

10 Great New Aged Bourbons and Ryes

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Now that bourbon and rye have firmly established themselves as the mighty pillars of the backbar, whiskey producers have begun looking for the next new thing, which just happens to be an old thing.

In recent years, an increasing number of brands have started pushing extra-aged whiskeys onto the market at a rapidly growing rate. The trend can be explained in part by the decade-long popularity of Pappy Van Winkle Family Reserve, a suite of bourbons aged 10 to 23 years that has attracted collectors and frenzied bourbon drinkers for the last decade.

Traditionally, American whiskey producers have generally steered clear of the extra old stuff, except to mix with younger whiskeys. There was a perception in the industry that no one really wanted it on its own.

“When I got into the business 20 years ago, I would go to Kentucky for holidays, and I knew there was all this old bourbon being blended into four-year-old whiskey or evaporating into nothing,” says Trey Zoeller, the head and founder of Jefferson’s Bourbon, which recently released its Presidential Select 16-year-old bourbon. “I remember talking with Julian Van Winkle at one of the first WhiskyFests, and we would joke about how we would both give away a case of the older stuff. Back then, there wasn’t much appetite at all.”

Times have certainly changed, and so have our options. Today, there are more labels selling more old whiskey than at any point in history. But since many of the brands in the game are sourcing inventory from established Kentucky, Indiana and Canadian distilleries, a ready supply is getting tougher to come by. “Demand has grown so dramatically you have to look hard and far to find it,” says Roy Danis, the CEO of Clyde May’s Whiskey. “But it’s out there.”

And with that bit of encouragement, we’ve searched high and low to come up with 10 of the best “new” old bourbon and ryes on the market.



1: Lock Stock & Barrel 18 Year Straight Rye (\$230)

When maverick distiller and blender Rob Cooper released his 13-year-old straight rye back in 2014, it was an instant hit. The rye, sourced from Canada's Alberta Distillers, is rich and elegant, with a complex mix of sweet and spice notes. He followed up in 2016 with a 16-year-old that was brasher and woodier, with slight vegetal and burnt toffee notes.

Cooper passed away unexpectedly that same year, but Cooper Spirits continues the journey with this new 18-year-old expression. Billed as one of the oldest rye whiskeys on the American market, it's the moody 16-year-old two years later, and it's matured beautifully. At 54.5 percent ABV, it's still a "hot," brash rye but with a beautiful balance between wood, rich toffee, cooked apple and peach, raw tobacco and a bright, spicy finish.



2: Virgil Kaine Electric Owl 9 Year Sour Mash Whiskey (\$75)

Virgil Kaine founder David Szlam comes from the culinary world of Charleston, S.C., and his whiskeys reflect that sense of balance and adventure. Blindly tasting Electric Owl, you would be fairly certain sherry barrels were involved, thanks to the notes of cooked fruits and soft baking spices. In fact, Szlam used ex-pinot-noir barrels from Oregon, which then cradle Oregon wild farmhouse ale before holding eight-year-old sourced bourbon for a couple of months. (The barrels then bounce to Charleston's Revelry Brewing to age a scotch ale.)

“We are flavor fanatics at heart,” says Szlam. “When we were able to find a funky eight-year-old sour mash bourbon that was super spicy and corn-forward, we were excited to do something with it.” The bourbon is mild and soft, with distinctive notes of cooked tart cherry, butter and caramel and a long toasty finish that reveals just a hint of spice.



3: Jefferson's Presidential Select 16 Year Twin Oak Bourbon (\$200)

This is the youngest expression in the Presidential Select series, which launched in 2012 and features other whiskeys aged between 17 and 30 years old. “Certainly, in the last seven years, there have been a number of older bourbons that have come out,” says Zoeller.

This limited edition (10,000 bottles) looks to be no different. In what Zoeller says is highly unusual, the barrel isn’t “finished” in an ex-sherry or other previously used casks. Instead, the Kentucky bourbon spent 10 years in a #3 char new American oak barrel, then an additional six years in another #3 char new American oak barrel. The results are pleasing: a bourbon with a bright, rich nose and clean fruit and caramel notes. On the palate, it’s round and smooth, with hints of chocolate, oak and fresh tobacco and a lingering sweet finish.



4: Clyde May's Cask Strength 9 Year Alabama Style Whiskey (\$100)

Clyde May's launched about five years ago with an intriguing "Alabama style" take on traditional bourbon, infused with essences of apple, cinnamon and vanilla, inspired by a technique used by 1940s moonshiner Clyde May. "Consumer palates have become more refined, and they're looking for special entries to sustain their desire," says Danis. "We're very happy to be able to do that with our cask-strength portfolio."

This same stock was released as an eight-year-old expression previously, and Danis says fans can expect a 10-year-old and hopefully an 11- and 12-year-old. "I want to have a whole vertical lineup for fans." Danis says the company also plans to release a 10-year-old, cask-strength expression of its straight bourbon soon.



5: Kentucky Owl 11 Year Straight Rye Batch #1 (\$130)

Founder Dixon Deadman's great-great-grandfather owned a still in the late-19th century and produced a bourbon called Kentucky Owl, which he made until Prohibition. Three years ago, Deadman decided to honor his family legacy with a new iteration of the brand, sourcing extremely high-quality and hard-to-find bourbons to blend into batches sold until last year exclusively in Kentucky, to the joy and frustration of serious collectors.

While the bourbon is on Batch #7, Deadman is just stepping into the rye pool with this very small release. He brought the cask strength down from 132.6 proof to a more manageable (but still exciting) 110.6 proof. The end result is a wonderfully sippable, rich rye with complexity that goes well beyond wood and spice. Deadman says he's not done with this batch yet. "I will probably hang on to some of the rye and let it age," he says. "I personally like that 8- to 12-year range. There's so much character in this rye at that age."



6: Redemption 18 Year Rye (\$400)

Redemption kicked off in 2010 with a focus on sourcing and bottling outstanding orphaned barrels of rye and bourbon from Indiana and Kentucky. The 18-year-old is part of Redemption's new Ancients Collection, extra-old whiskeys (there's also a \$1,200, 36-year-old bourbon!) in limited editions.

Laid down in 1998 at the old Seagram's distillery (now MGP), the nose on this rye is all oak, but on the palate, it avoids, almost magically, being overly tannic and woody. Instead, expect a rich canvas of cooked apple, dark chocolate, oak and baking spices that finishes long, with a lovely balance of rye spiciness and a mellow fruit sweetness that comes with age.



7: Blade and Bow 22 Year Kentucky Straight Bourbon (\$200)

Diageo launched Blade and Bow in 2015, inspired by the defunct Stitzel-Weller distillery in Kentucky and designed to appeal to younger aspirational bourbon fans. At the same time Blade and Bow released its flagship bourbon (aged four to six years), it also pushed out a limited edition 22-year-old expression. For many of us, it was reminiscent of the Orphan Barrel 22-year Rhetoric, another Diageo label from around the same time. It sold out quickly. In 2017, Diageo released another batch of 22-year-old bourbon, and liquor stores snapped it up.

Though wood is still a dominating force, compared with Rhetoric, you'll find a slightly lighter, sweeter undertone with notes of candy plum and banana. There's a light spice note and strong caramel flavors, with a slightly astringent finish. If the price on the 22-year-old seems out of reach, consider that a 24-year-old expression of Blade and Bow sold for more than \$95,000 at Christie's auction house in 2016.



8: George Dickel 17 Year Tennessee Whiskey (\$75, 375mL)

This is the oldest expression from Tullahoma, Tenn.'s George Dickel. "We're definitely in new territory," says brand ambassador Brian Downing. The remnants from a private barrel program, 14-year-old whiskey was moved from the top of a hill at the brand's rickhouse to a warehouse near the distillery at the bottom (a 600-foot elevation difference, which is pretty huge for whiskeys aging in the American South), where they sat for another three years until their discovery. The remaining barrels exhibited a wide range of proofs, and a decision was made to lower the finished product to 86.8 proof.

"We want you to taste the grain itself, not necessarily the barrel," says Downing. The lovely deep-amber juice does display its oak maturation in a rich nose of caramel, oak, dark molasses and chocolate. On the tongue, it opens sweet with baking spices and moves into spicier pepper notes.



9: Orphan Barrel Entrapment 25 Year (\$150)

Most of Diageo's Orphan Barrel program consists of bourbons from Kentucky and elsewhere, mining its extensive stock of ex-Stitzel-Weller and other supplies. With this release, the company dips into its Canadian whisky reserves (Diageo owns Crown Royal). The 25-year-aged liquid here hails from the "leftovers" from spirit laid down in barrels in 1992 and earmarked for blending into Crown Royal Deluxe.

Not a rye (even by Canadian definitions), this whiskey has a mash bill of 97 percent corn and 3 percent malted barley. The corn sweetness comes through, even after all the decades on wood. On the nose is a heavy vanilla-toffee-plum character. On the palate, it's slightly nutty, with a tobacco bite and a stewed plum finish.



10: Michter's 25 Year Straight Bourbon (\$800)

Michter's began its life as a 1970s brand name for a Pennsylvania distillery that existed in one form or another since the mid-1700s. It then closed, unceremoniously, in 1990. Joe Magliocco and his team revived the brand, beginning with carefully sourced bourbon and rye whiskeys and more recently the opening of a distillery in Kentucky.

Despite announcements over shortages and allocations of its flagship US*1 sour mash whiskey in the past couple of years, the brand occasionally releases an extra-aged bourbon (10 or 20 years old), released only when the distiller deems it ready. Last year was the first time since 2008 Michter's has released a 25-year-old expression.