

# Proof & Perspective™

An inside look at Kentucky's bourbon scene

## Focus on Frankfort

Volume 1, February 2025

**In This Series: Frankfort, Large Distillers; Craft Distillers; Quality Dining; Quaint Towns; Side Trips; Horse Farms; Thoroughbred Racing**

Frankfort, the capital of Kentucky, is a tranquil town with a population of 28,000. Like many state capitals, it exudes a laid-back atmosphere—except during legislative sessions in January and February. This city boasts some of my favorite bourbon distilleries, a number of outstanding restaurants, and nearby attractions that enhance your bourbon experience. Here's a detailed look at what a day in Frankfort could include as you plan your visit to Bourbon Country.

### **Morning - 10:45 a.m. Arrive at Whiskey Thief**

Start your day at Whiskey Thief Distilling Co., located just a few miles west of Frankfort along Interstate 64, near the Graefenburg/Lawrenceburg exit. As a craft distiller, Whiskey Thief offers knowledgeable tour guides and produces exceptional bourbon, rye whiskey, and gin. The distillery is housed in a charming barn at the bottom of a valley on the 127-acre Three Boys Farm. Upon arrival, you may be tempted to stop at the Gift Shop on your left, but check-in occurs at the stillhouse, which is down the long gravel road below the entrance.

Tours cost \$35 and last approximately 30 minutes. While they are informative, you won't visit a large 50,000-barrel rickhouse as you might at some other distilleries. To ensure you have enough time for check-in and to explore the grounds beforehand, schedule your tour for 11:00 a.m. You will receive a small commemorative glass and have the chance to sample from the five barrels they feature that day

after the tour. On most days, you'll be able to taste four different bourbons and a rye whiskey, all uncut and unfiltered straight from the barrel. Don't miss their permanent food truck with some of the best food in the area.

### **Lunch – 11:30 a.m. at Whiskey Thief**

You can stay at Whiskey Thief for lunch. After your tour, exit through the back of the distillery, order from the food truck, and enjoy a cocktail at the lovely outdoor bar. You can dine at one of the tables or relax in an Adirondack chair around the fire pit on a pleasant spring or fall day. On Fridays and Saturdays, live music is featured, so be sure to check their schedule for performance times—it adds a delightful touch to your visit.

If you are interested in more formal dining, add Serafini in place of Whiskey Thief's truck. They are located in downtown Frankfort, just 1.7 miles from Buffalo Trace. They offer great food in a beautiful



*Figure 1 - Whiskey Thief is in a beautiful barn in rural Franklin County, home to Kentucky's state capital.*

setting and are open for lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday.

### **Mid Afternoon - 1:10 p.m. Arrive at Buffalo Trace**

Next, head to Buffalo Trace, located just 11 miles east of Whiskey Thief in downtown Frankfort. The drive takes about 20 minutes. Reservations are essential and should be made online in advance. While tours are free, securing a spot can be challenging. I recommend the 1:30 p.m. Old Taylor Tour; however, if that's unavailable, the Trace Tour is a great alternative and easier to reserve.



*Figure 2 - Buffalo Trace distillery is steeped in history and produces some of the most coveted labels in the state.*

You can reserve tours online at the Buffalo Trace website. Reservations are released weekly on Wednesdays at 10:00 a.m. ET. To find out when your desired tours will open online, check the website three months before your visit, as tickets are typically released about two months in advance. Mark the date in your calendar and set an alarm as a reminder. Log in five minutes early, as tickets often become available a few minutes before the official release time. It can also be helpful to have others in your party assist you online from their own computer, since tickets tend to sell out within minutes. After securing your tickets, review your bookings and release any that you won't be using, as many people overlook this step. This allows others to enjoy one of

the best tours in Bourbon Country, which I consider essential. Don't be a no show.

Upon arrival, proceed past the guard shack and park near the small brown brick building with a buffalo mural. This is where you will check in for all tours. Be sure to bring your driver's license for identity verification; you will receive a bracelet that permits you to purchase any allocated bottles available that day. After checking in, feel free to stroll around the rickhouse on your right to the gift shop behind. Tours begin here, and you'll want to explore their extensive selection of bourbon-themed gifts. If you're lucky, check the back left corner of the gift shop for any available allocated bottles. Visitors can purchase one bottle every 90 days, with allocations typically including at least one of the following: Blanton's, Col. E. H. Taylor Small Batch, Eagle Rare, or Weller Special Reserve. My wife and I make four trips every 90 days to collect our allocations.

The tours are led by knowledgeable hosts eager to answer any questions. You will visit one of the historic rickhouses, some of which have been standing for over 100 years. After the tour, you'll head upstairs to conclude with a tasting of several of their spirits. Don't expect to find rare labels like George T. Stagg, Elmer T. Lee, or any Pappy Van Winkle products, as these are seldom available and are typically found only on the top shelves of specialty retail stores.

### **Late Afternoon - Cocktails by the Creek at Castle & Key or a Tasting at Glenss Creek**

That's enough touring for the day. I typically only recommend one tour each day and we have worked in one short, and one longer tour for the day. Let's finish the day in a low-key fashion. Castle & Key is a relatively new addition to the Kentucky bourbon scene, but its stunning location boasts a rich history dating back to 1887. This site was originally home to the Col. E. H. Taylor distillery and remains one of the most beautiful spots in the state. The nine-mile drive from Buffalo Trace takes less than 20 minutes, transporting you from the small capital city to a serene location that is basically ten minutes from anywhere. The historic significance is immediately apparent, with beautiful buildings surrounding the old water tower and Glenss Creek, which meanders lazily behind the grounds.



Head over to Taylorton Station, a beautifully restored train depot completed in 1910. Take a leisurely stroll by the creek and settle into one of the Adirondack chairs; we've enjoyed many lovely afternoons on the grounds. You can also explore the botanical gardens designed by Jon Carloftis, a renowned landscape architect based in nearby Lexington.



*Figure 3 - Castle & Key is located at the site of the Col E. H. Taylor distillery that was built in 1887.*

I personally love the Old Fashioned cocktail, but be sure to try their gins as well. They craft exquisite floral varieties that are expertly blended into their cocktails. My wife, typically not a fan of gin and tonics, adores the ones here and happily shares her preference with anyone who asks. Be sure to check their website for hours; during warm Kentucky weather, they're usually open until 5:00 p.m., although the bar closes at 4:30.

If the weather isn't suitable for wandering the distillery grounds, or if you're seeking one of the most unique tastings around, consider swapping Castle & Key for a visit to Glens Creek Distillery. Located just two miles away at the historic Old Crow Distillery, Glens Creek is owned by David Meier, one of Kentucky's most knowledgeable and personable distillers. We visit often, and I'm proud to call him a friend. While I enjoy all the bourbons he produces, you'll also have the opportunity to explore several unique spirits. David will guide you through an hour of tastings, so be sure to call ahead to schedule, as they are a small producer with a devoted following. You'll appreciate the intimate atmosphere, with

tastings taking place at a beautiful bar situated among the production equipment, with active fermentation just behind the seating area.

### **Dinner - An Evening in Midway**

The charming little railroad town of Midway is one of the most delightful spots in the state, home to several fantastic restaurants. As you enter the town, look to the right side of the railroad that runs through this short area, and you'll find Don Jockey and Heirloom situated side by side. Park your car and choose your dining destination.

Don Jockey is an upscale Mexican restaurant that stands out as one of the best in all of Central Kentucky. The quality of their margaritas perfectly complements the excellent flavors of their dishes. Enjoy their Cuatro Leguas - guacamole, Pico de Gallo, salsa, and cheese dip as appetizers. For entrees, consider the enchiladas de mole or the molcajete, which brilliantly pairs steak, chicken, and chorizo with onions and poblano peppers. Neither entrees will disappoint. Don Jockey is open every day of the week.

If you prefer a fine dining experience in a quaint setting with white tablecloths, consider Heirloom. Just be sure to make reservations, as they have a limited number of tables. Try their buttermilk-brined fried chicken, pan-seared sea bass, or the porcini-rubbed beef filet. Heirloom was voted one of the "Top 100 Restaurants in the United States" by OpenTable. Heirloom is closed on Sundays and Mondays.

Midway is conveniently located for most overnight stays in Central Kentucky. It is just a mile from



*Figure 4 - The small town of Midway boasts some of the best restaurants in all Central Kentucky.*

Interstate 64, providing easy access to Frankfort, Lexington, and Louisville.

### **Options - Horse Farms, Thoroughbred Racing, More Distilleries, and Terrific Sandwiches**

I highly recommend taking a tour of one of the beautiful horse farms during your visit to Kentucky, especially in the Frankfort area, which offers several excellent options. Two of my favorites are Lane's End and WinStar Farms. The natural beauty of the land and the chance to meet some of the most successful stallions in thoroughbred racing make this a must-see experience. Be sure to secure reservations in advance.

Lane's End, owned by Will Farish, who served as the U.S. Ambassador to England under George Bush, has a remarkable history, including a visit from Queen Elizabeth. Notable stallions like Flightline and Quality Road command stud fees of \$150,000 for a live foal. Flightline is particularly memorable as the winner of the 2022 Breeders' Cup Classic, finishing his racing career undefeated.



*Figure 5 - The beans and cornbread at Wallace Station are among my favorite in the state.*

WinStar Farm is home to numerous graded stakes winners. You may remember Justify, who triumphed in the 2018 Triple Crown by winning the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont Stakes as a three-year-old—an achievement that is among the rarest in sports. He was here until his untimely death a few years ago. During our tour a few months back, we met Constitution, whose stud fee is \$110,000, and

whose offspring have collectively earned over \$12 million.

If you're interested in spending a day at the track, consider visiting Keeneland in Lexington or Churchill Downs in Louisville. Keeneland hosts both a spring and fall meet, running for three weeks in April and October, respectively. Churchill Downs operates most weeks when Keeneland is not racing and is recognized as the venue for the Kentucky Derby, the first leg of the Triple Crown. It is larger than Keeneland, making it easier to secure tickets, except during the first week of May when the Kentucky Oaks and Kentucky Derby are ran. Be sure to book your tickets online through the tracks' official websites.

There are two more distilleries to consider while you are in the Frankfort Area. I am sure you are familiar with Woodford Reserve. They are located along McCracken Pike, just over three miles from Castle & Key. This is another beautiful location that dates to 1812. This gives it the distinction of being the oldest working distillery in the U.S. The distillery was built by Elijah Pepper and is where Dr. James Crow introduced modern bourbon-making processes. The location is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Bluegrass Distillers just opened a new location in Midway, just north of Interstate 64. We have been twice and this promises to be one of the more impressive stops in Bourbon Country. I didn't include it on the list at this time as construction was still ongoing the last time we dropped in. I need to make another stop to see where they are. I expect it will make my "must see" locations as soon as things are complete onsite.

Finally, if you are in the mood for terrific sandwiches in a casual setting, consider adding Wallace Station to your list. This is one of Ouita Michel's restaurants, one of the most successful Central Kentucky chefs and this is one of her best in my opinion. Order inside, then eat outside on one of the picnic tables or opt for the patio. This is located just outside of Midway, making it convenient as you move around the area.

### **For More Information**

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

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Visit our website for more useful information about bourbon tourism, behind-the-scenes looks at distilleries, and Central Kentucky in general.

[www.kentuckyjourney.com](http://www.kentuckyjourney.com)

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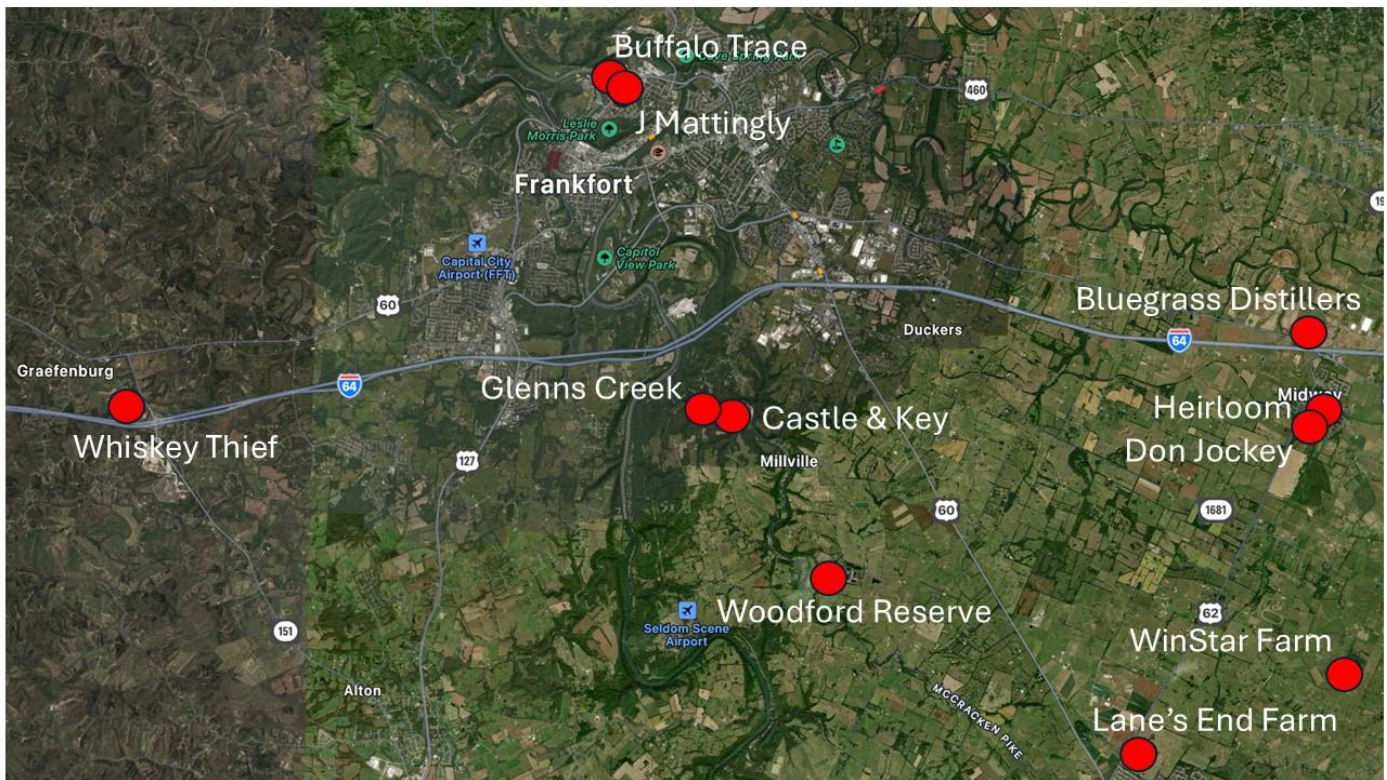


Figure 6 – From top, then clockwise: J Mattingly 1845 is a great stop and easy to combine with Buffalo Trace as they are only a block apart; Bluegrass Distillers has a new location in Midway on a working farm just north of the Interstate; the greater Frankfort area provides plenty of options for exploring Bourbon Country; Woodford Reserve is the oldest working distillery in the U.S.