

Chapter 5

American and Canadian Whisk(e)y

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the whiskey production process
 - ▶ Exploring different whiskey varieties
 - ▶ Keeping your whiskey for a long time
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This chapter deals with several kinds of whiskey: bourbon, Tennessee whiskey, rye whiskey, Canadian whisky, blended whiskey, and wheat and corn whiskies.

How Whiskey Is Made

Whiskey is distilled from grain. The type of grain or grains used determines the type of whiskey. After the grain is harvested, it's inspected, stored, and then ground into a meal and cooked to separate the starch. Malt is added, changing the starch to sugar. This mash is cooled and pumped into fermenters. Yeast is added to the mash and allowed to ferment, resulting in a mixture of grain residue, water, yeast cells, and alcohol. This mixture is then pumped into a still, where heat vaporizes the alcohol. The alcohol vapors are caught, cooled, condensed, and drawn off. This new, high-proof spirit is stored in large holding tanks. Water is added to lower the proof, and the whiskey is drawn into barrels, which are stored in a rackhouse for aging. After aging, the barrels of whiskey are drained into the tanks that feed the bottling line. In the case of blended whiskey (including Canadian), different whiskeys are mixed together, and the grain spirits or other whiskeys are added.

Some alcohol-related jargon

When you read about the production of alcoholic beverages, you see terms like *proof* and *distillation* thrown around. Here's what they mean.

Proof is the strength of an alcoholic beverage. In the United States, the scale is 200 degrees, with each degree equal to 0.5 percent alcohol by volume. So a 100-proof spirit is 50 percent alcohol. A 200-proof spirit is after-shave, or 100 percent alcohol.

Distillation is the process of converting a liquid by heating it into a gas or vapor, which is then condensed back into a liquid form. In the case of liquor production, the liquid is a blend of ingredients that have been fermented so that it contains some alcohol. When you heat this liquid, the alcohol it contains vaporizes first (because alcohol has a lower boiling point than, say, water). So the vapor that's trapped and later condensed back into a liquid has a much higher alcohol content than the original liquid.

Distillation is usually performed by a still. Stills come in two basic types:

- ✔ **The pot still:** A copper or copper-lined vessel with a large bottom and a long, tapered neck connected by a copper pipe to a cooling spiral tube, which is the condenser. As the liquid boils, it evaporates. The vapor rises up to the condenser, cools, and returns back to a liquid state with alcohol. Often, this process is repeated to achieve the right alcohol level.
- ✔ **The continuous still:** Also known as a *column still*, *patent still*, and *Coffey still*, the continuous still has tall copper columns that continually trickle liquid down over many steam-producing plates. The vapor is drawn into vents and condensed. A continuous still performs under the same principles as a pot still but can work with a constant flow of materials coming in and going out, which is great for mass production.

Bourbon

Bourbon is the best-known and probably the most popular whiskey produced in the United States. It has an amber color and a slightly sweet flavor. By law, straight bourbon must be made from at least 51 percent corn, and it must be aged in brand-new, charred oak barrels for at least two years. Although Tennessee whiskey doesn't have to be made this way, both Tennessee distilleries — George Dickel and Jack

Daniel's — also follow these guidelines. After aging, only pure water can be added to reduce the barrel proof strength to bottling (selling) proof. Scotch whiskies, Canadian whiskies, and Irish whiskies can have added caramel coloring, but bourbon can't.

A little history

Settlers on the East Coast of North America began making rye whiskey in the 1700s. They were mostly immigrants from Scotland, England, and Northern Ireland and weren't familiar with corn. In the 1790s, when the U.S. government imposed a tax on distilled spirits, the whiskey makers of Pennsylvania revolted, culminating in the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. President Washington called out federal troops to put down the rebellion, and many distillers fled west to Kentucky, where the law wasn't imposed quite so strictly.

In Kentucky, early settlers had already begun making whiskey from corn, and the newcomers quickly learned how to use this American grain to make what would become known as *bourbon*. Its name came about because it was shipped from Bourbon County in Kentucky to places such as St. Louis and New Orleans, where it soon became known as *whiskey from Bourbon* and eventually *bourbon whiskey*.

Popular brands

When applicable, I list the varieties within each brand.

- ✔ **Baker's:** Aged for 7 years and bottled at 107 proof.
- ✔ **Basil Hayden's:** Aged for 7 years and 80 proof.
- ✔ **Blanton's Single Barrel Bourbon:** Produced in a variety of proofs and ages.
- ✔ **Booker's Bourbon:** Produced in a variety of proofs and ages.
- ✔ **Buffalo Trace Bourbon:** 90 proof and produced in a variety of ages.
- ✔ **Bulleit Bourbon:** Aged for 6 years and 90 proof.

- ✔ **Distillers' Masterpiece:** Available in 18- and 20-year-old versions. The 18-year-old is finished in cognac casks, and the 20-year-old is finished in Geyser Peak port wine casks.
- ✔ **Elijah Craig Bourbon:** 12 years old and 94 proof.
- ✔ **Evan Williams Black Label Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey:** 7 years old and 86 proof.
- ✔ **Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey:** Vintage-dated and 86.6 proof.
- ✔ **I.W. Harper Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey:** 86 proof; very limited distribution.
- ✔ **Jim Beam:** 4 years old and 80 proof. Beam Choice: 5 years old and 80 proof.
- ✔ **Jim Beam Black:** Aged for 8 years and 86 proof.
- ✔ **Knob Creek:** Aged for 9 years and bottled at 100 proof.
- ✔ **Old Charter Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey:** 8 years old and 80 proof; 10 years old and 86 proof. The Classic 90: 12 years old and 90 proof. Proprietor's Reserve: 13 years old and 90 proof.
- ✔ **Old Crow Bourbon:** Aged for 3 years and 80 proof.
- ✔ **Old Fitzgerald Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey:** 86 and 90 proof. Very Special Old Fitzgerald (Bourbon Heritage Collection): 8 years old and 100 proof; very limited distribution.
- ✔ **Old Grand-Dad:** 86 proof. Bottled in Bond: 100 proof. 114 Barrel Proof.
- ✔ **Wild Turkey:** 80 proof. Wild Turkey Rare Breed: a blend of 6-, 8-, and 12-year-old stocks that's usually around 108 proof. Wild Turkey Old Number 8 Brand: 101 proof. Kentucky Spirit: 101 proof.
- ✔ **Woodford Reserve:** 7 years old and 90.4 proof.

Specialty bourbons

As you discover bourbon whiskey, you come across several different types within this category, including small batch and single barrel, which are more expensive and harder to find.

Small batch

A *small batch* bourbon is produced and distilled in small quantities of approximately 1,000 gallons or fewer. In other words, it's made in small batches, but you probably figured that out. The following are small batch bourbons:

- ✔ **Baker's**
- ✔ **Basil Hayden's Small Batch**
- ✔ **Booker's Small Batch**
- ✔ **Elijah Craig**
- ✔ **Knob Creek**
- ✔ **Maker's Mark Kentucky Homemade Bourbon**
- ✔ **Old Rip Van Winkle and Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve**
- ✔ **Ridgemont Reserve 1792**
- ✔ **Woodford Reserve Distiller's Select**

Single barrel

Single barrel bourbon also has a self-explanatory name. Each bottle contains bourbon whiskey from just one barrel, with no blending. Some single barrel bourbons include

- ✔ **Benchmark/XO Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon**
- ✔ **Blanton's Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon**
- ✔ **Elijah Craig Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon**
- ✔ **Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage Kentucky Straight Bourbon**
- ✔ **Henry McKenna Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon**
- ✔ **Jack Daniel's Single Barrel**
- ✔ **Wild Turkey Kentucky Spirit Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon**



A limited number of distilleries produce a whiskey bottled at *barrel proof*, which enters the barrel at 125 proof and gains strength during aging, so it sometimes exceeds the 125-proof legal limit. Pretty potent stuff — drink at your own risk.

Tennessee Whiskey

Tennessee whiskey differs from bourbon in that it's mellowed (altered) through sugar-maple charcoal before it's aged. Although both whiskeys are usually filtered before bottling, the sugar-maple charcoal adds a different flavor to Tennessee whiskey.

The following are the only two producers of Tennessee whiskey:

- ✔ **George Dickel Tennessee Whiskey:** Old No. 8 Brand: 80 proof. Old No. 12 Superior Brand: 90 proof. Barrel Reserve: 10 years old and 86 proof.
- ✔ **Jack Daniel's Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey:** Black Label: 86 proof. Green Label: 80 proof, available only in the United States. Gentleman Jack: 80 proof.

Rye Whiskey

Distilled at no more than 160 proof, *rye whiskey* is a fermented mash or grain containing at least 51 percent rye. It's matured in new charred oak barrels for a minimum of two years. Rye has a strong, distinctive flavor. For quite some time, rye has taken a back seat to bourbon in the preferences of American whiskey drinkers, but rye has seen a resurgence lately. Whiskey connoisseurs are rediscovering the old brands, and new ones are popping up as well. Here's a sampling of what's available:

- ✔ **Jim Beam Rye:** 80 proof.
- ✔ **Michter's Straight Rye:** Aged in bourbon barrels for 4 years.
- ✔ **Old Overholt:** One of the early brands of American straight rye; 4 years old and 80 proof.
- ✔ **Redemption Rye:** 92 proof.
- ✔ **(ri)¹:** New in 2008 by Jim Beam; bottled at 92 proof.
- ✔ **Rittenhouse:** 80 and 100 proof.
- ✔ **Russell's Reserve Rye:** 90 proof.
- ✔ **Templeton Rye:** 80 proof; produced in Iowa.
- ✔ **Thomas H. Handy Sazerac:** 127.5 proof whiskey.

- ✔ **Van Winkle Family Reserve Rye:** 95.6 proof and aged for 13 years.
- ✔ **WhistlePig Straight Rye:** 100 proof.
- ✔ **Wild Turkey Rye:** 80 proof.

Canadian Whisky

Canadian whisky (spelled without the *e*) is a blend of aged grain whisky and heavier flavored blended whiskies that's aged in oak casks for a minimum of three years. There are no limitations as to the grain, distilling proof, formula, or type of barrels used. Each distiller is allowed to make its own type of whisky. Most Canadian whisky is aged in white oak barrels. Canadian whiskies sold in the United States are blends bottled at a minimum of 80 proof and are generally three years old or older. Popular brands include

- ✔ **Black Velvet:** 80 proof and 3 years old.
- ✔ **Canadian Club:** 80 proof and 6 years old.
- ✔ **Canadian Mist:** 80 proof and 3 years old.
- ✔ **Crown Royal, Crown Royal Special Reserve, and Crown Royal XR:** All 80 proof.
- ✔ **Seagram's VO:** 86 proof; aged for 6 years (the *VO* means "Very Own" or "Very Old").
- ✔ **Tangle Ridge:** 100-percent rye whisky aged for 10 years in oak barrels, blended with sherry and other natural flavors, and then recased before bottling.

Blended Whiskey

American blended whiskey is a mixture of at least 20 percent bourbon, corn, or rye whiskies and neutral spirits or grain whiskey. Sometimes, additional coloring and enhancers are added. Blends are bottled at no less than 80 proof.

Whiskies blended with neutral spirits have a label on the back of the bottle that states the percentages of straight and neutral spirits. The most famous and biggest seller of blended whiskey is Seagram's 7 Crown. It, of course, is part of that famous drink, the Seven and Seven.

Other brands of blended whiskey include the following:

- ✓ Barton Reserve
- ✓ Carstairs
- ✓ Fleischmann's
- ✓ Imperial
- ✓ Mattingly & Moore

Wheat and Corn Whiskey

Wheat whiskey must contain 51 percent of a single type of grain and must be aged a minimum of two years in a new, charred, white oak barrel. As a commercial product, this type of whiskey is relatively new. (For all I know, some wheat farmers in the Midwest have been making this stuff for a couple of centuries, but you couldn't buy it at the local liquor store until recently.) The only brand available at press time is Bernheim Original Straight Wheat Whiskey (90 proof). More brands are likely to follow.

Corn whiskey is similar to bourbon, except that it must be made of a mash consisting of at least 81 percent corn. It's still called *moonshine* or *white lightning* in the southern United States. Available brands include

- ✓ Dixie Dew
- ✓ Georgia Moon
- ✓ J.W. Corn
- ✓ Mellow Corn

Storing and Serving Suggestions

American whiskey and Canadian whisky can be served straight, on ice, with water or seltzer, or mixed as a cocktail. Store an unopened bottle in a cool, dry place. After opening, a typical bottle should have a shelf life of at least two years.