



SOUTH

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QofM
Question of the Month

Do Fewer Oak Trees Mean it's Time to Say Bye-Bye to Bourbon?

Bourbon is more than just a drink of choice; it's become an icon. Picture Paul Newman's character Fast Eddie in the 1961 film *The Hustler*. "Go on down and get me some bourbon. A JTS Brown. No ice. No Glass," he says during his first matchup against Minnesota Fats. Or recall how, in the 1996 feature "Goldeneye," when James Bond tells a new M, played by Dame Judy Dench, that her predecessor kept cognac in the office, only for M to quickly answer that she prefers bourbon before producing a bottle of Jack Daniels. Bourbon certainly isn't just for pool players and professional spies; President Harry Truman supposedly drank bourbon with

breakfast, while singer Sam Cooke sipped it to unwind in the evenings¹.

As the saying goes, all bourbon is whiskey, but not all whiskey is bourbon. And though the word "whiskey" derives from the Irish word "uisce²," which means water, bourbon whiskey is distinctly American. So much so that the U.S. Congress passed a resolution in 1964 declaring it to be a "distinctive product of the United States³." Even in countries like Ireland and the United Kingdom, any liquor labeled as bourbon must come from the United States⁴.

1. "History's Notable Bourbon Drinkers," Pinhook, January 25, 2023. ([link](#))

2. Murray, James Augustus Henry, Craigie, William Alexander, & Onions, Charles Talbut, "Whiskey," *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Clarendon Press, 1928. ([link](#)) Clarendon Press

3. S. Res. 19, 88th Cong., Cong. Rec. Vol 110, Part 8 - Senate, page 9882, 1964. (enacted). ([link](#))

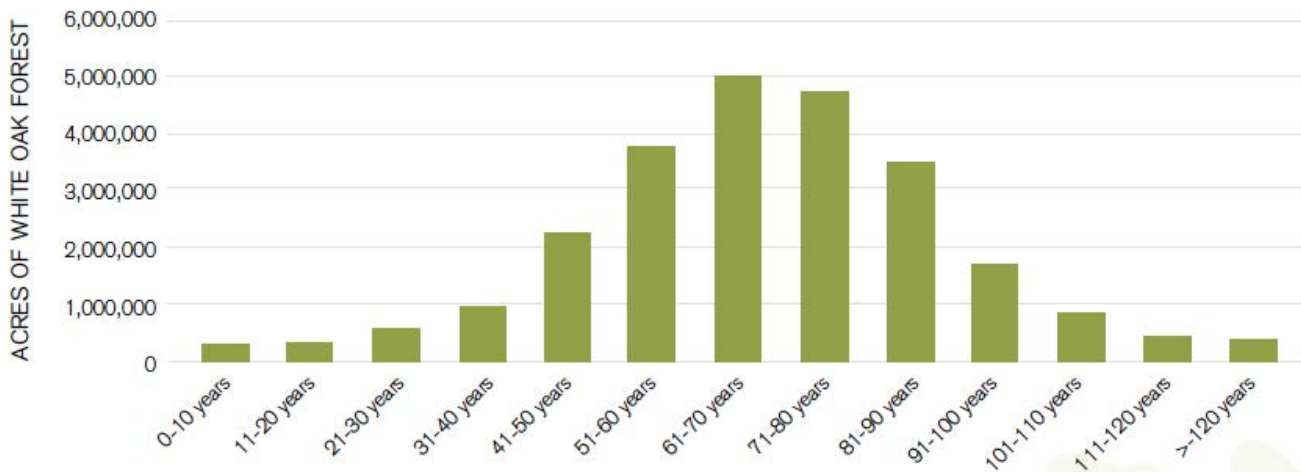
4. Official Journal of the European Union L, Annex I, 2009/264/5, October 7, 2009. ([link](#))

Aside from being produced in the United States—and often in the American South with Kentucky accounting for 95% of production⁵ – straight bourbon must also meet certain requirements under the Federal Standards of Identity for Distilled Spirits. For example, it must be made from at least 51% corn, have no additional colorings or flavorings, and be aged in “charred new oak barrels” for at least two years⁶.

That last requirement – being aged in oak barrels – might soon be cause for concern. The wood used for these barrels is often white oak, which might soon disappear.

management changes have led to an increase in competing tree species in white oak forests (namely maple and beech trees), which block white oaks from receiving enough sunlight, therefore preventing them from regenerating at a fast enough rate⁷. In short, while there are plenty of white oaks for approximately the next ten years to meet product demands (for bourbon barrels or otherwise), these trees are not being replaced at a fast enough pace to meet future demands.

This is bad news for bourbon. According to the Kentucky Distillers’ Association, the number of distilleries in the Bluegrass State went from 27 to 68 between 2009 and 2019 (many of these were



The age class distribution of white oak across Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee shows the number of acres of white oak-dominated forests in different age classes. The curve shape indicates a lack of younger age classes needed for replacement over time.

Source: *The White Oak Initiative*

According to The White Oak Initiative, a group made up of private companies, trade associations, universities, and nonprofits, fewer new white oaks (officially known as *quercus alba*) are growing these days. A 2021 report released by the initiative states that ecological and land

management changes have led to an increase in competing tree species in white oak forests (namely maple and beech trees), which block white oaks from receiving enough sunlight, therefore preventing them from regenerating at a fast enough rate⁷. In short, while there are plenty of white oaks for approximately the next ten years to meet product demands (for bourbon barrels or otherwise), these trees are not being replaced at a fast enough pace to meet future demands.

new premium small-batch and single-barrel brands) and bourbon production rose 115% from 2014 to 2019. Kentucky distilleries are now producing 1.7 million barrels a year, the majority of which are made from charred white oak to give bourbon its signature color and flavor.⁸

5. Osburn, Christopher, “The White Oak Tree is in Danger, and so is Bourbon – Here’s What the Industry is Doing About It,” *The Manual*, November 27, 2023. ([link](#))

6. 27 CFR §5.22(b)(1)(i). ([link](#))

7. Restoring Sustainability for White Oak and Upland Oak Communities: An Assessment and Conservation Plan, The White Oak Foundation, November 2021. ([link](#))

8. The White Oak Foundation, 2021.

What then can be done to save these trees and ensure the future of bourbon barrels? The White Oak Initiative recommends that federal, state, and local governments develop and enhance measures to support the white oak industry, including education, cost-sharing, and technical assistance programs for white oak growers, and support programs that increase the markets for other types of wood to incentivize clearing out species that affect white oak growth.⁹

The Brown-Forman Corporation, which produces several well-known bourbons like Jack Daniels (even though the drink is marketed as “Tennessee Whiskey”), Old Forester, and Woodford Reserve, has partnered with the White Oak Initiative to plant more than 800 white oaks for a 15-year study to determine what helps the trees grow¹¹.

Efforts like this will hopefully stave off a white oak shortage and ensure that the tree is around



Some private companies are already working on solutions. For example, Marker’s Mark partnered with the University of Kentucky and barrel-maker Independent Stave Company to create what will become the world’s largest repository of white oak. They started by planting 1,400 white oaks in 2021 just outside of Loretto, Kentucky¹⁰.

for a long time to come, and available to barrel bourbon long into the future so the next generation can enjoy the taste of one of the South’s most iconic drinks.

9. The White Oak Foundation, 2021.

10. Childress, Rick, “Why Working to Conserve this Tree can Yield Better Kentucky Bourbon in the Future,” Lexington Herald Ledger, May 10, 2021 ([link](#))

11. Grantz, Jordan, “Brown-Forman Plants Trees for Bourbon Study,” Spectrum News 1, April 18, 2023. ([link](#))