

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Louisville's big on bourbon

By [Sara Pepitone](#)

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Bartender Michael Anderson makes the Old Seelbach Bar's Sellbach Cocktail

Photo: James Moses/The Seelbach Hilton

The best way to get to the heart of Louisville (pronounced Lou-uh-vul — no “i” ’round here) is through one of the main arteries. Yes, racehorses (Churchill Downs) and baseball bats (Louisville Slugger) rate highly with visitors to Kentucky's largest city, but it's bourbon that runs through everyone's veins.

Through the 1800s and until Prohibition, a portion of SoHo-looking Main Street was known as Whiskey Row because of the sheer number of distillers (50!) in operation. The city is revitalizing this area now, bringing back the designation and celebrating the influences of “America's Native Spirit.”

Bourbon, in case you're confused, is whiskey with specific rules, the federally mandated kind. Namely — percentage of corn in the recipe, and aging in new, American white-oak barrels. Nearly all bourbon is made in Kentucky — mostly outside of cities these days, but the bourbon folks know a good bar crawl is as good a reason as any to stay in town.

So they created the Urban Bourbon Trail, consisting of about 20 bars and restaurants, each with more than 50 different bourbons on their list and a wide selection of bourbon-based cocktails. And if you buy a drink in at least six different venues — tracked by stamps on a promotional passport — you're eligible for a free Urban Bourbon Trailblazer T-shirt and a Citizen of Bourbon County certificate. This is how memories are made.

Available at every participating bar, or contact the Visitors Bureau for details ([888-568-4784](tel:888-568-4784), gotolouisville.com).

Here are six spots worth checking out on your crawl.

Bourbons Bistro

2255 Frankfort Ave.; 502-894-8838, bourbonsbistro.com

A former wine guy who always preferred the local drink, Bourbons Bistro bar manager Jeff Shaw is a legendary bourbon expert. Ask him about the off-list, antique bottles for a treat you're unlikely to experience anywhere else, ever. "It's hard to put a value on this old stuff," he says, carefully measuring 1 ounce of Bicentennial Commemoration Bourbon, distilled in 1959, bottled in 1975. "But this is about as good as you'll ever have for \$50." Want to spend more? He can help you there, too, with bottles from the collection of someone's dead grandparent, or eBay. Once you've demonstrated your interest, Shaw will take care of you all night, educating you with each new pour. And it can be as pricey or inexpensive as you want — the bourbon list is more than 125 bottles long. Or take it easy with a \$10 Bourbon Cobbler (Old Forester, house-made vanilla simple syrup, fresh citrus sour mix, seltzer).

The Brown Hotel Lobby Bar

335 W. Broadway; 502-583-1234, brownhotel.com

Ninety years ago, when the Brown Hotel was built, they surely weren't serving chilled Bisontinis (Buffalo Trace Cream Liquor, bourbon, nutmeg), \$12. But there's no shame in enjoying one today, surrounded by the fading but still awesome old-school opulence. Or you can go native. "This has a slight burn; put water in it and it really opens up," says Lobby Bar bartender Lucy Paez as she presents three glasses: one with ice, one with water, and one with uncut, barrel-proof George T. Stagg, \$18, one of the harder-to-find labels (but same distillery) on the 70-deep list at this classic spot. "You get a different proof with each batch," she explains. This one is 142.8. Uncut means they did not dilute with water to sell at, say, 80-proof. Take your time appreciating this or anything else recommended, and ask about the longtime Louisville late-night eat: the Hot Brown, \$22, an open-faced turkey sandwich with bacon and Mornay sauce, created for party-pooped guests in 1926.

Derby Cafe at the Kentucky Derby Museum

704 Central Ave.; 502-634-0858, derbycafe.com

The Mint Julep (bourbon, simple syrup, mint, crushed ice) has been the Kentucky Derby's official drink since 1938, commemorated each year with a new souvenir glass. Originally a morning beverage, this classic is delicious in its natural habitat, before or after an "Inside the Gates" walking tour of Churchill Downs, \$11. You'll wish the wagering windows were open as soon as you see the stables, the mile-long track and listen to the enthusiastic guide (you don't know horse lovers until you arrive here). And as an official Urban Bourbon stop, the list goes well beyond easy-drinking cocktails. Check out the special Jefferson's Presidential Select, \$31.50, or the fun Willy Nelson's Old Whiskey River, \$8.

Doc Crow's Southern Smokehouse and Raw Bar

127 W. Main St.; 502-587-1626, doccrows.com

Doc Crow is the guy credited with standardizing the bourbon industry through science — consistency is a good thing when it comes to production. Named for the good doctor, this restaurant and bar on Whiskey Row is steps from the Louisville Cardinals' basketball arena. But this doesn't feel like a rowdy college bar. Louisville's die-hard hoops fans can be super chill, even when sloshed — perhaps bourbon's truest testament. And anyway, a Ginger Diver (ginger-infused bourbon, a Swedish liqueur called punsch, pineapple, ginger ale), \$9, or an Elijah Craig 12-year, \$8, will put everyone in an amicable mood.

The Old Seelbach Bar

500 S. Fourth St.; 502-585-3200, seelbachhilton.com

Prohibition might have gotten others down, but the Seelbach, built in 1905, was a favorite hangout of Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, Dutch Schultz and King of the Bootleggers George Remus. He's reported to be F. Scott Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby (the two met here, over drinks, perhaps not exactly legally, more than once). And "The Hustler" was filmed in the old billiards room (now a restaurant). Bottom line: This place has chops. The hotel's dimly lit bar is a great place to get lost for a few hours, just to allow some booze-related history to permeate. Start with the refreshing Seelbach Cocktail (Old Forester, triple sec, bitters, champagne), \$10, created in 1918. Then move to some of the interesting, lesser-known bourbons, like Noah's Mill, \$12.50, a favorite of the bartenders here.

Proof on Main

702 W. Main St.; 502-217-6360, proofonmain.com

Proof on Main is the bar inside the appealing 21c Museum Hotel. Small-batch bourbons, special releases and single barrels (that means it's the only one, anywhere, until it's gone, sometimes as few as 15 cases) are prominent on the list. This includes an Elmer

T. Lee Single Barrel, \$9, which general manager Rachel Cutler says was chosen for its deviation from the usual. “Not necessarily less caramel, but more funk, like an old- world wine.” We can get used to that, although the cocktails here are pretty special, too, and you can take one on a walk around the hotel’s galleries — every room on the lobby level is open for public viewing. The art is even more engaging with a champagne coupe full of Death’s Grip (Old Grand-Dad BIB, house-made porter-jam syrup, hazelnut bitters), \$10.

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