

Proof & Perspective™

An inside look at Kentucky's bourbon scene

Brilliance in Bardstown

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In This Series: Bardstown, Large Distillers; Craft Distillers; Quality Dining; Quaint Towns; Side Trips

Bardstown is famously known as the "Bourbon Capital of the World," and it's easy to understand why. This charming city, with a population of just over 13,000 residents, boasts 11 distilleries in the area. Notable producers include well-established companies such as Heaven Hill, Lux Row, and Bardstown Bourbon Company, alongside craft distillers like Willett and Preservation. In 2012, *USA Today* recognized Bardstown as the "Most Beautiful Small Town in America," and in 2023, *Travel & Leisure* ranked it eighth on their list of the "20 Most Beautiful Small Towns in America."

Bardstown serves as an ideal starting point for your Bourbon Journey, conveniently located near the center of Kentucky's Bourbon Country. Many renowned distilleries in nearby towns, such as Loretto, Lawrenceburg, Clermont, Lebanon, and Springfield, are all less than 30 minutes away.

Morning – 9:50 a.m. Arrive at Bardstown Bourbon Company

Begin your day at Bardstown Bourbon Company. While I typically enjoy the charm of historic distilleries, with their century-old hardwood trees and gently flowing brooks, Bardstown Bourbon offers a distinctive modern experience. This contemporary distillery campus is a marvel of design.

Book the 10:00 a.m. Core Four Tour, where you'll taste their four core whiskeys—three bourbons and one rye. You'll learn about the complete bourbon production process and afterwards, sample bourbon straight from the barrel in one of their spacious modern rickhouses. The tour lasts for one hour. If you plan accordingly, you can also enjoy their Summer Patio Series after the tour, held every other Friday from May through August, featuring curated small plates and live music.

11:30 a.m. – Choose Your Lunch Spot

Bardstown offers a wealth of dining options, making it difficult to recommend just one for lunch. Below are four of my favorites.



Figure 1 - The hundred thousandth barrel filled is proudly displayed in one of their large rickhouses.

First, consider dining at Bardstown Bourbon's expansive Bottle & Bond Kitchen and Bar. This restaurant is particularly enjoyable on pleasant days, thanks to its lovely outdoor patio. The menu features a variety of innovative dishes, and starting with their charcuterie board is always a good choice. I personally love their duck ragu and the shrimp and grits, while my wife enjoys the buttermilk fried chicken sandwich with its intriguing honey jalapeno spread.

The next two options are in the heart of downtown, just a couple of miles from Bardstown Bourbon. One is rich in history, while the other presents a façade reminiscent of a historical atmosphere—but don't be deceived by first appearances.

The Old Talbott Tavern is a must-visit in Bardstown. If you can't make it for lunch, be sure to stop by later in the day for a cocktail. Built in 1779, when Kentucky was still part of Virginia, the tavern served as the western end of the stagecoach route from Pennsylvania to Virginia. Kentucky later became the 15th state in the Union in 1792. You might want to try the Jesse James ribeye, named after the infamous outlaw who shot up the walls upstairs after indulging a bit too much. Lincoln's bourbon barbecue ribs are another fantastic option, named after President Abraham Lincoln, who lived here as an infant before his family moved from Kentucky to Illinois.

Right across the street is Mammy's Kitchen and Bar, one of our favorite spots for comforting, down-home food. Owned by Christy Clark, Mammy's pays tribute to her grandmothers, both affectionately called "Mammy." One grandmother raised 15 children, while the other raised 17. Interestingly, I initially thought this location had been around for over 50 years, but it actually opened in 2006. Although they don't take reservations, you can usually get a table little to no wait on most days.

Lastly, consider the Bar at Willett for your lunch plans. They are open Wednesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. I love the shishito peppers or trout dip as appetizers, and their egg salad sandwich is a standout. Be sure to try the chicken thigh with Calabrian chili paste or the pâté en croûte with fig jam.

1:30 p.m. – An Afternoon at Heaven Hill

Heaven Hill is a large distillery located in Bardstown, renowned for its numerous awards, including Distiller of the Year in 2019 and 2023, Visitor Attraction of the Year in 2016 and 2022, and Whisky of the Year in 2017 and 2020. You may be familiar with their brands, which include Heaven Hill, Henry McKenna, Bernheim, Larceny, Elijah Craig, Evan Williams, and Parker's Heritage.

Book the "You Do Bourbon Experience," where you can enter their classroom to explore all things bourbon and fill a bottle of your choice. There is an additional cost for filling your bottle, but you'll get to rinse, fill, and label it to take home.



Figure 2 - Heaven Hill is a beautiful location in Bardstown.

After this experience, head upstairs to the Five Brothers bar for a cocktail in their beautiful space. The bar is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

Dinner – All Aboard for My Old Kentucky Dinner Train

If you want to enjoy breathtaking views of the Kentucky landscape while savoring a gourmet meal with a cocktail or a glass of wine, consider dining on My Old Kentucky Dinner Train. Be sure to check the calendar for available dates during your visit; lunch is typically offered on Saturdays, while dinner is served on Friday and Saturday evenings. The train usually departs at 6 p.m. on Fridays and at 5 p.m. on Saturdays, so mark your calendar when booking your tickets.

You will dine in one of two beautifully restored 1940s vintage dining cars. Lunch lasts for two hours, while dinner is two and a half hours long. Both options feature a seasonally inspired prix fixe menu, including three courses for lunch and four for dinner. The round-trip journey spans just over 30 miles of rail, and R.J. Corman has spared no expense in restoring these dining cars to their former glory.



Figure 3 - R. J. Corman's My Old Kentucky Dinner Train will treat you to beautiful Kentucky landscape as you enjoy a gourmet meal during the train ride. Photo courtesy My Old Kentucky Dinner Train.

Board the train at the Corman depot in Bardstown. From there, the train travels north through Bernheim Forest, past the Jim Beam distillery, and on to Limestone Springs before returning to Bardstown. Full bar service is available both on the train and at the depot before departure.

Look for unique specialty excursions that offer more than just dining. One exciting option is a bourbon-themed experience featuring a local Master Distiller. Participants gain in-depth insights into bourbon production and enjoy pairings of different bourbons with their meals. Another memorable choice is a live Murder Mystery performance during the ride.

Corman opens reservations for these experiences on a quarterly basis, allowing you to book your spot three to six months in advance. However, reservations tend to fill up one to two months ahead of time.

The peak seasons for these excursions are spring, when the area's flowering trees bloom, and fall, when

the hardwoods display stunning oranges and vivid reds. Specialty experiences, such as the murder mystery and bourbon-themed excursions, are usually the first to sell out. Be sure to check your dates and make reservations online well in advance of your trip—this is sure to be a delightful outing.

Option – Tour with the Master at Bardstown Bourbon or an Afternoon at the Museums

Enhance your bourbon experience by spending a few hours with Steve Nally, the Master Distiller at Bardstown Bourbon and a member of the Bourbon Hall of Fame. When Peter Loftin founded Bardstown Bourbon in 2014, Steve was his first hire. Before joining Bardstown, Steve was the Master Distiller at Maker's Mark for many years and later helped build the Wyoming Whiskey brand from the ground up.

I had the pleasure of spending a morning with Steve during a VIP tour last year, which remains my favorite bourbon-themed experience to date. He is both genuine and an excellent tour guide, having played a significant role in the distillery's growth. His wife, Donna, is a longtime employee of Maker's Mark, and together they hold the unique distinction of being the only living husband-and-wife members of the Bourbon Hall of Fame.

This tour is offered on a limited number of days throughout the year and, at \$95 per person, provides



Figure 4 - Steve Nally is the Master Distiller at Bardstown Bourbon and a member of the Bourbon Hall of Fame.

one of the best deals available. With a maximum of ten guests, you'll have ample opportunity to interact with Steve. During our tour, we enjoyed a private experience with four close friends.

If you're interested in exploring beyond the distilleries, Bardstown boasts a rich historical scene, including Museum Row. The Old Bardstown Village Civil War Museum is the fourth largest of its kind in the U.S. Kentucky played a significant role in the Civil War, with several battles fought in the area. Notably, Kentucky was one of the states that divided its support between the Union and Confederate armies.

The Battle of Perryville, was Kentucky's bloodiest battle, resulting in over 7,000 casualties, including 1,700 killed in action. Located approximately 30 miles southeast of Bardstown, the battle featured the Union Army, led by Major General Don Carlos Buell, with 22,000 troops, while the Confederate Army, commanded by General Braxton Bragg, had 16,000.

Another worthwhile visit is the Oscar Getz Museum of Whiskey History, where you can explore rare American whiskey-themed artifacts, including antique bottles, historical documents, and memorabilia from pre-Colonial times to post-Prohibition.

The Women's Civil War Museum highlights the roles of women both at home and on the battlefield. Their

contributions included nursing, reporting, and, in some cases, disguising themselves as men to fight alongside their husbands and countrymen. With many men away at battle, women also took on crucial roles at home. You'll learn about all this and more.

Finally, the General Hal Moore Military Museum covers all of America's wars, from the Revolutionary War to Desert Storm. You may recognize Moore from the film *We Were Soldiers*, in which he was portrayed by Mel Gibson. Born in Bardstown, Moore led his troops in the first major battle of Vietnam at Ia Drang, where they held off the North Vietnamese army for three days, despite being significantly outmanned.

For More Information

If you have questions or comments, feel free to reach out to me at:

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Visit our website for more useful information about bourbon tourism and Central Kentucky.

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