

Bourbon: A taste of America

Trailing just behind the United States, New Zealanders are among the highest consumers of Bourbon in the world. Bourbon is now the top selling spirit in the country, surpassing Gin and Scotch, the previous leaders in the New Zealand spirit market.

Bourbon's popularity has been helped by its immense versatility and mixability. Lending itself to being combined with mixers like cola or dry gingerale, Bourbon is also widely used as a base for a variety of cocktails. For those with more traditional taste, Bourbon can also be savoured neat, on the rocks or with a little water.

A uniquely American spirit, more than 90% of all Bourbon hails from the State of Kentucky, which is officially recognised as the Bourbon Capital of the World. Inherently proud of their Bourbon distilling origins, Kentucky holds an annual Bourbon Festival each September to celebrate the spirit. Indiana is also an important State for Bourbon production.

Bourbon contributes to a rich cultural heritage and has become synonymous with modern, fashionable American imagery. It is this association that has assisted Bourbon's proliferation and popularity around the world.

First made by settlers in the late 1700s, Bourbon is made from rye, wheat, barley and corn, distilled in water that has flowed over limestone. The distinctive amber glow and rich flavour of Kentucky Bourbon was discovered and popularised when a batch of corn whiskey was shipped to market in barrels whose insides had been charred by fire.

Laws of Bourbon

Bourbon, like most other distinctive national spirits, has laws regulating for quality control and to define what can legally be deemed a Bourbon whiskey. To be officially labelled as Bourbon, the spirit must be distilled in the USA and not exceed 160 proof (80% abv). All Bourbon must also contain at least 51% corn and no more than 80% (product's that exceed this limit are known as corn whiskey). In the USA Bourbon must be at least 40%abv, however 37%abv is permitted in export markets, including New Zealand.

The Aging Process

After distillation, Bourbon is actually a clear spirit. It is then matured in new, charred, white oak barrels, which allow the spirit to be permeated by the wood's colours, flavours and aromas. The Bourbon rests in the barrels for a minimum of two years, although maturation usually lasts for between 3 to 15 years, although occasionally Bourbon is aged for as many as 20 years.

Bourbon barrels can only be used once, so many are transported to Scotland where they are re-used, this time to mature Scotch whisky.

Bourbon's Close Cousins

Although it can't technically be called Bourbon because it undergoes an additional "charcoal mellowing" process after distillation, Tennessee whiskey is considered a close cousin of Bourbon.

Charcoal mellowing is the process of refining whiskey by slowly mellowing it drop by drop through large vats packed with sugar maple charcoal before barreling. And of course, it has to be produced entirely in the state of Tennessee.

Another closely related spirit is Canadian Rye whiskey from the north. Described as lighter than Scotch and smoother than Bourbon, due to being produced from rye not corn.

Not All Whiskey is Created Equal

There are dozens of brands of American whiskey available in our market, so it is wise to stock only the quality brands that your consumers know and trust. Well-known international brands marketed in New Zealand have been distilled by Master Distillers who take an enormous amount of care and pride in the resulting product. Their techniques are a combination of tradition, beliefs and immense skill in addition to a careful selection process before bottling.

Of course the best way to judge one Bourbon from another is by taste and personal preference. You can rely on reputable brands to not only provide your customers with superior quality and taste, but you'll also profit from repeat purchase.