

7TH TIME'S A CHARM

Explore the Jack Daniel's distillery in Lynchburg, TN

WRITER: ANDY JOHNS



Jasper "Jack" Daniel is said to have established the nation's oldest distillery near his birthplace in Lynchburg, located about 90 minutes from Chattanooga. I decide to make the trip to "Mr. Jack's" place along with a college friend nicknamed Peps during the waning days of summer, when spectacular ambers and reds of autumn reportedly render Lynchburg among the prettiest places on earth.

As we arrive early one Monday morning, more than 20 guests have already browsed the spacious visitor center and read the placards. To Peps and me, nine o'clock seems a little early to even study whiskey, but the distillery attracts more than 250,000 visitors each year. Most tour the barrelhouse, distillery and rickyard. We're shocked to find it's all free. On most other tours, water isn't even free.

Finding that the distillery is actually located in a dry county—and therefore unable to serve its world-famous product—is among the biggest shocks confronting the uninitiated. Visitors are restricted to the purchase of commemorative bottles since Moore County banned alcohol sales before prohibition and has remained dry since.

Placing the world's best known whiskey-maker in a no-drinking zone seems like hanging "No orange!" signs at Neyland Stadium, or banning fiddlers from the Grand Ole Opry. But Mr. Jack recognized this site was ideal due to the presence of iron-free water from the distillery's famous cave, and the ready availability of corn, rye, and barley malt to produce his fermentable mixture called sour mash.

Guests who are distracted while pondering such ironies run the risk of missing the visitor center's introductory, tour-opening video. A five-minute film outlines some of Old No. 7's history and provides visitors with a

wonderful overview of whiskey-making. Our tour guide, who claims to be Mr. Jack's great-great grand nephew, walks us to the famous cave spring—purportedly the source of Gentleman Jack's inimitable flavor. We observe the distillery's elaborate charcoal-making process before winding up at Mr. Jack's historic office.



BE SURE TO SAY HELLO TO JACK DANIEL HIMSELF ON THE WAY TO THE CAVE SPRING. THE STATUE CAPTURES HIS LIKENESS IMPECCABLY.

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDY JOHNS

Inside the latter sits the famous "death safe" with its apparently forgettable combination that indirectly cost Mr. Jack his life. One ill-fated day, as the story goes, when he couldn't remember the proper series of numbers, Mr. Jack angrily kicked the lock-box and broke one of his toes. The



TOUR HOURS ARE 9:00 A.M. TO 4:30 P.M. (CENTRAL TIME) EVERY DAY EXCEPT THANKSGIVING, CHRISTMAS EVE, CHRISTMAS, NEW YEAR'S EVE, AND NEW YEAR'S DAY.

distiller's digit became infected, leading to gangrene and blood poisoning that eventually led to amputations, and ultimately the whiskey-maker's death at 65. Devil-may-care visitors sometimes kick the safe.

Down a path from the office stands the Still House, where we experience our first whiff of whiskey-scented air. The smell lingers so thick that Peps will later find it advisable to change clothes before going to work.

From the stills we walk to the fermentation area, which is a series of cisterns of sour mash. The tour guide pulls open the door on two of the vats, revealing gallons of horrifying, yellow bubbling soup—or mash.

Visitor reactions improve upon arrival in the mellowing

A pragmatic friend of mine lived in Germany during the height of the anti-American feelings in the early 2000s. At the bars he visited, locals made it clear: "We don't like America, and we hate George Bush!" "But I'm from Tennessee," my friend would explain, "and y'all love Jack Daniel's!" Sneers would turn to smiles. "Jacky!" the bar patrons would cheer at the mere mention of the world-famous, best-selling liquor.

The legendary Tennessee whiskey-maker has been making friends since 1866 when 16-year-old

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room where the whiskey is filtered through charcoal. The lid on the mellowing chamber is lifted and fanned so visitors can get a whiff. It's stunning but delightful; everybody loves it.

After a breath of fresh air, we hit the single-barrel bottling building where walls are adorned with plaques revealing names of those who shell out up to \$12,000 for their own barrel of whiskey.



DON'T FORGET TO VISIT THE DINING TABLE OF MISS MARY BOBO'S BOARDING HOUSE AND EAT YOUR FILL OF SOUTHERN FAMILY-STYLE HOME COOKING

Some patrons are firms – Bristol Motor Speedway has purchased several barrels – but names of countless individuals and celebrities are also on the wall. Country music star Gretchen Wilson's nameplate appears to have been removed, but George Strait's can be seen six feet high on the outside wall, three panels from the bottling room door. Barack Obama has a barrel waiting for him, according to our guide.

Following a walk through a cavernous Barrel House, the tour concludes with a trip to the souvenir bottle shop—and a glass of lemonade. After mowing grass, Pep and I agree, lemonade might be delightfully satisfying. But following videos of amber whiskey splashing over ice cubes, and smelling the spirits for an hour, it's like ordering pinot noir and getting peanut butter.

We drain our glasses and ponder two options: either we head for Davy Crockett's Roadhouse, the closest bar in Tullahoma, or we take a shady stroll across a walking bridge to downtown Lynchburg for souvenirs and perhaps enjoy southern family cuisine at Miss Mary Bobo's Boarding House. We choose downtown and stop at Lynchburg Hardware and General Store, where I buy a \$44-stamped barrel top that will be proudly displayed on a wall at my place.

But first, I drop Peps off. I head home with a glass, some ice cubes and a black-labeled bottle. "Yes, Jacky!"



Buy the Barrel

Why not save the trouble of going out to buy a new bottle of Jack Daniel's when you can just buy your whiskey by the barrel?

Not only can you save a couple of bucks per bottle—and we're talking approximately 225 bottles worth—you'll also be the only person in the world with that particular flavor. No two barrels of Old No. 7 are alike.

Riley's Wine & Spirits owner Terrell Hurley, who has bought two barrels exclusively for the Hixson shop and helped some other customers get their own barrels for birthday presents or special occasions, says the process is so easy you could be drinking from your own commemorative bottles within a month.

Once arrangements are made in Lynchburg, Hurley says you get to enjoy a VIP tour with distillery experts. Sample from single barrel lots that are generally 7-8 years old—selected exclusively by Master Distiller Jeff Arnett and a committee of tasters.

Do the math:

A 58-gallon barrel loses about 20% of its volume during the aging process. With the addition of distilled water, each barrel produces anywhere from 210 to 250 750ml bottles. Jack Daniel's Single Barrel retails for about \$40 per bottle, so you can expect to pay somewhere in the range of \$9,000 to \$10,000 for your own personalized barrel. But it's worth every shot—all 5,625 of them!

"They know where the best whiskey is in their barrel houses," explains Hurley. "It's usually up high where there's more heat."

Through the personal sampling process you're able to pick up nuances from each snifter, as subtle variations of taste and color are presented in caramel, oak and vanilla, based on the interactions with the barrel.

"There's a real satisfaction knowing that nobody else in the country has that exact same whiskey," says Hurley. "For me personally, it was exciting to have customers come back in after tasting it and say how much they liked it."

Once you choose that perfect balance suited to your preferences, Hurley says the roughly 140-proof whiskey will be cut with distilled water and finished at around 94 proof.

Your exclusive selection will then be bottled in 750ml units, and your barrel will be sanded, coated with polyurethane and embossed with a brass nameplate and signed by the master distiller.

You also become one of the select few individuals to have your name forever etched in single barrel history on an honorary wall at Jack Daniel's Distillery, joining the ranks of international superstars.

And to top it all off, Jack Daniel's will treat you to lunch at Miss Mary Bobo's Boarding House restaurant, sometimes even with Master Distiller Jeff Arnett himself.