Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey
Reid Mitenbuler
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Americans have long seen spirits—especially bourbon—as distillations of values as much as of corn and wheat. Colonial-era drinkers hailed corn whiskey as a symbol of self-reliance, a homegrown alternative to rum made with imported ingredients. Modern-day craft distillers use imagery from early American history and the Prohibition years to market bourbon as a rebellious, individualistic frontier drink. In his book *Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey*, spirits writer Reid Mitenbuler peels back whiskey labels to explore the true origins of a drink that has defined American distilling.

Behind the hoary depictions of moonshiners and outlaws, Mitenbuler finds a thoroughly modern industry that is largely controlled by multinational spirits conglomerates. Many popular "craft" bourbons—such as Diageo's Bulleit Frontier Whiskey and Beam Suntory's Knob Creek—are produced by vast companies with production facilities around the world. But even independently owned bottlers may not be what they seem. Mitenbuler reels through a list of brands that line top shelves in bars across America: there is Templeton Rye, a twenty-first-century bottling company that buys its whiskey from the bulk distiller MGPI, and resells it as "the same whiskey that Al Capone drank" (p.203); and Michter's, a brand that launched in the 1990s with labels that read "1753," and the suggestion that the company supplied George Washington with whiskey during the American Revolution.

It is a situation that gives rise to colorful juxtapositions, as Mitenbuler notes while sampling "moonshine" with white-coated scientists in a sparkling laboratory. But he is too nuanced an author to spend much energy catching out fabrications, and has a narrative-oriented perspective captured by the proverb that opens the book: "What's truer than truth? The story" (p.ix). Mitenbuler's aim is to understand why drinkers and distillers tell the stories they do, and explore the reasons why fictional "authenticity" sells more booze than the industrial reality.

To do so, he traces bourbon's origins back to early European settlers, who swapped native corn into the whiskey recipes they had brought from home. The spirits' fortunes rose and fell repeatedly, as American values and drinking habits changed, ice became commercially available, consumer protection laws were written, and a nationwide ban on alcohol was passed and repealed. It is a tangled web of stories that is often entertaining, but sometimes unfocused. This may be due, in part, to the contrast between the true history of bourbon and the picturesque version used for marketing purposes; bourbon's early evolution was poorly documented, and much of its post-Prohibition history is a corporate tale of mergers and industry. Some readers may find themselves in sympathy with those distillers that learned about bourbon's origin stories, and decided to write new ones.

Mitenbuler's most engaging ideas touch on bourbon's recent resurgence; the author explains current controversies about "craft spirits" as friction between ideas that he traces to Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. He believes that Hamilton would smile on the modern, large-scale whiskey industry, whose efficiency-driven production has made consistent, good-quality whiskey available at a low price. But the folk appeal of craft spirits, he suggests, are a resurgence of Jefferson's romantic ideals. The men that appear on bourbon bottles—and they are almost always men—are icons of the artisans, farmers, and frontiersmen that Jefferson saw as the future of the American economy, and a source of moral strength for the country. In an era of pervasive industrialization and technological change, that Jeffersonian cast of characters has nostalgic power. Today, smallness conveys status and quality, which puts large distillers on the defensive. At times Mitenbuler steps in to support the giants, reminding drinkers that early bourbon was harsh and often adulterated, and that industry brought quality and consistency to the drink. We might enjoy the tintype images of nineteenth-century distillers, he argues, but we would probably steer clear of the booze they made.

He praises the value offered by industrial spirits, and reminds readers of the advantages of scale. But it is telling that he ends his book with a visit to Coppersea distillery in upstate New York, which produces spirits in tiny batches from grain they grow themselves in nearby fields. Within Mitenbuler's conclusion is a nuanced pivot: despite the advantages of well-rounded spirits from large manufacturers, he believes that decades of homogenization have gone too far, and there is real value in a return to small-scale alcohol production. He cautions readers to drink thoughtfully and ask questions, but also, maybe, to relax and enjoy the whiskey. Bourbon's history, he muses, remains a "curious pastiche of charming truths and strange little lies. In the end, it might not matter which are which" (p.288).

—Jen Rose Smith, Writer, Vermont