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Stetson Puts a Tall Hat on Bourbon

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If you're having a hard time squaring yourself to the fact that John B. Stetson Bourbon is a whiskey from Kentucky, and not some rugged Wild West outpost as the name suggests, remember that the archetypal cowboy hats from the same company were originally made in Philadelphia.

Obviously a marketing conceit on the part of the hat maker that also hawks shirts, boots, cologne and sunglasses under its brand, Stetson Bourbon is nevertheless a legitimate entry in the category and not just a generic taste-alike with a fancy label.

Setting this whiskey apart is its unusual mashbill, which includes rye and wheat grain as well as barley. Legally, Bourbon must contain at least 51 percent corn, but no percentages are specified for lesser grains. Most examples in the category include rye as a secondary partner and a small amount of barley. A few replace spicy rye with mellow wheat (most popularly Maker's Mark). Representing all four grains is rather rare.

The Bourbon is also twice distilled in copper-pot stills, which again runs against the grain of industry standards, which normally involve continuously operated column stills. Woodford Reserve is a notable exception, with its triple-pot-still distillation.

Other than to note its grain components, the brand (which is distributed by Vision Wine & Spirits LLC of New Jersey, also the birth state of John B. Stetson) does not discuss specific percentages, nor disclose the distillery from which it is contracted.

The end result of its complex mashbill is an unsurprisingly complex whiskey with an elegance that belies the rustic implication of its name.

John B. Stetson (84 proof, or 42 percent alcohol by volume; four years old; \$29 a 750-milliliter bottle)

APPEARANCE: Light amber color, with medium-width, slow legs.

NOSE: Honey aromas greet the nose before becoming more complex, with peppermint, candy corn, toffee, rye bread and a slight oiliness.

PALATE: The whiskey strikes first with mellow notes of vanilla and caramel and then chimes in with spices. The counter punches of sugar and spice are what make this whiskey interesting, and they come in various forms, with honey, toffee, as well as a slight chocolate and cherry representing the former. Clove, cinnamon, orange peel and rye pipe up for the latter.

FINISH: While it doesn't hold on much longer than a medium-length finish, the ending presents a lot of character—mainly defined by the notes of the palate as well as a return of the olive oil from the nose.

CIGAR PAIRING: Brick House Short Torpedo (5 1/2 inches by 52 ring gauge; \$4.95; 89 points; *Cigar Aficionado June 2014*) A dark torpedo with a very oily wrapper. It starts out mildly woody before picking up some spice notes, woodiness and a bit of charcoal on the finish. The spice of the cigar rushes to underline the cinnamon notes on the whiskey. The Stetson's sweetness mellows out the charcoal notes of the Brick House, making it toasty and lending it some nuttiness. A good give and take.

Red Witch XO (6 inches by 60 ring gauge, \$6.00; 88 points, *February 2014 Cigar Aficionado*) Big and box-pressed with a Colorado wrapper. Earthy, leathery notes take on some sweet fruitiness, but the finish is woody and a bit flat. Any dullness of finish suffered when the cigar is smoked alone disappears in conjunction with the whiskey. The Witch's leathery character elongates and its fruit notes gather momentum. The Stetson takes on more hearty flavors and its spice becomes rounder. Another pairing with a sum that is greater than its parts.

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