

A photograph of two men and a dog in a whiskey barrel room. The man on the left is wearing a black t-shirt and a black baseball cap, with a small 'Nashville Barrel' logo on his shirt. The man on the right is wearing a light blue t-shirt and a black baseball cap, also with a 'Nashville Barrel' logo. A small, fluffy brown dog is sitting on a wooden barrel between them. The background is filled with rows of wooden whiskey barrels.

IT'S WHAT'S IN THE BOTTLE — THAT COUNTS —

NASHVILLE BARREL COMPANY | NASHVILLE | TENNESSEE

Nashville knows whiskey. We've met two guys (and one dog) who have bonded over their love of single barrel picking and are bringing this fine art to the eager masses – locals and visitors alike. Meet James and Mike of Nashville Bourbon Company.

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ADDITIONAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NASHVILLE BARREL CO.

"TO PEOPLE WHO ARE BRAND NEW TO WHISKEY, AND DON'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM IT, THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES THEM IS THAT SPICY BURN AT FIRST THAT WARMS YOUR CHEST," MIKE HINDS SAYS WISTFULLY, AND IT'S CLEAR WHY IT'S CALLED THE KENTUCKY HUG, EVEN ACROSS THE STATE BORDER.



"You have to meet Stella," he says. "She's the boss." Mike Hinds, the company's CEO and co-founder, briefly leaves the room. I straighten my shirt. After some commotion, a golden doodle with the energy of a Red Bull-fueled toddler bounces in, wearing a bowtie, narrowly missing the chair she tries to land on. "She just got a trim, so she's ready to represent the brand," Mike explains. "People ask for her by name." To say that this distillery does things their own way is an understatement.

But let's start at the beginning. We pull into a non-descript parking lot in an industrial area, about three miles from bustling downtown Nashville – far from the countless, half-finished skyscrapers reaching into the bright blue beyond. In the sweltering summer afternoon, Nashville feels like a city molting.

Then we walk in the door at Nashville Barrel Company and instantly understand what the place is about. It's got a homey feel, and based on the buzz around the small tasting bar, you can tell that while this is a place where locals go, everyone is welcome.

BEFORE BOURBON WAS COOL

"While the upside to buying a blended bottle from one of the big producers might be that you always know what you're getting, the downside is that you know what you're always getting."

Mike and James Davenport, Nashville Barrel Co.'s Chief Blender and co-founder, first met, as they say, "before bourbon was cool". A self-proclaimed bourbon enthusiast, Mike was spending his free time picking single barrels and trying anything new and exciting. James, meanwhile, had several years of whiskey retail under his belt.

Ultimately, however, it was their mutual commitment to charity work that brought them together. Mike was picking single barrels for a charity raising money for cancer research and found James, and soon they had founded the company to let more people in on the art and joy of picking barrels.

Picking single barrels allows for a more unique selection and the ability for the drinker to really specify a flavor profile they're looking for. Each barrel gives its own flavor and color to the bourbon within, a bit of magic that might disappear when blended with other barrels.

A whole single barrel, however, is going to be pricey and hard to get a hold of, so the ability to buy into a



A barrel sample never hurt anyone.

barrel with others is the way to go for most mere mortals. It's what brought the Nashville Barrel gang and their old friends together to begin with, and making this experience available to regular shoppers has made new friends out of many customers.

For people who aren't experienced whiskey drinkers, the folks at Nashville Barrel Co. are more than happy to begin their education journey. "A lot of people know Jack Daniels, and that's it," says James, and notes that they're seeing more people coming in who may not be "barrel heads" who know what they're looking for. Beyond regular barrel tours, they run classes for people looking to expand their knowledge, all the way from the start.

"To people who are brand new to whiskey, and don't know what to expect from it, the first thing that strikes them is that spicy burn at first that warms your chest," Mike Hinds says wistfully, and it's clear why it's called the Kentucky hug, even across the state border. With not a whiff of snobbism, anyone you talk to at the distillery can walk you through what to look for, how the whiskey experience may differ between bottles or barrels, and how to figure out what you yourself like. For people who still prefer other spirits, they also sell their WooShine liquors and rums, as well as blended and small batch whiskeys.

HEARTS THE SIZE OF TENNESSEE

The dedication to charity that first brought them together still courses through Nashville Barrel Co. today. Organizations that support families of veterans are particularly meaningful to James, himself a veteran. He says supporting veterans means a lot to him, but that when it comes to bourbon, he wants to focus on what's in the bottle and that his time in the military doesn't affect how he works. At which point Mike interjects.



“TO HAVE THE BEST COCKTAILS, YOU HAVE TO START WITH THE BEST INGREDIENTS,” SAYS MIKE. HE EXPLAINS THAT STARTING WITH A HIGHER PROOF WHISKEY ALSO PREVENTS THE COCKTAIL FROM GETTING CRITICAL TO THE DRINK AND SHOULD NEVER BE SKIPPED.



“Maybe you don’t see it, but we do,” he says to his partner. “There’ll be times when we’re scrambling to finish things and running on no sleep, and he’ll just be up here getting it done. I think he doesn’t realize what he brings from his service, but we see it in how he shows up, the things he does.”

TOP NOTES OF HUMILITY

Perpetually humble, it’s hard to get out of these two what might make Nashville Barrel Co. better than anyone else. But they clearly take pride in the product and what they put in their bottles.

“What matters most to us is picking good products. Most of our whiskey is a lot older than what comes out of the big five,” says James. “And they add a lot of water to make it 80 proof, which ours isn’t. This is what gives our whiskey such full flavor.” Mike continues, “We do well because people know us and like us,” and it’s easy to agree. Listening to these two talk about whiskey is like cozying up with your favorite bedtime story as a child, except better because it includes whiskey. They bring a complete lack of pretentiousness to the table, and it’s clear that even complete novices could come here and feel okay about asking questions or be allowed to enjoy whatever they enjoy.

Asking them to pick a favorite among their bottles, however, is like asking them to pick a favorite child. But they try. “I do like bigger, bolder, richer, in-your-face whiskeys,” says James. “It depends on the time of year, like typically in winter it’s rye time. People, when they think of rye, they think spicy, but it doesn’t always mean

that. Ten years in, it’s candy. Ten years in, it’s a bourbon drinker’s rye.” Right now, their most popular bottles are the 7-year single barrel bourbons, but the Founders 14 straight bourbon series is dear to their heart. “That series means a lot to us,” James continues, “because those were the first 14 barrels that we bought.”

WHISKEY SOUR

Finally, we bond over a mutual love of the whiskey sour, a perfect cocktail made with whiskey, lemon juice, bitters, simple syrup, and egg white. Mike and James are happy to share their secrets to making it perfect.

“To have the best cocktails, you have to start with the best ingredients,” says Mike. He explains that starting with a higher proof whiskey also prevents the cocktail from getting watered down. They both agree that the egg white is absolutely critical to the drink and should never be skipped. It doesn’t change the flavor, but it is everything when it comes to texture. “I also recommend trying chocolate bitters,” says James, for a twist on the classic Angostura. “And in winter you can use rye whiskey. It’ll give you that spicy holiday feeling.” With that, Stella barks, demanding to greet a new group at the door. She is the boss, after all. **AT**



Mike and James Davenport at Nashville Barrel Co. However, the real boss is Stella, who is in the photo on the first two pages.

