

The IMPROPER TONIAN

METRO BOSTON'S DAPPER GUIDE
TO ENTERTAINMENT,
CULTURE AND THE
PERFECT SOUR MASH

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LADIES'
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COMPLETE
GUIDE TO
AMERICAN
WHISKIES

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UNDER THE INFLUENCE

**HOW TO IGNORE THE TRENDS AND NAVIGATE
THE WORLD OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT**

BY NICK ALTSCHULLER • PHOTOGRAPHED BY ADAM DETOUR



THREE SHEETS TO THE WIND,

THE JOURNEY OF AN AMERICAN WHISKEY DRINKER BEGINS IGNOBLY, IN WHAT CAN BE CALLED THE EARLY TIMES. THIS IS A PERIOD OF PLASTIC JUGS, WELL DRINKS AND BOTTLES HIDDEN IN PAPER SACKS. (THE KENTUCKY GENTLEMAN MAY BE ENTERTAINING, BUT YOU DON'T WANT TO BE CAUGHT IN HIS COMPANY.) IN THE BEGINNING, ROTGUT IS THE CALL, JIM IS A NEW FRIEND, AND JACK IS FOR THOSE JUST PUTTING ON AIRS.

But like a Whopper fan who begins to appreciate the tastes of a flame-licked rib eye, the American whiskey world opens to those who delve. Today, the spirit is more popular than ever. Ask Joy Richard, bar and beverage manager for the Franklin Restaurant Group. She opened Citizen Public House in 2010 with about 90 whiskeys. Two years later, the bar was redesigned to accommodate 100 more. Says Richard, "The reason we have so few is because we're very selective."

But, of course, this being a matter of food and drink, there's always a sacred cow, consecrated by the media and fetishized by chat boards. In American whiskey, its name is Pappy Van Winkle. This rhapsodized Kentucky

bourbon sports a label you may never see except on boastful Facebook posts or in fuzzy Instagram images: a distinguished Southern man smoking a cigar. He's as elusive as a confirmed Bigfoot sighting, making would-be aficionados a little rabid. "I'm terrified to let anyone know we have it because my bartenders will get beat up for it," says Richard.

Calm down, people. American whiskey is not a beverage about status. That's what Scotch is for. Let your connoisseurship come through experimentation, because people who settle on a single favorite are just looking for easy answers. And if life were easy, we wouldn't need a drink.



ANOTHER EXPERT WHO KNOWS

ABOUT THE CRAZY DEMAND FOR PAPPY IS TJ DOUGLAS.

“THE FASCINATION COMES FROM THE FACT THAT PEOPLE want something they can’t get,” he says. As the GM and co-owner of the Urban Grape, Douglas receives about five calls a day requesting American whiskey’s most desirable brand. He keeps a waiting list with dozens of names, but like every seller, his annual allocation has dropped—from a dozen bottles in 2012 to just five last year for both Urban Grape locations. Which means you may be more likely to get that ring about your Patriots season tickets than your bottle of Pappy.

With whiskey, there’s only so much made and so much to go around. “You can make vodka in a day,” says Douglas. “Distill grain, boom, you have vodka.

This?” he says pointing to a bottle of James E. Pepper bourbon, “takes 15 years.”

That’s why distilling giant Jim Beam ran out of Knob Creek in 2009, but you’ll never hear of a Great Smirnoff Drought. So while your odds of finding Pappy are slim, there’re a lot of great whiskeys out there. It’s a complicated realm of grains and woods and proofs and bizarre folklores and bylaws.

FOR DOUGLAS, FINDING THE RIGHT WHISKEY COMES DOWN TO A SIMPLE QUESTION: **HOW DO YOU WANT TO DRINK IT?**

NEAT

ROCKS

In a
COCKTAIL

or

or

or

SWEET

DRY

SMOOTH

KICK

BUBBLES

FLAT



JAMES E. PEPPER 1776 BOURBON

MICHTER'S US1 SINGLE BARREL STRAIGHT RYE

ROWAN'S CREEK KENTUCKY BOURBON WHISKEY

PARKER'S HERITAGE COLLECTION KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY

ELMER T. LEE SINGLE BARREL BOURBON

FOUR ROSES SINGLE BARREL KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY

A distiller with a sweet tooth, Colonel Pepper is credited with inventing the Old Fashioned.

This young rye is aged in heavily charred barrels for earthy, peppery notes.

It's 100 proof but cooled by honey, caramel and vanilla flavors.

At 137.9 proof, each sip ignites a bonfire on your tongue.

“You never want to mess up a drink by adding soda, so I'd go cheap,” says Douglas. If you crack a Coke, the hints of cherry and apple in this whiskey will pair nicely.

“Super well-balanced, this is a great entry-level bourbon,” says Douglas. “But every whiskey connoisseur appreciates it.”

TOP SHELF

High West Rendezvous Rye Whiskey

Here's high-class booze out of Park City, Utah, of all places. In 2007 High West became the state's first legal distillery in 137 years. A blend of six-year and 16-year ryes, Rendezvous "starts sweet, but you get some vegetal notes, brininess and tobacco," says Richard. At Citizen, ask for the limited edition, aged 29 months in rye barrels.

\$61 at Boston Wine Exchange,
181 Devonshire St., Boston (617-422-0100) bostonwineexchange.com

Jefferson Presidential Select 18 Year

"If you're looking for the excellent whiskeys from the sea that's out there, look for someone to pluck out exceptional examples," advises Cannon. He recommends visiting Ryan Maloney, owner of Julio's Liquors. To find this woody, slightly sweet bourbon, Maloney flew to Kentucky on a Super Bowl Sunday to explore the abandoned Stitzel-Weller Distillery, founded by the original "Pappy" Julian Van Winkle Sr. in 1935.

\$95 at Julio's Liquors,
140 Turnpike Road,
Westborough (508-366-1942) juliosliquors.com

Elijah Craig 18 Year Old Single Barrel

Whiskey is a numbers game. Too much aging can mean too much evaporation, and the ideal levels of tannin and char can fade. At 18 years, this option "is getting into what I consider slightly over-aged," says Cannon. "Twelve is the peak, but this belongs in the conversation with Pappy 15."

Last seen for \$90 at Julio's Liquors,
140 Turnpike Road, Westborough (508-366-1942) juliosliquors.com

GENIES OF THE BOTTLE

For your home bar, you're going to need some standbys. Solid, reliable (OK, cheaper) drams for your nightcaps and parties. Then there are your investment pieces—the whiskeys taken out for special occasions and for true friends, or when it's Wednesday and you're thirsty. It's just whiskey, you're an adult, so pop the top, already. Richard and Jackson Cannon, bar director at Eastern Standard, Island Creek Oyster Bar and bar director/owner at the Hawthorne, offer some handpicked options.



ON THE RAIL

Old Overholt Straight Rye Whiskey

Priced less than some cocktails around town, this bottle is the "granddaddy of value," says Cannon. "It's lean, light and proofed down for mixing," he adds. "It makes a fine Sazerac and mixes well in sours."

\$15 at Downtown Wine & Spirits,
225 Elm St., Somerville (617-625-7777) downtownwineandspirits.com

Johnny Drum Private Stock 101

Whether there's truth in advertising is debatable, but there's always a markup. "I try and stay away from the mass marketing because you can get much better whiskeys at better prices," says Richard. Toasty with notes of maple, one of her favorites packs serious punch with a low price tag.

\$30 at Marty's Fine Wines,
675 Washington St., Newton
(617-332-1230) marty'sfinewine.com

Bernheim Original Kentucky Straight Wheat Whiskey

Made with 51 percent soft winter wheat, Bernheim is America's only designated wheat whiskey. "When you take the rye out, the wheat gives it a softer, easy-drinking profile," explains Richard.

\$30 at Martignetti Liquors,
1650 Soldiers Field Road, Brighton
(617-782-3700) martignettiliquors.com

LOCAL LURES

THERE ARE SOME TASTY NEW ENGLAND BRANDS IF YOU'RE LOOKING TO SHOP LOCAL. BUT CONSIDER, WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW A ROLLING FIELD OF WHEAT IN RHODE ISLAND? WE CAN DRINK IT WITH AS MUCH GUSTO AS ANYONE, BUT WE NORTHERNERS ARE NOT A WHISKEY PEOPLE.



The business is notoriously hush-hush about where they source and distill their product. They'll thank you to simply be impressed by the wizened, bearded coot on the label and move along, please. That said, there are some nearby companies creating some worthwhile booze.

Distilled in Canada with 100-percent Canadian grain, the Vermont-based WhistlePig produces a butter-smooth 10-year rye (\$70, the Urban Grape) with the help of Dave Pickerell, who previously spent 14 years as the master distiller for Maker's Mark. Funny name; serious hooch.

While better known for their gins, Berkshire Mountain Distillers uses Massachusetts corn for their Berkshire Bourbon (\$40, Kappy's Fine Wine & Spirits). They even cut, mill and char local oak and cherry for aging their New England Corn Whiskey.

Will and Davis Willis, the brothers behind Boston's Bully Boy Distillers, harvest wheat from Maine for their vodka. For their new American Straight Whiskey (\$35, Julio's Liquors), they source barley, corn and rye from Kansas for a spirit that's almost dangerously easy drinking.

To add some local nuance to any whiskey, try Hammerstone's Whiskey Disks (\$30, the Urban Grape), handcrafted in New Hampshire (from Canadian soapstone). "It makes the heat go away, so you can focus on the flavors," explains Douglas. "Drop one in, but gently—because it's a rock."

INSTANCE GRATIFICATION

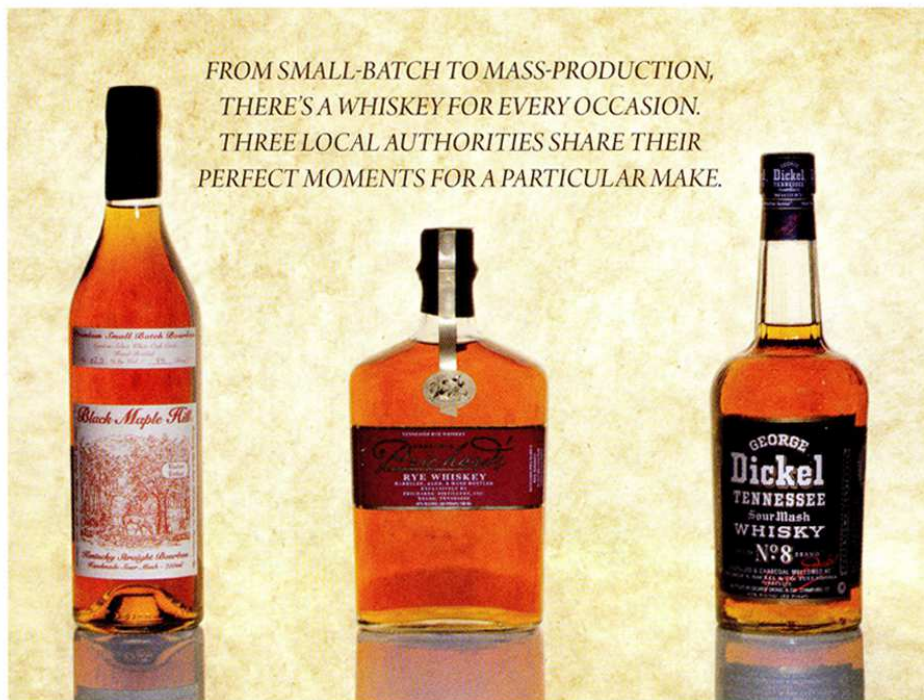
A WINTER TAILGATE

"Rye fills the bill, and my pick is Prichard's Rye (\$50, Martignetti Liquors), hailing from Keiso, Tenn. Spicy and drier than bourbon, it's a perfect warmer straight from a flask on a cold day. At 95 percent rye in the mashbill, one might not expect such balance and smooth finish, but it's aged in small oak barrels, which integrates and rounds out the whiskey's flavors—showing apple, cinnamon and toasted vanilla. A sip should melt my frozen toes, otherwise I might start singing a line from an old Tex Ritter song from 1948: 'It's a whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey I cry. If I don't get rye whiskey, well, I think I will die.'" **Josh Childs, bartender and co-owner of Silvertone Bar & Grill, Trina's Starlite Lounge and Parlor Sports**

A BONFIRE ON THE BEACH

"I don't know what's in the mash. I don't know how many years it's been aged. All I know is that it's spelled 'whisky' like its Scottish cousins, and it tastes really good sitting by a bonfire with your boys. George Dickel No. 8 (\$27, Marty's Fine Wine) was the whiskey of choice for me and my friends during college. It was cheap and smooth. I hadn't had it since my tailgating days until this fall. My wife and I just bought a house close to the beach around Labor Day. I had some friends come down to see the place but hadn't unpacked the bar yet. On a last-second run to the liquor store, I grabbed ol' Mr. Dickel for no other reason than fond nostalgia. But I tell you what: A bonfire on a cool New England night, a cigar, some friends and George Dickel No. 8 works just fine." **Beau Sturm, bartender and co-owner of Trina's Starlite Lounge and Parlor Sports**

FROM SMALL-BATCH TO MASS-PRODUCTION, THERE'S A WHISKEY FOR EVERY OCCASION. THREE LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHARE THEIR PERFECT MOMENTS FOR A PARTICULAR MAKE.



LAZY SUNDAY

"My favorite thing to do on Sunday is cook a dinner at home. Especially in the winter months, when I can do a long slow braise and just lounge with my family. I like Black Maple Hill (\$47, Boston Wine Exchange) for my everyday bourbon. It has Kentucky roots, small-batch size, and it's well rounded enough to match any moment. I just drop a couple of ice cubes in and let them swirl into the bourbon. The character changes dramatically over the day, and it never gets too heavy—perfect for chasing three kids and a dog." **Michael Scelfo, executive chef at Russell House Tavern**

SPIRIT GUIDE

A GREAT RECIPE MEANS NOTHING WITHOUT THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS. From his time behind the bar at the beloved B-Side Lounge and now at Harvard Square's First Printer, Cocktail Consultant Brother Cleve has discovered and designed a lifetime's worth of cocktails. And for every whiskey preparation, he's got the right distillation for the job.

MANHATTAN



2½ oz. Rittenhouse
1 oz. Cinzano Rosso
(sweet vermouth)
2 dashes Angostura
bitters
1 Luxardo
Maraschino cherry

RITTENHOUSE RYE 100 PROOF

WHISKEY SOUR



2 oz. Old Fitzgerald
1 oz. lemon juice
½ oz. simple syrup
¼ oz. orange juice
shake with one egg white
1 dash of Angostura
bitters on top

OLD FITZGERALD BOURBON

MINT JULEP



Dissolve 1 sugar cube with 2 dashes
Angostura bitters
Add water
Add and gently bruise mint leaves

Fill with crushed ice
Add 3 oz. Evan
Williams Single
Barrel Vintage
Stir and garnish
with mint and a
metal straw

EVAN WILLIAMS SINGLE BARREL VINTAGE

Always stirred, never shaken, for his Manhattans, Cleve uses the heat of this straight rye to balance the sweetness of the vermouth. A name with some legacy, Rittenhouse disappeared decades ago but was reintroduced in 2005, helping to create what Cleve deems "the rise of the ryes," as the grain continues to increase in popularity.

For this classic, Cleve goes old-school with an egg white and grabs a whiskey with some vigor at 100 proof. "Because of the higher proof and the pepperiness to it, it helps tame the citrus, which can overwhelm a spirit."

For this frigid and sugary refreshment, Cleve uses a bourbon that's a little rough around the edges. "Derby Day has become a big holiday in the bartending world," says Cleve. "Bars have started having derby parties, and if they have the wherewithal, they'll show the race."

\$24 at The Urban Grape,
303 Columbus Ave., Boston (857-250-2509)
theurbangrape.com

\$16.50 at Martignetti Liquors,
1650 Soldiers Field Road, Brighton
(617-782-3700) martignettiliquors.net

\$34 at Kappy's Fine Wine & Spirits,
10 Revere Beach Parkway, Medford
(781-395-8888) kappys.com