

Make mine a double

Whether it's neat, on the rocks or the star ingredient in a cocktail, there is something wonderfully approachable about American whiskey, as **Jonathan Ray** explains

I'M JUST back from Virginia, USA, and went straight from airport to doctor for an immediate liver-function test. Just a precaution, you understand. I'd hate you to think I was a complete old soak. The trouble is I have this terrible weakness for American whiskey. I simply can't resist the stuff, and drank little else for an entire week. Hang on, I did also have a decaf coffee one day. Oh, and a glass of water as I left the hotel on Friday afternoon. Or maybe it was Saturday morning. I forget which.

Anyway, I just can't help wandering into whatever bar it is that I find myself on the verge of passing and I just can't help exploring its whiskey selection. I sit at the polished copper counter, ignore the baseball on the vast television, ponder the immaculately stocked, beautifully lit range of bottles and before the barkeep has even started with "Hi there, where y'all from?" I've made my choice: an Old-Fashioned, please, just to get my eye in. Then maybe a Four Roses or Maker's Mark or Buffalo Trace or Old Rip Van Winkle on the rocks as a chaser and, well, just keep them coming until I fall off my stool or say stop.

There's just something so wonderfully approachable about American whiskey (just like Americans themselves, in fact) be it neat, over ice or in such cocktails as a Boulevardier (like a Negroni but with bourbon instead of gin), Bourbon Sidecar (bourbon instead of cognac), John Collins, Kentucky Kiss (with strawberries, lemon juice and maple syrup), Manhattan, Mint Julep and so on.

Of course, most of the whiskey one sees in such establishments is bourbon, and most bourbon comes from Kentucky. But it doesn't have to. What constitutes bourbon is strictly controlled: whiskey can only claim that precious name if it's distilled in the USA, is made from a minimum 51% corn spirit, is distilled to no more than 160 proof (that's 80% vol), contains no additional colour or flavour



Six of the Best bourbons and ryes

Catocin Creek Roundstone Rye Whiskey (£39, Amathus)

Made in a former Buick car showroom in Purcellville, Virginia by Becky Harris.

Elijah Craig Small Batch Straight Bourbon Whiskey (£43, Waitrose)

An award-winning beauty from Kentucky, named after the 'Father of Bourbon'.

Westward American Single Malt Whiskey (£61.99, Master of Malt)

From Portland, Oregon: a glorious single malt, double-pot distilled from fine American pale ale.

Never Say Die Rye Whiskey (£64.90, The Whisky World)

Named after an Epsom Derby winner, made in Kentucky and aged further in... Derbyshire, UK.

Balcones Texas Single Malt Classic Edition (£72.75, Master of Malt)

From Waco, Texas, a beast of a whiskey beloved by its many fans.

Reservoir Virginia Rye Whiskey (£90.75, The Whisky Exchange)

A remarkable spicy, concentrated citrusy/chocolaty whiskey from Richmond, Virginia.

and spends at least two years maturing in charred, new oak barrels.

As home to the 'Three Great Sins' of racing, tobacco and bourbon, Kentucky is deeply proud and regards said whiskey as its own. Locals particularly hate it if you point out that bourbon was first distilled in Virginia. By an Englishman, George Thorpe from Gloucestershire was one of the early settlers and is credited with producing the first bourbon in Virginia in 1620 by distilling a batch of corn beer. This really sticks in a Kentuckian's craw, and I strongly suggest you identify a quick and easy exit, and aren't too heavily outnumbered before you decide to drop this tasty little morsel into the conversation. Where Thorpe led, others followed. By 1799 the distillery at George Washington's Mount Vernon estate was producing 11,000 gallons of whiskey per year, making it one of the largest in the country. Now beautifully restored, it's making whiskey once again, using 18th-century methods and authentic replica stills.

Elsewhere in Virginia, the Open Road Distilling Co in Reston blends bought-in whiskey from Indiana and Texas, and makes and bottles its own sublime Maple Old-

Fashioned. In Williamsburg, the bonkers genius that is Rick Wasmund has converted the bedrooms and basement of a crappy old motel into the Professor Branestawm-like Copper Fox Distillery, producing immaculate rye whiskey, bourbon and much more, using fruit woods such as cherry, apple and peach as well as oak. Meanwhile, up the road in Richmond, Dave Cuttino at Reservoir Distillery is pushing the boundaries with his wheat, bourbon and rye whiskeys, following closely the scrupulous research of Shelley Sackler at the Virginia Heritage Grain Project. And in Purcellville, Becky and Scott Harris's Catocin Creek Distillery – housed in an old Buick car showroom – is producing astoundingly fine ryes and bourbons that draw folk from miles around.

Many of these gorgeous whiskeys are now finding their way across the pond and, although nobody loves Kentucky bourbon more than I do, I urge you to look towards the bourbons, ryes and single malts of, say, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and, of course, Virginia. Since my liver-function test result has just this minute come back normal (thank you, I knew you'd be pleased) I'm celebrating with a large Virginia Distillery Co Courage & Conviction Single Malt. As Dave Cuttino at Reservoir says: "What does Virginia taste like? Pretty darn good." It sure does, yes sirree, Bob. ■

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