



Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey

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How bourbon came to be, and why it's experiencing such a revival today

Unraveling the many myths and misconceptions surrounding America's most iconic spirit, *Bourbon Empire* traces a history that spans frontier rebellion, Gilded Age corruption, and the magic of Madison Avenue.

Whiskey has profoundly influenced America's political, economic, and cultural destiny, just as those same factors have inspired the evolution and unique flavor of the whiskey itself.

Taking readers behind the curtain of an enchanting—and sometimes exasperating—industry, the work of writer Reid Mitenbuler crackles with attitude and commentary about taste, choice, and history. Few products better embody the United States, or American business, than bourbon.

A tale of innovation, success, downfall, and resurrection, *Bourbon Empire* is an exploration of the spirit in all its unique forms, creating an indelible portrait of both bourbon and the people who make it.

Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey Details

Date : Published May 12th 2015 by Viking

ISBN : 9780670016839

Author : Reid Mitenbuler

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Food and Drink, Food, Business, Historical, Alcohol, Booze, North American Hi..., American History, Cooking, Microhistory

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From Reader Review *Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey* for online ebook

Jesse Lansner says

If I think a book is worth lower than three stars I won't finish it. This gets three stars because I did finish it -- something I'm not sure the editor can say, as the last third of the book is repetitive, unfocused and riddled with cliches. (Can you compare the history of the bourbon industry to a battle between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian ideals? Sure, but you don't need to do it over a dozen times.) The last chapters seem to exist just so Mitenbuler can bash new distillers (and new bourbon drinkers) for basically the same behavior that distillers and drinkers have engaged in for the last 200 years. (It's hard not to suspect that the distinction between innovative new techniques and gimmicks is whether the author personally likes the results or not.)

The first two-thirds of the book couldn't also have used some trimming, but at least the story there is told in a more straightforward manner. That is, if you don't get lost in the endless names of distillers, brands and holding companies, and the ever-changing relationships among the three. Mitenbuler has clearly done a ton of research for this book, but not all of that research needs to make it on the page. At about half it's actual length, I'd recommend this to anyone interested in bourbon. At it's current length, it's only for obsessives.

Tomasz Stachewicz says

Loads of good, thorough research (the bibliography section is as big as I'd expect from such a book) combined with good writing, making the book a smooth read. I loved it!

Mark says

Great narrative of how the evolution of whiskey spirits parallels our own national history. And, I particularly enjoyed learning about the economics of the distilling business.

P.e. lolo says

The author takes you on a journey just like our country has been forged through the history of immigrants and does the same with bourbon, whiskey, rye, and the differences. How they are produced still in certain regions because that is where their ancestors emigrated to from Scotland, Germany, Ireland. How that before that revolution most people were drinking rum, and then like most things the British started taxing the rum at a higher rate so the whiskey or bourdon being produced in Tennessee, and Kentucky, started making it to the bigger cities. Now after the war and formation of our country we did the same thing. That is tax the whiskey, called simply the whiskey tax, and this was just one of the many things that Jefferson, and Hamilton argued over. An agreement was brokered and for the most part that stayed in place until the early 1900's, when the food act came into existence and whiskey, rye, bourbon came under there guide lines. The tax for whiskey has change over the years but has always been there. The author takes you through every period of our history as a Nation, wars from the Revolution, Civil, to the World wars. Then through probation where it was

not as dry as they made it sound. If you had a medical condition and needed bourbon for that condition with a doctor's recommendation (note), you could have it. Of course the only people who could afford it were the rich or politicians, but I found this to be very interesting. Of course during this time only a few of the big makers were able to survive and the author takes you through the owners of the companies and how really only 4 or 5 actually own all of the names. Old Grand Dad, Wild Turkey, Jim Beam, but now there are new people coming into the game kind of like with beer the independents, specialty brands, or makers. This was a good book with a lot of information he even goes into the formation of NASCAR, so overall a very good read. I got this book from Netgalley.com I gave it 4 stars. Follow us at www.1rad-readerreviews.com

Stayton says

Mittenbuler's written a hell of a fun biography of that brown stuff your grandpa and no one else drank when you were little. He pulls off the tall task of being comprehensive covering bourbon's long, rich history while keeping things interesting and engaging. The writing's not dry (whiskey pun!) and is filled with Gladwellian nuggets ready to wow dinner parties (e.g. a "shot" is thought to be the amount of booze an old timey soldier could get in exchange for one bullet). There's plenty here to entertain drinkers and teetotalers alike as bourbon's path speaks volumes to the history of our fair US of A and how our relationships with liquors have evolved to reflect the times. Filled with colorful characters, it's easy to understand why it's not just your gramps drinking bourbon in today's day and age.

Phil says

I had a hard time choosing between 3 and 4 stars for this book. The author has a wealth of interesting information to share, but most importantly he is a good storyteller and his love of the topic is infectious. Parts of the book are fascinating. I especially liked seeing how the opinions on bourbon changed throughout American history spanning the civil war, the western frontier, prohibition (of course), the industrial "captains of industry" age, and the modern craft food/drink movement. The bourbon industry seems to have more than its fair share of colorful characters. Also interesting to get a view behind the curtain at how major distilleries construct a story/history/image to fit the notions that consumers expect out of a bourbon.

The reason I struggled to give it that 4th star is largely a matter of editing. The book jumped about quite a bit (sometimes dry history, sometimes fascinating storytelling, sometimes mini-biographies, sometimes speculation on eras when historical records are scarce, sometimes near-tirades against particular distilleries). It also repeated itself from time to time (I was already rolling my eyes the 3rd of 4th time I was reminded of the Hamilton/Jefferson views of industry), included short bursts of hyperbole and opinion, and even had the odd misspelling or two. A firm hand at editing would have made this book really crackle, but I'm trying not to hold that against it. You can even sense the author trying to reign himself in at times (noting that taste is subjective etc.) with mixed results.

In the end it is kind of like sitting down (over a bourbon?) to have a chat with someone who really loves and is knowledgeable about a subject. Even if the conversation goes off the rails on occasion it is bound to be interesting. Ultimately I enjoyed reading it and felt like I came away learning new things, so 4 stars it is.

Cathie says

All bourbon is whiskey, but not all whiskey is bourbon.

Entertaining historical account on the spirit of bourbon that spans from Washington & the Revolutionary War, to Repeal of Prohibition & the Twenty-First Amendment, to Bourbon branding and resurgence today.

Each chapter has an interesting historical trait of the bourbon industry. The author discusses key family-owned and operated distilleries across the U.S., and those who supported and promoted the bourbon brand. He also shares such great pivotal moments - **Old Bourbon** being served at the first Kentucky Derby; its contribution to the creation of NASCAR; its influence on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to name a few.

I was especially surprised by Chicago's connection and influence towards the spirit of bourbon – not to mention lead to the birth of the nation's largest drugstore chain, Walgreens.

I recently attended a Producer's fair and visited KOVAL distillery. Established in 2008, it is Chicago's First Distillery since the Mid-1800s. [KOVAL's Single Barrel Bourbon whiskey was awesome, btw]

A great micro-history of the birth of bourbon, its evolution, and revival.

Bourbon - America's whiskey!

Disclaimer: I received this book in exchange for a fair review. All opinions are my own and I was not compensated for this review.

Patrick says

The history of bourbon as told through the lens of U.S history. That's about the first 2/3 of the book. The last 1/3 covers contemporary whiskey and bourbon industry.

There are good stories and plenty of trivia. All the company name changes can get confusing.

Erik says

Fascinating. I am a bourbon fan, and really liked the portion of this book that dealt with the historical origins of the liquor and it's original distilleries. Unfortunately, I found myself less and less interested in the telling as the story line progressed toward the present day.

Amory Ross says

I was excited to have finally gotten around to read *Bourbon Empire*. Though I tend to lean toward craft

brews, I will stray specifically into bourbon territory to change things up. I knew enough that my sliver of Pennsylvania was a rye powerhouse prior to Prohibition. I knew enough that Pappy Van Winkle was a bottle to grab at any price. I knew this was the liquid of a country. Or did I?

Never has an author so convincingly put forth a thesis that whiskey was at the root of all things America. It was there at the beginning of Colonialism prior to the United States. George Washington was the nation's largest producer of whiskey for a time. Whiskey could be used as collateral on the frontier if need-be. It was the focus of many Appalachian frontiersmen who had gone into the woods to be left alone. These were the men who inspired James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving. These were also the men who rose up to rebel against the whiskey tax with George Washington at the center of it all. Reid Mittenbuler lays a strong foundation for the rest of the book.

Moving to the near past and Mittenbuler continues his argument. He presents a census of the distillers in pre-Prohibition America. It is staggeringly high. With the introduction of Prohibition, nearly all of the distilleries would shut down. Those that did turned to medicinal whiskey, considered a stimulant at the start of the last century. Doctors could write prescriptions for whiskey, spawning other empires such as Walgreen's. Whiskey was nearly the country's gold standard. Mittenbuler includes probably the most in-depth chapter about the dawn of NASCAR because of the Prohibition demand. Just that chapter is worth the book.

The story continues to present-day whiskey production where there are around four main whiskey producers in the US. This exploration in marketing is fascinating. So too are the dispelling of producers targeting the recent spike in rare whiskey demand. The book also suggests the future of whiskey making in a market that seems to push the past instead of thinking of the future. There's nothing wrong with that when the product is so heavily rooted in American culture.

This is a great gift for any whiskey fan. I tore through this book in no time at all. I was worried about the built-up hype but Mitenbuler delivered a solid study in Bourbon Empire. The one spot I was not a fan of was the repetition that took hold in the middle third of the book. He did tidy up the remainder of the book and I wondered if he emulated the distilling process in his writing, but I was concerned the remainder of the book would be of the same style. What I was absolutely convinced of is that Reid Mitenbuler was not sponsoring one whiskey in particular. He came off as unbiased throughout the whole study. Either he was unbiased or he really fooled me for 200-plus pages.

This is a great book. Spend some time with it to learn about the nation, it's bourbon, and how it shaped America to the country it is today. Oh. And be prepared to be surprised about certain offerings on the shelves of your liquor store.

Grampus says

I don't know why I am fascinated with these biography-of-things books. I suppose if you are a history lover such as me, a biography is a biography no matter the topic. Still, who would have thought to write a history of bourbon? Who knew there would be enough compelling information to hold a reader's interest for 320 pages? I don't drink the stuff nor know anybody who does. Yet, this was compelling because ALL of the information was new.

Even though the content was previously unknown to me, it was not the most exciting topic, that's why I gave it 3 stars (meaning I liked it). It was however, a very interesting read and if you like learning about things

that you typically do not give much thought to, you may find this biography of interest.

Gail Strickland says

I'm not a fan of bourbon, but my last husband surely enjoyed Evan Williams and I wish he were still here so he could read this informative, entertaining book on the history of his favorite drink. You may think you know this history of that bourbon in your hand, but you'll be surprised how many backstories are a product of pure marketing. Whatever the story is/was/or will be, I still think your taste buds will lead you to the perfect brand for you.

Steve says

I'll be honest, I only read a third of it. I enjoyed the history in the beginning but then it got kind of repetitive and dry. I love bourbon but, unlike a glass of bourbon, I could not finish this.

David Yoon says

It's America's whisky and Reid Mitenbuler traces the history of bourbon back to the first president. Turns out the spirit is closely tied to the country that gave birth to it. Backwoods individualism to corporate shenanigans, outright criminal activities to being an essential staple of war. For a spirit that cultivates it's craft heritage it's become a mass produced product created by only a handful of distillers. It enjoys a rip-roaring, mythic history that makes for an entertaining read.

Amir says

For an author with a passion for a topic to write a book on that topic addressed to a general audience is no small undertaking. The audience may share the author's interest in the topic, but that interest won't necessarily rise to the level of a passion. Consequently, the author needs to take a step back from the topic rather than dive into it, to keep his enthusiasm in balance with his other goals as a writer rather than allow his writing to be consumed by his enthusiasm.

All these things Reid Mitenbuler does remarkably well. His passion and enthusiasm for bourbon and its history are felt, but they reach the reader in between the lines rather than on an overt level of the prose -- they emerge like vapors subtly rising from a freshly poured glass of aged bourbon, not like downing a shot of cheap vodka. It's the difference between mature, dispassionate writing and amateurish exclamation-mark prose.

It's a formula that manages to convey bourbon's thrilling history without climaxes and slumps in the narrative, a trap that a less refined writer would easily fall into. Indeed, there is never a dull moment in Bourbon Empire. The narrative is a steady stream of information that's as interesting as it is easy to follow and to process.

Bourbon Empire opens with a profile of Lewis Rosenstiel -- not a name Bourbon Trail veterans will be familiar with but who it turns out was instrumental in elevating bourbon to the status it enjoys today. The narrative then shifts to early history, but in such a way that at each stage the reader is eager to know what will come next. From the adoption of corn as a fermenting grain in the Colonial era, to the Jefferson-led westward migration and increased production of corn, to the Whiskey Rebellion, to the Civil War, to the Whiskey Ring scandal, Prohibition, Repeal, and so on -- each period of whiskey and bourbon history leads naturally to the next.

The approach of Bourbon Empire is to establish two story arcs early on: the tension between Jefferson and Hamilton in their approach to business and the pervasiveness of mythology in the whiskey industry. It's an effective method of writing, mostly because Mitenbuler is consistent in relating his content to the arcs throughout the book.

The single shortcoming of Bourbon Empire is the sometimes flawed style of its writing. Mitenbuler's prose never rises to the profound heights that would make this a five-star classic. That's usually not necessarily a problem in a work of nonfiction, but towards the end of the book it feels like he got a little too lazy. Bits and pieces repeat themselves, even more than once, and there's a large chunk that's way too quote-heavy. Here and there better self-editing would have benefited passages like "But enough melodrama" or opening successive paragraphs with "Of course," "Even so," "Nevertheless," and "But regardless."
