Longshots

By Michelle Eigenheer / Photo by Mickie Winters

Can out-of-state distilleries give Kentucky bourbons a run for their money?

Here in Kentucky, much of the rhetoric surrounding bourbon is that if it’s not made here, it’s not the real deal.

“When you go overseas and ask for bourbon, nine times out of 10 they’re going to try to sell you Jack Daniel’s,” says Chris Renninger, manager of bottling operations at beverage-development company Flavorman/the Distilled Spirits Epicenter, on Eighth Street just south of Broadway. “They don’t know. We don’t realize the word is not held in as high regard as it is here.”

A 1964 U.S. Congress resolution established the guidelines once and for all: A legitimate bourbon must be made in the United States — not necessarily in Kentucky, though our state’s Distillers’ Association estimates that 95 percent of bourbon is produced here. Its mashbill must contain at least 51 percent corn. It must be aged in a new, charred oak barrel, distilled at no more than 160 proof, put into the barrel at no more than 125 proof and bottled at no more than 80 proof.

To be a “straight” bourbon, it must age for at least two years. Straight bourbons aged fewer than four years must disclose that on the label. A bourbon cannot include any added coloring or flavoring. (Jack Daniel’s, a “Tennessee whiskey,” goes through an added charcoal-filtering process that gives it its own distinctive taste profile.)

The so-called “bourbon boom,” which began about five years ago when consumption started increasing all over the world, has motivated non-Kentucky companies to get into the bourbon game. But, of course, aging bourbon takes time.

“Some of these are playing fast and loose with the definition of bourbon,” Stevens says, noting the low aging period — as little as a few months — on several of the samples. Younger whiskies may lack bourbon’s depth of flavor. “Kentucky’s been in the business 200-plus years. If anything, I’d like to see more respect around the definition and not semantics.”

In a bourbon market struggling to meet demand (remember the long aging process?), quick releases are an opportunity for a small distillery to increase its reach with a product that’s likely to sell. It’s worth noting that many of the new labels popping up over the last five years are from distilleries whose flagship spirits are whiskies, vodkas, tequilas or gins, which are often quicker to produce. “You can’t just come out of the gate with a fine 12-year-old bourbon that is a perfect product,” Renninger says. “You can’t do that and expect to be able to keep your lights on with nothing else to sell.”

The label that perhaps stood out the most was Sonoma County Distilling’s West of Kentucky Bourbon No. 1. Over the phone, Sonoma County owner and distiller Adam Spiegel stresses that Sonoma’s West of Kentucky series aims to honor the history of bourbon while also embracing it as a California spirit. No. 1 incorporates cherry-wood-smoked barley, giving the whiskey a pleasant floral note and a sweetness, something that, according to Spiegel, provides a distinctive California taste. As far as whiskies go, our taste-testers agreed that it’s a good one. As far as bourbons go, though, it fell out of bounds of some of the typical characteristics. It’s a phenomenon that’s difficult to reconcile: innovation or experimentation.

“I don’t think we should get caught up in the word bourbon as much. We should champion that these are whiskies,” Renninger says. “It’s a pretty young industry, craft spirits. Can you really compare a project that is five years old to a distillery that’s been established for 100 years?”