

The Kentucky Bourbon Festival By Suzanne Wright

Cathy, my friend of 20 years, has deemed my footwear inappropriate. “Nice, but they’re not black tie,” she says. In less than four hours, we are going to The Great Kentucky Bourbon Tasting & Gala and we’ve been directed to a downtown store, Glorieta’s, to buy evening shoes. When we enter the store, we are greeted with hugs and happy shrieks by the owner and another employee, two gals we met at last night’s Bourbon, Cigars & Jazz event held at My Old Kentucky Home State Park, the inspiration for Stephen Foster’s ballad. After a day, we’ve been embraced by Bardstown. (And like Cinderella, they have footwear in my size).

The Kentucky Bourbon Festival is held annually in September. The festival, which draws attendees from 36 states and 15 countries, is in its 14th year. We’ve flown into Lexington a couple of days early to visit the distilleries before the festivities.

By law, bourbon, the nation’s only native spirit, must be made from 51% corn meal (which differentiates it from whiskey); Kentucky produces 4.2 million gallons of liquid gold a year, 95% of all the bourbon manufactured. Bardstown is known as the “Bourbon Capital of the World.” The Kentucky Bourbon Trail includes seven distilleries, but we’ve got time to visit just three tomorrow.

We overnight at the Campbell House Hotel in Lexington. Built in 1951, this whitewashed low-rise has hosted both the Queen of England and the King of Rock and Roll. Now a Crowne Plaza, it features comfortable rooms, Starbucks coffee and an art deco bar, Bogart’s. We enjoy a marvelous dinner at Jonathan at Gratz Park in historic downtown: sea scallop hot browns, a riff on the classic with country ham, tomato and bacon, ham and shrimp pot stickers with bourbon soy dipping sauce and fried oyster-stuffed filet.

The following morning, we drive through gently rolling, deeply peaceful horse country, the grayish fog just lifting on the bluegrass to begin our bourbon education at Woodford Reserve, the official bourbon of the Kentucky Derby. Located on Glenn’s Creek (all the distilleries are located near famous Kentucky limestone water), Woodford offers an intimate tour through the mechanical, chemical, technical and sensory aspects of producing bourbon on its 78-acre, National Landmark site. Most intriguing are the massive bubbling wooden vats of corn mash, with its distinctive aroma, and touring the stone aging warehouses filled floor-to-ceiling with barrels. We enjoy lunch on the patio: pimento cheese sandwiches, pulled pork sandwiches, lemon chess pie and chocolate cake with bourbon icing.

The gorgeous butter-colored 19th century Spanish mission-style building that houses Four Roses is on the National Register of Historic Places; the distillery is owned by the Kirin Brewery Company and is worth a stop (they have a particularly good video of the distilling process). Buffalo Trace, on the banks of the Kentucky River, is named for the ancient buffalo crossing that was pathway for westward moving explorers. During

Prohibition, Buffalo Trace, the oldest continually operating distillery in the country, was issued only one of four permits to distill bourbon for medicinal purposes. Ambling the campus-like setting, we meet the CEO—cat enforcement officer, Elijah, a ginger and feline named for Elijah Craig, the father of bourbon. Named “Distiller of the Year” by *Whisky Magazine*, Buffalo Trace gives a thoroughly fascinating tour, capped off by employees painstakingly hand numbering labels of Blanton’s. Our guide says busloads of children and Baptists tour the distilleries—it’s a proud part of the state’s heritage.

The Bourbon Festival is family-friendly; the barrel racing and dancing (more like aerobics with an unwieldy 500 pound weight, as Cathy points out), the breakfast with bourbon coffee and bourbon-spiked maple syrup, and the voluptuous antique car show are favorites. After touring the charming downtown—and running into some newfound friends—we head back to the hotel to change into our finery. The gala includes a bourbon tasting before dinner and Cathy, who isn’t a fan of brown liquor, finds one she likes—a liqueur kissed with honey. I’m moving as fast as prudent through the booths, trying (but failing) to sample all the pours. Sitting at a table with the folks from Four Roses, an international group that includes Czech and Japanese nationals, Cathy and I dance off the calories, toasting the spirit—and spirits—of Kentucky.

If You Go: The Kentucky Bourbon Festival is held in mid-September; the distilleries are open year-round.

More Information: Lexington area: www.visitlex.com or 800-845-3959; The Kentucky Bourbon Festival: 800-638-4877 or www.KyBourbonFestival.com; Campbell House: 800-354-9235 or www.thecampbellhouse.net; 859-231-1777; gratzparkinn.com; www.woodfordreserve.com; 859-879-1812; Four Roses: www.FourRoses.us or 502-839-3436; Buffalo Trace: www.buffalotrace.com or 800-654-8471.