're standing in a bar in the twenty-first century, staring at liquor bottles, tapping your foot to a Johnny Cash tune. Spread out before you are myriad drink choices: rums, vodkas, whiskies, gins, tequilas. Some are as clear as water; others are the color of polished copper, amber brown, or a gold so rich it looks as if the sun had melted into a bottle. The exotic liquids come from all four corners of the earth, different nectars exuding different flavors and scents, with brand names and marketing slogans written in strange tongues. You ask yourself, how did drinking go from the "water of life" days to the bizarre mix of branded mass-marketed stuff we drink today?

It's an epic story, the history of booze. The evolution of liquor is a story about love and war, rape and murder, miraculous wealth and abject poverty. It's a story about the conquest of economies and political revolutions, CIA assassination plots, earthquakes, plagues, piracy, and vomiting. The story's main characters are the proverbial men behind the bar. Jack Daniel. Johnnie Walker. Jose Cuervo. Captain Henry Morgan. Don Facundo Bacardi Masso. Some of these men made tons of liquor and didn't drink much. At least one didn't make any at all, but drank himself to death. (Can you guess which?) All of them had one thing in common: they adored alcohol, each in his own way.

The following narrative tells the story of booze from the early days to the present, through a series of profiles about the guys on the bottles, and the companies they created. Each chapter tells the story of a man wrapped up in the turmoil of his time, and collectively, you get the whole story of alcohol post-Shakespeare. From the rum-addled pirates who raped and pillaged the Caribbean to the Prohibition-era rumrunners who smuggled Canadian whiskey over the border here in the States, the history of

liquor presents one beautifully picaresque tale after another. If nothing else, you'll be the most enlightened person in the bar. And that's worth drinking to.

But really, in the end, this book is about getting to know your booze and learning about its past. A person's drink is kind of like a spouse. If you abuse your drink, it'll make your life hell. (Alcohol kills about two million people every year, and though drink tends to make you feel no pain, killing yourself with it is a rough way to go.) If you treat your drink with respect and curiosity, the relationship can grow for a lifetime. The more you know about your drink, the better each drop tastes. And like a spouse, there's a secret to keeping it happy.

Every now and then, lean over and give it a little kiss. It'll reward you every time.

PART I
AMERICAN WHISKEY MEN

CHAPTER 1



JIM BEAM



**The Granddaddy of Bourbon and the Grandson
Who Just Might Have Murdered Him**

Hey, who took the cork off my lunch?
—W.C. Fields, date unknown

“**G**oddamn! Hell! We’re gonna be late!” cries seventy-three-year-old Booker “Hard Times” Noe, the master distiller emeritus of Jim Beam’s stable of whiskeys, his giant body shoehorned into the front passenger’s seat of a sea green Ford minivan.

“Do you want to put your seat belt on?” asks the driver, a young, dark-haired guy named Jim.

“I don’t mind if you can manage to get the thing around me,” Booker replies in his trademark deep Kentucky drawl. Jim gives the old man’s six-foot-four-inch frame the once-over (Booker looks like he’s just swallowed a bourbon barrel whole), ponders for about three seconds, then throws the car in gear and hits the gas. We’re headed from the main Jim Beam distillery in Clermont, Kentucky, fifty miles away to Wild Turkey in Lawrenceburg, where a ceremony will be held to induct, among nine others, the original Jim Beam into the Bourbon Hall of Fame. Booker will be accepting the award in honor of his grandfather. (The so-called Bourbon Hall of Fame is just a couple years old. Like a lot of things in these parts, it’s basically an excuse to indulge in a Kentucky double feature: whiskey and ham.)

Slowly the minivan pulls down the road past the Beam distillery on the right: a massive operation of pipes slithering like petrified snakes out of the ground with giant stacks blowing smoke and trucks loading up with cases upon cases of some of the finest bourbon in Kentucky. The stink of mash fermenting assaults the nose. To the left, towering corrugated metal rack houses hold thousands of fifty-three-gallon five-hundred-pound barrels of Beam whiskey: Jim Beam White Label, Jim Beam Black, plus the company’s four “small batch” bottlings (Basil Hayden, Baker’s, Knob Creek, and Booker’s). In the front seat, dressed in a classic dark suit, Booker Noe himself smiles when he sees the rack houses, the hot Kentucky sun bouncing rays off his bald head. On the classic Beam White Label bottle, Booker’s name is listed at the bottom as master distiller, under his grandfather’s name. He’s been making whiskey for fifty years, truly (and pardon the cliché) a legend in his own time.

“The last time I went to Wild Turkey ten years ago,” Booker says, “I was with Jimmy Russell [Turkey’s master distiller]. He says I got drunk. I say *he* got drunk. *Goddamn! We all got drunk!*”

At the wheel, Jim checks his watch and squirms nervously as we merge onto the Bluegrass Highway, in the heart of what is fondly called “the Bourbon Trail.” Looks like we’re running late. Booker appears nervous, as if the revelers might suck the entire Wild Turkey distillery dry before we get there.

“Now where was I?” he asks. He was telling a story about Jim Beam, his grandfather, and the last time he saw him alive. As the story goes, Booker says, he believes he might have killed his grandfather. That’s right: killed him.

“This is the God’s truth. Every word. Hell, I remember it like it was yesterday. It was December 25, 1947. I’d shot some birds, and I took these quail over to give my grandfather for Christmas. He was in bed, sick. I gave him the birds. My grandmother,

his wife, asked him if it would be okay if she gave me his shotgun. He said yes, so she went and got this old gun, a Model 12 Winchester pump shotgun. It rolled seven shot, but you could only put three in there by law. During Prohibition, my grandfather was, among other things, a coal miner, and he used the gun to guard the mines. Anyway, I gave him the birds and he gave me the shotgun. That was Christmas Day.

“On the twenty-seventh, he was dead in bed,” Booker continues, “just like he was sleeping. Now I don’t know for sure, but I think he ate those birds. . . .”

Sounds like murder, right? More like manslaughter.

For the rest of the drive to Lawrenceburg for Jim Beam’s induction into the Bourbon Hall of Fame (a drive that took a little longer than expected because of a few wrong turns), Booker Noe continued telling stories that, collectively, piece together the life of his grandfather—stories about making Jim Beam whiskey, about Prohibition and Kentucky moonshiners, about the growth of the largest bourbon distillery in the world and more. With a whole bunch of gaps filled in (Booker’s memory gets foggy here and there), the following is a brief life of one of the greatest whiskey men in history, and the strange world of American distillers he was born into.

By the time the original Jim Beam kicked off his distilling career, whiskey was already a staple “resource” in Kentucky. When the first settlers came to the New World, they brought with them a distaste for “strong water.” (They were Puritans.) The original colonies in Massachusetts and New York were dry. But the Irish and Scottish settlers who came at the beginning of the eighteenth century had a taste for grain spirit, and they knew very well how to make it. They settled in what is now Maryland, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia—states with fertile soil where rye grew plentifully.

All the ingredients necessary to make good whiskey were on hand: grain, pure water, forests to provide wood for lighting a fire under the still. By 1776, when the United States was born, smoke columns were rising off stills throughout the western part of the country.

The first Homestead Act offered free land grants to anyone with the guts to head west and settle in the wilderness. Among other places, thousands of pioneers of Scotch-Irish descent from Pennsylvania settled in Kentucky County, Virginia, where corn grew. Naturally, the settlers started making whiskey out of the grain, and they soon figured out that corn whiskey was much sweeter and arguably more full-flavored than rye. Have yourself a taste test of Jim Beam bourbon (bourbon must be at least 51 percent corn whiskey by law) and Jim Beam rye (with the yellow label) and you’ll be able to tell for yourself.

As Bill Samuels Jr., president of Maker’s Mark Distillery in Loretto, Kentucky, put it: “The fact that the native grain of Kentucky was Indian maize changed one of the key distinguishing elements between bourbon whiskey as we know it and other whiskeys.”

Eventually, distilleries sprang up around a particular section of what is now Kentucky where a thin layer of soil covered a huge limestone shelf. The limestone gave the water a particularly fresh flavor—great for making whiskey. (This same limestone is responsible for the state’s famous blue grass, which is rich in calcium and said to have given rise to the premium breed of Thoroughbred horses raised on it. It’s

no coincidence that the greatest horse race in the nation is run in Kentucky.)

By the end of the eighteenth century, some two thousand small distilleries were operating in Kentucky. Among the early distillers, some have bourbons named after them that you can buy in stores today: Elijah Craig, a Baptist minister, the first to notice the fine flavor and caramel color whiskey gained when aged in charred oak barrels (according to legend, Craig used herring barrels, and the charring removed the fish odor); Evan Williams, a Welshman who established Kentucky's first commercial distillery on Main Street in Louisville in 1783; Scot James Crow of Old Crow fame; and Jacob Beam, Jim's great-grandfather, a distiller of German descent who sold his first barrel of whiskey in 1795.

Kentucky became the fifteenth state in 1792, and its fledgling government named one county after the French royal family—the Bourbons—in recognition of the support they gave to the Americans during the war against England. (There's also a Louisville and a Versailles in Kentucky.) The whiskey made in Bourbon County had a strong reputation, and drinkers began to ask for it by name. Bourbon. Ironically, the county is dry today, just like Moore County in Tennessee, where Jack Daniel's is made. The finest whiskey comes out of the counties just to the west, around Lawrenceburg and in particular Bardstown, a quaint hamlet not far from the Mason-Dixon Line.

If you stroll through Bardstown today, you can just barely smell the stink of grain fermenting as you pass by Toddy's liquor shop, which has one of the finest collections of bourbons in the world, and a host of stores selling all manner of worthless souvenirs to tourists. As you near the end of town, there's a large stately brick house right on Third Street, where one Jim Beam lived, and where Beam's grandson Booker Noe lives today.

“He wasn't any old blowhard like me,” says Booker about his grandfather, as we roll down the Bluegrass Highway toward Wild Turkey. “He was a quiet type of guy, debonair. He always wore a suit and tie, even when he went fishing.”

James “Jim” Beaugard Beam was sixteen when he first started making whiskey, under the tutelage of his father, David. The business was called the Clear Springs Distillery Company, and it was located down the road from where the main Jim Beam distillery is today. After fourteen years of training on the job, Jim took over in 1894—the fourth generation of Beams to run a still. The bottle of Beam White Label today says, SAME RECIPE SINCE 1795, in reference to a recipe devised by Jacob, Jim's granddad, the first Beam to make whiskey in Kentucky.

Before Prohibition, the family distilled two brands of bourbon: Old Tub and Double Ford. The bottles were round and had no labels. Back in the horse-and-buggy days, Beam sold the whiskey to saloons, where drunks and businessmen alike drank it, sometimes before killing each other. Beam had a partner up in Chicago, and a brother, Tom Beam, in the saloon business in Kentucky. The word on Old Tub and Double Ford spread.

“He was not a chemist, see, but he knew about culturing yeast,” says Booker about his granddad. “He made the strain of yeast we use today. He didn't have a microscope. Nowadays they use test tubes and microscopes. And he didn't have a fridge either, so in the old days he kept the yeast in a well, ya see. Groundwater is about 56 degrees



Booker Noe, T. Jeremiah Beam, Carl Beam, in the 1960s. (Photo courtesy of Jim Beam Brands Co.)

Fahrenheit all year round. So he hung it down there on a rope.” Apparently, Beam held his yeast in such esteem he kept some of it in his house just in case something happened to his other stashes. Visitors noticed the unique odor of the stuff when they walked through the door.

Beam also kept ledgers recording sales, which show that business was pretty good in those days. The burgeoning steamship and railroad industries made commerce easier, so the whiskey started showing up in saloons farther and farther west. You’ll notice that, in all the classic Western films, cowboys are drinking a brown liquid. Bourbon was the choice—and sometimes only—liquor available in the Wild West (unless you were tough, and perhaps dumb enough to land way down in tequila country). A lot of it was Beam’s bourbon.

There were some fifty other working distilleries in Kentucky before Prohibition—all of them booming, clouds of dark coal smoke from the stills billowing into the sky. Then, on October 28, 1919, the United States government put out the fire. The days of moonshiners, smugglers, and Al Capone had arrived.

By the time the government passed the Volstead Act, otherwise known as the National Prohibition Act, Jim Beam was fifty-six years old. He’d done little outside of the liquor business his entire life. But government agents were starting to comb the Kentucky countryside, carrying guns and wearing their game faces. A very few distilleries were allowed to continue operation to make “medicinal whiskey,” but Beam’s wasn’t one of them.

“I don’t want to end up in that penitentiary,” he told his family.

As grandson Booker points out, “*Goddamn it! Outlawing alcohol was the dumbest thing the government ever did. People aren’t gonna do without their toddies! Their pick-me-ups! Hell.*” Of that, there was no doubt. Jim Beam was able to sell his distillery pretty quickly to some “people who didn’t mind getting their hands dirty and doing it illicitly,” according to Booker. “A lot of them ended up in prison.”

During Prohibition, an underground liquor industry thrived in Kentucky. Because the stills shot columns of telltale smoke up in the air, the guys running them had to

operate at night (thus the term “moonshiner”). The hooch had to go straight from the still to the middle man. It couldn’t be aged and darkened in charred oak barrels, where the cops would find it. So it was drunk clear and raw. It was called “white lightning” or “white dog” (because it had a nasty bite) or, as one witty writer recently joked, “Kentucky sushi.”

A lot of the liquor went up north to Chicago, where one Al Capone was making more than \$60,000 a year selling the stuff, quite a bit of money at the time. Gang warfare escalated over liquor turf, culminating in the infamous St. Valentine’s Day Massacre in Chicago in 1929, when Capone’s thugs shot seven of rival gang leader “Bugs” Moran’s men dead.

“In its practical effects,” says Andrew Sinclair in his book *Prohibition: The Era of Excess*, “national prohibition transferred \$2 billion a year from the hands of brewers, distillers, and shareholders to the hands of murderers, crooks, and illiterates.”

Meanwhile, Jim Beam was making a successful living. He invested in a coal mine in the mountains of western Kentucky, a rock quarry around the corner from the old Beam distillery, and some citrus groves in Florida. Wearing his trademark black three-piece suit and tie, white shirt, round spectacles, and pocket watch, he guarded his mines with the shotgun he’d eventually pass on to his grandson. He went on frequent fishing trips in Canada. He worked on his house, a redbrick building on the edge of Bardstown, which he purchased from the Bardstown Girls’ Academy. All was well, but the taste for making whiskey never left him.

In the 1932 presidential election, the Democrats ran on a platform aiming to abolish the Prohibition Act, with a candidate who would go on to serve four terms—Franklin Delano Roosevelt (who preferred a Dirty Martini by the way). FDR was no fool. Naturally, he won, and on December 5, 1933, the federal government repealed the Eighteenth Amendment.

On December 7, just two days later, Jim Beam—now seventy years old—applied for a new distilling license and was assigned DSP License Number 230, the same one he’d had before Prohibition. With the help of his son Jeremiah, fresh out of the University of Kentucky, Beam rebuilt the distillery in one hundred twenty days in Clermont, where the company’s main facility is today. Rather than Old Tub or Double Ford, as the Beam whiskey was called before, he decided to name the new liquor Jim Beam Kentucky Straight Bourbon.

If there was any good news for the whiskey business to come out of Prohibition, it was the fact that drinking on the sly made it impossible to get off on beer and wine. You had to go for the greater bang per ounce so you could get drunk on whatever could fit in a flask concealed in your pocket. Whiskey and gin emerged as the drinks of choice when Prohibition was repealed.

The name aside, Jim Beam’s new whiskey wasn’t any different from the old stuff: a liquor made from very specific amounts of corn, barley, and rye, aged four years in new charred oak barrels. Beam created a fresh white label with his name on it. Competition was tough; the flood of Canadian whiskey over the border during and after Prohibition made things hard on American distillers at first. Whiskey had to be aged before it could hit the market, but in Canada reserves were ready to go. (See Seagram’s: A Dynasty Founded on Rumrunning later in the book.) Still, Beam’s booze

was a hit in no time, and it was quickly on its way to becoming the bestselling bourbon in the world.

“He worked all the time,” remembers Booker. “Whiskey was what he knew. He made good whiskey and people loved it.” Just a teenager back then, Booker began spending more time with his grandfather—going fishing, strolling around the distillery, cruising in the old man’s 1939 Cadillac Coupe. “He was known to have a highball sometimes,” Booker says, “but honest to God, I never once saw him take a drink. He didn’t set around like me and drink. I drink at the drop of a hat. *Hey, you’re not going to print that are ya? Aw, shit. I don’t give a damn what ya write. Hell.*”

Jim Beam died in December 1947, at his home in Bardstown, quite possibly at the hands of his grandson, Booker, who’d delivered him some birds to eat two days earlier on Christmas Day. “He made it to eighty-three, which is pretty good, especially in those days,” Booker notes. “He got baptized three months before, so if he’d done any sinning in his life, it all disappeared before he died.” Four years later, in August 1951, Booker, then twenty-one years old, joined the company.

By that time, Jim Beam’s son, Jeremiah, was running the show. The whiskey was all handmade, “stirred with a stick.” A decade later, Booker became master distiller. Over the next forty years, a Rube Goldberg–style assembly line would take the place of the factory’s old-fashioned innards, and production would increase by twelve times. “When I started we made forty thousand gallons a week,” says Booker. “Now we make *eighty thousand gallons a day*. We use the same grain, the same yeast, the same everything. But it’s all automated.”

Today, Booker’s son, Freddy, is running the business side, while one Jerry Dalton has become the master distiller, the first non-Beam to hold the title. Under their command, the company filled its nine millionth barrel of whiskey in July 2002, the tally counting only liquor made since Jim Beam incorporated after Prohibition. That comes out to be, oh, 280 million cases of bourbon, or 115 billion drinks.

As we are driving home from the Wild Turkey distillery after the Bourbon Hall of Fame party, one of those nasty Kentucky rainstorms sweeps over the highway. In the passenger’s-side front seat, Booker rolls his eyes and stares out the windshield, which looks like it’s been coated with Vaseline. In the backseat, a trophy copper still with a black plaque honoring Jim Beam’s induction to the Hall of Fame sits next to Booker’s gray fedora.

“*Whoa!*” Booker yells, the rain blinding us. “*You watch that road, Jim! You put on your brakes on that goddamn slick highway . . . oh, hell. Damn!*”

“I got it,” says Jim, white knuckling the wheel, his eyes straining to catch a glimpse of the double yellow line.

“*Goddamn!*” Booker says again. “Now where was I?” He was talking about how much he likes drinking his own brand of bourbon—Booker’s—and about his diabetes. Aren’t people who have blood sugar problems like diabetes supposed to lay off the booze? “*Hell no!*” he says. “If I stayed plastered all the time, I’d be fine. But the liver can’t handle it. Are you quoting me? Aw, hell, I don’t give a shit. I have a toddy every day. *Several!* It levels off the sugar in your blood. Ask any doctor.” By the way, he’s dead wrong.

JIM BEAM'S SMALL BATCH BOURBONS

School days were all about drinking White Label shots with beer chasers. And for folks who manage to graduate . . .

 **BAKER'S:** A deep amber whiskey with hints of fruit, caramel, and nut, this bourbon is generally a hit among folks who like cognac. (Baker's happens to be my favorite bourbon in the world, if that counts for anything.) It's made from an old family recipe preferred by Jim Beam's grandnephew, Baker Beam, using an old strain of jug yeast that's been in the family for decades. The whiskey is aged seven years and comes dressed up in a slope-shoulder wine bottle.

 **BASIL HAYDEN:** This delicious whiskey's named after an eighteenth-century master distiller. Basil Hayden grew up in Maryland, where he learned to make rye. When he moved to Kentucky in 1796, Hayden added corn to the recipe, the same recipe the Jim Beam distillery uses to produce the bottle that now bears his name. The mash contains twice as much rye as most other bourbons, and you can taste it. Aged eight years and bottled at 80 proof, Basil Hayden is light and mellow on the tongue—great for breakfast or first-time drinkers.

 **KNOB CREEK:** This drink's named after Abraham Lincoln's childhood home in Kentucky. The best known of all small batch bourbons these days, Knob Creek spends nine years “getting to know the inside of a new charred American white oak barrel,” as the Beam folks like to put it. The barrels are charred up to “level four,” meaning they're burned pretty good. The dark caramelized wood gives the whiskey its signature earthy aroma, delicate sweetness, and dark amber color. It's bottled at 100 proof, like most good bourbons were way back when.

 **BOOKER'S:** For years, Beam master distiller emeritus Booker Noe used to bottle a bourbon straight from the barrel at Christmastime for his friends—uncut, unfiltered, untouched. The stuff became a hit among in-the-know locals. So in 1988, he decided to brand and market it (Booker's True Barrel Bourbon). This liquor goes down like a hot mystery novel—hints and clues of flavors (oak, tobacco, vanilla), legs that coat a glass like fishnet, and a long, hot finish. At proofs that vary from barrel to barrel (121–127 proof), Booker's comes with a Joe Frazier-style right hook packed inside each bottle.

So when Booker pours a tall one, does he like to drink, say, Wild Turkey? Maker's Mark?

"Don't ask me no dumb-ass questions. I drink Booker's bourbon, with water. Booker's has the most body. It has the most flavor."

Back in 1987, the old man launched his own "small batch" bourbon, bottled under his own name. To produce the stuff, he personally samples barrels of the finest whiskey from what he calls the "center cut" of the rack house, bourbon aged six to eight years. Booker's is sold in a wine bottle, available in varying strengths depending on the batch, from 121 to 127 proof. In other words, it mixes well with a dash of water. Booker himself is a walking advertisement.

"As far as I know, it's the only uncut, unfiltered, unadulterated bourbon in the world—straight from the barrel. *Goddamn right!* That's the way it was one hundred fifty years ago, and that's the way I like it."

As we pull up into Bardstown, the rain stops and the sun cuts through the clouds. Jim pulls around a corner and into the driveway of a redbrick house with a large front lawn and a circular blossoming flower bed. Welcome to the original Jim Beam's house, at one time the Bardstown Girls' Academy, now the home of Jim Beam Brands master distiller emeritus Booker Noe. The home is a big but modest place, a classic old suburban beauty with a couple added touches out back—a smokehouse for ham and a makeshift pond where Booker keeps bluegill for eating. (The pond looks like a giant hot tub that hasn't been cleaned in, well, ever.) His son, Freddy, lives right next door.

Booker climbs out of the minivan and slams the door shut behind him. Without looking back, he waves his hand in the air and says with a deep Southern drawl, "*Allll right.*" Then he opens the door to his house and disappears inside, where his Jack Russell terrier, Spot, is waiting, and no doubt a toddy of Booker's bourbon as well.

THE MINT JULEP

The julep is probably as old as alcohol itself, perhaps even older. The Arabs called it *julab*. The Persians called it *gulab*. Technically, it means rose water, and it came to denote any liquid infused with the essence of something else. Here in the States, julep generally means bourbon flavored with sugar and mint. And make sure you get the mixology right, lest you wind up on the business end of a double barrel.

As the prevailing legend has it, the origin of the Mint Julep goes something like this: One day, a transient on the Mississippi came ashore hunting for some springwater to dilute a stiff batch of whiskey. Finding some wild mint growing on the riverbank, he tossed a bunch in. That's pretty much the story, with the noted exception of a dash of sugar, which was added later. Way back in 1820, the *Old American Encyclopedia* described drinking in the South: "A fashion at the South was to take a glass of whiskey, flavored with mint, soon after waking; and so conducive to health was this nostrum esteemed that no sex, and scarcely any age, were deemed exempt from its application."

Today, the Mint Julep is a staple drink all over the South. It's also the official drink

of the Kentucky Derby. The following recipe is my favorite, culled from a variety of sources in Bardstown and Louisville, Kentucky. It'll take twenty-four hours, so plan accordingly.

- 🍹 Make a batch of simple syrup. Throw a cup of plain granulated white sugar and a cup of freshwater (springwater if possible) into a pot. Heat it until the sugar melts into the water, stirring occasionally. Then let it cool.
- 🍹 Take a pile of fresh mint leaves without stems, about enough to make a loose ball the size of a large fist. Throw that in a big bowl with a cup of bourbon. Then muddle it up using any instrument you've got.
- 🍹 Take a break for a couple hours. Ask yourself, what is life? Is there a God? Should socks always have to match, or is it okay to wear a blue one and a black one if you're sure that no one will notice?
- 🍹 Take the rest of the bottle of bourbon and dump it in the bowl, along with about a cup to a cup and a half of your cooled syrup. (However you like—taste it as you go.) Stir the concoction; then put it in the refrigerator overnight.
- 🍹 Wake up the next day. Put tall cocktail glasses in the freezer to chill. Then invite some friends over.
- 🍹 When ready, fill your chilled cocktail glasses with crushed ice (snobby Southern folk will require silver cups). Stir up your Mint Julep, and start pouring. Garnish with a mint sprig, and raise a toast.

CHAPTER 2



seagram's



A Dynasty Founded on Rumrunning

This law will be obeyed in cities, large and small, and in villages, and where it is not obeyed it will be enforced. The law says that liquor to be used as a beverage must not be manufactured. Not sold nor given away, nor hauled in anything on the surface of the earth nor in the air.

—John F. Kramer, U.S. Prohibition Commissioner, 1920

Between the years 1920 and 1930—the heyday of the Prohibition era—some thirty-four thousand Americans drank themselves to death. Two thousand gangsters and five hundred federal agents were murdered as a result of the illicit booze frenzy. The government seized more than a billion gallons of liquor during this country’s “noble experiment.”

“Good old Prohibition days,” as the drunk tank nurse says in Billy Wilder’s classic 1945 film, *The Lost Weekend*. “You should’ve seen the [drunk tank] then. This is nothing. Back then we really had a turnover. Standing room only.”

Now one has to wonder where all this booze was coming from. The answer is everywhere. It was made overseas and sold in America as “medicine” (Laphroaig Scotch, for example), whipped up in makeshift distilleries in the South, brewed crudely in bathtubs all over the forty-eight states.

Perhaps no one was making more money off the illicit liquor trade during Prohibition than a couple of brothers, Harry and Samuel Bronfman, the sons of Orthodox Jewish Russian immigrants living in Canada. The brothers got their start in the liquor trade selling whiskey out of the hotels they owned in Saskatchewan about 150 miles north of the U.S. border. They made poor-quality hooch with counterfeit Scotch whiskey labels and sold it to thirsty smugglers, who could make a fast buck by driving a fast car into American territory.

In Canada at the time, making liquor was perfectly legal. Running it over the border was not. The Bronfmans used the laws against liquor in their favor by making it easy for other people to break these laws. Then they sat back and skimmed the foam off the top. And there was nothing anybody could do about it. As one Bronfman biographer, Peter C. Newman, in his book *King of the Castle*, put it: “Sometimes it almost seemed that the American Congress and the Canadian federal and provincial legislatures must have secretly held a grand conclave to decide one issue: how they could draft antiliquor laws and regulations that would help maximize the Bronfman brothers’ bootlegging profits.”

By 1928, the Bronfmans had made enough cash to invest in a big-time legitimate liquor operation. So they bought a distillery—a small company called Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, Limited—and took the Seagram name for their own, slapping it across their stationery and their liquor bottles. Within just a few years, the family would become the largest producer of spirits in the world. They would become one of the richest families in the history of the planet—the “Rothschilds of the West,” a Jewish dynasty to rival any. (“Bronfman,” it’s worth noting, means “whiskey man” in Yiddish. You can’t *make* this stuff up.)

How much power did this family wield? By the 1970s, the Bronfmans had amassed a fortune of \$7 billion and a staggering catalog of liquors, which included not just Seagram’s Crown Seven, VO, and Seagram’s Gin, but brands like Crown Royal, Chivas Regal, The Glenlivet, White Horse, Gordon’s Gin and Vodka, Jameson Irish