

The Story of Maker's Mark
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The Origins of Maker's Mark

There's a well-known story of the origins of Maker's Mark: after prohibition, Bill Samuels went to his father and suggested that they revisit the family bourbon recipe to try to improve upon it. The response: "No, thank you, the American customer is thirsty and they will drink what we give them." This led to Samuels burning the family whiskey recipe and making his own whiskey, Maker's Mark. The thing about that story is that it's incredibly simplified, and misses some important and amazing steps that lead the Samuels family from prohibition to becoming one of the most beloved bourbon brands in the world.

To understand why Maker's Mark is so significant, it's important to understand what bourbon was like in the past. Unlike many of the things we tend to be nostalgic about, things were certainly not better in the 'old days.' Bourbon was a rough spirit. Marge Samuels, the wife of Bill Samuels and mother to Bill Samuels, Jr., often would say, "That shit will blow your ears off." It was this fiery spirit that was being produced at the TW Samuels Distillery. It turns out that Bill Samuels, Sr.'s father was right - Americans were thirsty after prohibition, but it was Scotch and Canadian whiskey that they had developed a taste for.

Things went from bad to worse during WWII when President Roosevelt ordered the bourbon distilleries to shut down to preserve grain and support the war effort. By the end of the war, many bourbon distilleries began to close. The threat of closure loomed again in the 50's with the start of the Korean War. The conventional wisdom was that Truman would do as Roosevelt did, order the closure of the bourbon distilleries. It was at this time that Bill Samuels, Sr. was enjoying his retirement, at the ripe old age of 37. Living off the earnings of land he owned and the family farm, Bill Samuels, Sr. was starting to get under foot at the family farm, which was managed by Marge. "Go get a job!" exclaimed Marge, who suggested Bill do what he had wanted after prohibition ended and make a better bourbon.

The Historic Maker's Mark Advisory Committee

Even though Bill had experience distilling with his father, to build a better bourbon he decided to enlist the help of his family friends. Unlike many industries, the bourbon industry has always been very close knit, with competitors often helping each other out. The Samuels family home was on Whiskey Road in Bardstown and sat right between luminaries like Jim Beam, Henry McKenna, and JW Dant. Bill Samuels, Sr. pulled together his friends and colleagues into an advisory committee which included Jerry Beam (son of Jim Beam), Daniel Evans "Hap" Motlow (son of Jack Daniel's Lem Motlow), Pappy Van Winkle, and Ed Shapiro (Heaven Hill). Instead of starting with the process of making whiskey, the group decided to begin their discussions with the common language of the tongue, looking at where on the tongue flavors were read. The goal of the discussions was to figure out how to get a whiskey that played more towards the front of the tongue in the sweet and sweet spice space, rather than the back of the tongue with sour and bitter.

The group broke things down into three stages: Grain, Process, and Maturation. At the time most bourbon was made with corn, rye, and malt. Since rye plays further back in the palate, Bill Samuels, Sr. decided to try to eliminate it from the equation. In yet another amazing contribution to Maker's Mark, Marge decided to bake bread with all of the possible grains that could be used in the mix to make whiskey. "I remember my mom baking over 150 loaves of bread. Things

became really clear when she started to make bread just out of the small grains. We were surprised that it was red river wheat, a ground cover that was the clear favorite,” recalls Bill Samuels, Jr.

Many things had changed since Bill Samuels, Sr. had distilled whiskey with his father, including the invention of the Hammermill and the pressure cooker. Both of these innovations sped up the process of making bourbon, but the advisory committee quickly pointed out the serious issues that these would present to Maker's Mark. “The Hammer Mill doesn't grind the grains, it explodes them, which causes a trace amount of heat that's covered up by heavier whiskies,” explains Bill Samuels, Jr. “The pressure cooker wouldn't work either because the corn needs a much higher temperature than the wheat to break down, and if you break down the wheat at the same temperature it results in all sorts of harsh elements in your whiskey.”

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place when Bill Samuels, Sr. began to look at the maturation process. It was J.E. Boswell from the Independent Stave Company in Missouri who helped deliver the final part of the equation. In the early 50's most barrels were made from staves which were dried in kilns. Boswell recognized that if the wood were left outside for a year and a half, the elements would help reduce the natural tannins much better than quick-drying in a kiln. This combined with a medium char would help Bill Samuels, Sr. on his journey to make a better tasting bourbon.

With all the pieces in place, Bill Samuels, Sr. went to the bank to get financing. Remember, bourbon distilleries were closing left and right, the threat of industry-wide closure loomed, Bill Samuels, Sr. couldn't use any of the recently invented tools which made making bourbon quicker, easier, and less expensive, and he was going to use wood that would take a year and a half to age before he could start putting whiskey in the barrel.

After Bill presented his idea, the banker replied, “No one is interested in a better tasting bourbon” and encouraged Bill Samuels, Sr. to go do some market research. Bill replied, “Hell, no! I'll decide if the whiskey is right or not.” This philosophy of not doing product testing would carry through the entire history of Maker's Mark. The banker asked, “What if I told you I invented a new fantastic kind of Brussels sprouts?” to which Bill replied, “I hate Brussels sprouts.” The banker smirked and replied, “Exactly. Now you understand why you aren't getting a loan.”

Undeterred, Bill Samuels, Sr. was convinced that his whiskey was going to add vibrancy to a dying industry. In 1953, Bill Samuels, Sr. found an old, run-down distillery in Loretto, Kentucky. It was away from Bardstown and down a narrow, windy road, the same narrow, windy road that millions of cases of bourbon now wind their way down. A stroke of luck helped Bill Samuels, Sr. succeed. With the threat of Harry Truman shutting down the bourbon distilleries, many distilleries were over ordering and over producing. When Truman didn't shut things down, there was ample stock of season-dried barrels from the Independent Stave Company which meant that Bill Samuels, Sr. could begin making and putting away whiskey immediately.

Burning The Family Bourbon Recipe

It was after the first batch of bourbon that Bill Samuels Sr. gathered his entire family, including the advisory board, picked up a bucket, put in his dad's bourbon recipe, and set it ablaze. Maker's Mark was born and this ushered in a new era of bourbon. Marge, who had told her husband to get out of the house and get a job, now began to get involved in the new venture. At this point, Maker's Mark was more Bill Samuels, Sr.'s hobby than a business. Marge had some very strong feelings about the bourbon; she mandated three important things: hand-torn labels,

a hand-dipped wax seal, and a cork. “The only problem was when you dipped the bottle in wax, the headspace between the bourbon and the cork expanded, and the cork would blow,” explains Bill Samuels, Jr. This mandate would help make Maker's Mark an instantly recognizable brand. It's the only bottle on the back bar with dripping red wax (plasticine is added to the wax to help make it drip). In addition to her mandates, Marge also designed the Maker's Mark bottle. “We didn't have access to glass so she made it out of paper mache.”

Bill Samuel's, Jr.'s Journey To Maker's Mark

Maker's Mark began to get a following in Kentucky, but it was still more of a hobby than a vibrant business. Bill Samuels, Jr. informed his father that he wasn't interested in being a part of the family business and went off to school at Case Western and then to the University of California Berkeley for a Masters in engineering. “This was during sputnik and the space race, so there was a lot of excitement around aerospace,” says Bill Samuels, Jr. From Berkeley, Bill Samuels, Jr. got a job working on the Polaris missile. At 23, Bill Samuels, Jr. became a senior engineer in charge of the injection thrust mechanism on the rocket. “It was a complete disaster. We sent up a test rocket and the motor broke loose - my motor - and wrecked a whole bunch of damage.”

Bill Samuels, Jr. was fired, and he called his father to tell him that he was coming home to work in the distillery. “Dad said, 'You need to go to law school or business school and get un-engineered. So I picked Vanderbilt Law.’” It was at Vanderbilt that Bill Samuels, Jr. would become very close with Hap Motlow from Jack Daniel's. “The Jack Daniel's sales office was right across from the Vanderbilt Law School, so I spent a lot of time over there with Hap. That's where I really learned the business.” Hap, who had been an adviser to Bill Samuels, Sr., became a mentor to Bill Samuels, Jr. “Hap was a big contributor to Vanderbilt so he got us football tickets and took care of me and my friends. He was like a father to me.”

Bill Samuels, Jr.'s aspirations to get involved with the distilling business faded after being selected in the first Presidential Intern program under Linden Johnson. “The summer of 1965 each senator got to pick someone to send to the program and John Sherman Cooper sent me.” In Washington, Bill Samuels, Jr. was surrounded by luminaries. “One of the other interns and I asked if we could work with Roosevelt in the commerce department.” They honored Bill's request and placed him in the patent office. It was in the patent office that Bill Samuels, Jr. fell in love with patent law and it served as the foundation for the future battles over the Maker's Mark brand and wax dripping that would help define the company. “They had us draft the patent law that changed the way that patents were handled so that you have a file date, but the patent doesn't get tested until someone complains.” The majority of the work done that summer would become law.

“It was an amazing time. We used to watch the news and here we were in the news. I remember helping carry Ted Kennedy up the Capitol steps after his accident. We carried him Boy Scout style.” After the summer in Washington and graduating Vanderbilt, Bill Samuels, Jr. had decided to work outside of the family business. “I went up to South Bend to interview for a job at a disc brake manufacturer. They offered me the job so I called Hap to tell him the good news. Hap said, 'Bill, we've got a problem! You're going to have to call them and tell them no. I've looked after your ass for the past three years and you are going to go work for your dad for a year and then take the bar, just in case.' Hap was like a second father, so I went home to work with Dad.”

When Bill Samuels, Jr. came back to work at Maker's Mark, his father sat him down and

said, "Your job is to go out and find customers." Bill Samuels, Jr. had never worked in sales and the brand was still limited to Kentucky. "It was then that I wished I had gone to business school. Law school taught me the case book method, which is good for talking and thinking on my feet." In addition to tasking Bill Samuels, Jr. with finding customers, Bill's dad made another mandate which would help define his life and career. "We have a lot to be thankful for. Kentucky has always been good to us. I want you to develop a plan to get involved with the community. I want you to pick two non-profits, one educational and one business, and I want you to prepare to serve on the board and be ready in the next five years if you are asked to chair those boards," recalls Bill Samuels, Jr. By the time he retired, he had served on over 28 community boards and been involved in key Kentucky community development projects. "It was the MBA I never got. My dad was smart making me work with all those smart and talented leaders."

For ten years, Bill Samuels, Jr. worked hard to get the word out on Maker's Mark, but had difficulty getting the product to have traction outside of Kentucky. "My dad sat me down and said, 'Why don't we hire an agency and maybe they could teach you how to do your job?' It was one of the most important things we did."

The Tipping Point - Wall St. Journal Front Page Article

Things came to a head on August 1, 1980 when the Wall Street Journal featured Maker's Mark on the front page in the center column with the story *Maker's Mark Goes Against the Grain To Make Its Mark*. "It was the first time a private company had been featured on the front page. Our phones rang off the hook. We had to add five new phone lines and my dad and I spent hours and hours answering letters from people asking why they couldn't find Maker's Mark where they lived."

This was a real tipping point for Maker's Mark, and also a major test. The opportunity to sell a ton of whiskey had arrived, but their supply couldn't match the demand. "They call this the marshmallow test. Researchers went to first grade classes around the country and gave each kid a marshmallow and told them if they didn't eat their marshmallow for fifteen minutes, they'd get a second marshmallow. 70% ate the marshmallow and the rest squirmed for that fifteen minutes. They followed the kids who didn't eat the marshmallow and they found that they did better than the ones who did. The key was the discipline to delay gratification. My dad was dyslexic, we weren't great students, but there's no way we'd eat the marshmallow."

Rather than changing the process or buying additional spirit, the Samuels stayed their course. "There are so many ways to look good on the short term, but not eating that marshmallow has had more to do with our success other than the act of creation." This approach has been consistent at Maker's Mark through the years and has guided them through several acquisitions and changes in the market. "From that point on we were focused on managing growth and not screwing up the product." It has been 35 years since that Wall St. Journal article appeared and Maker's Mark has seen double digit growth every year for the past 34 years. "We've never let growth go beyond 10-13%" and that has meant allocations and shortages throughout the years.

In 1982, keeping focus lead Maker's Mark to hire their first spirits Brand Ambassador. "At that point we were part of the Hiram Walker company and didn't control field activities. We hired John Hadley almost out of self defense, to show them what happens if you do it right." They started John in Atlanta and then sent him to New York, Washington DC, and San Francisco. "When we look at the markets where we have the closest relationships, it's the ones that John went to."

Making Maker's Mark

Maker's Mark has defined themselves by their unbending commitment to their product. "We don't do anything the easy way here," comments Bill Samuels, Jr. Maker's Mark uses one of the only roller mills in existence. "We used to buy old distilleries that closed just to get replacement parts for our roller mill. Then we discovered they were using similar mills in baking. We went to the manufacturers and asked if they'd make one specifically for distilling."

With corn and wheat both in the mash, Maker's cooks their grains separately to ensure the wheat isn't scalded, which means they can't use a pressure cooker. The mash is fermented in small batch fermenters. "We are small batch and we try like hell to overcome the batchdom." Instead of scaling their production capabilities, Maker's Mark has replicated them, building a mirror image of the original distillery and replicating the small fermenters over and over again. Maker's Mark also doesn't maintain a finished inventory of their whiskey. They bottle to order: "We don't look at projections - we've trained our distributors to be smart in their ordering. They know their markets a lot better and buying too much or running out is great motivation to get the numbers right."

Another key element in Maker's Mark's success is that they rarely give in to market pressure. "We measure success as we've never lost control of the product. Our number one marketing goal is to not alienate our existing customers and always try to make new friends." Whiskey connoisseurs have often pushed Maker's Mark to put out 8 or 12 year bourbon, and they've flatly refused. "Maker's ages quicker than other bourbons because of the wheat, which is more sensitive than rye. There are also fewer alcohol derivatives which puts its peak flavor balance at 6-7 years". Maker's Mark is one of the few bourbon companies to not chill filter their bourbon, a process which ensures its clarity in cold weather but removes fatty acids which add flavor. "When you charcoal filter, the charcoal can't differentiate between good and bad flavors."

Maker's Mark has demonstrated fierce self reliance over the years. Even in times of great shortage of supply, Maker's has never brought in outside whiskey. "We are the only Kentucky distillery that operates off one source. We are the epitome of self reliance." To that end, Maker's Mark created a dam on their famous spring that provides them with their water to ensure they'd always have enough supply. Maker's built their own waste treatment plant and enacted a myriad of conservation programs including methane capture, which powers 25% of their facility.

Leaving a Legacy - The Making Maker's 46

As Bill Samuels, Jr. was running Maker's Mark, his son, Rob, was building a solid reputation for himself in the sales end of the spirits business, outside of Maker's Mark. After 10 years of working in the business, Bill sat down and discussed recruiting him to run Maker's Mark. Part of the agreement they reached was to set a definite retirement date for Bill. Rob didn't want to run the company in the shadow of his father indefinitely, so they picked a date 6 years in the future and Rob joined Maker's.

After running Maker's Mark for 33 years, Bill Samuels, Jr. realized that he hadn't left behind a legacy. "Up to that point, my career was defined by not screwing up Dad's company." Bill sat down with then Maker's Mark master distiller Kevin Smith to figure out if there was something Bill could leave as his legacy. The two sat down and sketched out a framework. "What Winning Looks Like," Bill wrote on the top of the sheet. "#1 Needs to be Yummy, #2 Maker's Mark on Steroids, #3 Long Finish". Bill and Kevin met many times over a number of months trying to figure out how exactly to give a long finish to Maker's Mark without a bitter aftertaste (the two

often go hand in hand).

The pair brought in Brad from the Independent Stave Company, the same company that had helped Bill Samuels, Sr. figure out the maturation piece of the Maker's Mark equation. They told Brad what they wanted and he replied, "Nice, but it's impossible," and in a famous moment Bill Samuels, Jr. said, "That's just terrific, that means we will be first."

Brad took the challenge to heart, and one day while he was grilling steaks came up with a realization: "You sear steaks to lock flavor in, so how about searing staves to lock the tannins in?" Brad went back to his lab and began testing different types of wood. American Oak wouldn't sear because it too easily caught fire and then charred. Brad's sister handled the wine side of their business where thinner French Oak staves were commonly used. "Brad heated the French Oak staves and they did something interesting - they became visually varnished."

They put 10 staves inside a finished barrel of Maker's Mark and then waited. "I kept tasting it the first few weeks and didn't think that we were really on to something. Then after Thanksgiving, it turned a corner and became something really interesting." What they found was that the French Oak imparted a distinct cinnamon note and increased vanillin coated the alcohol molecules, tricking the brain into thinking that the proof is low. They decided that this new product worked better at a higher proof (Maker's Mark is 90 proof while Maker's 46 is 94 proof), but they still didn't have a product, a name, and didn't know if what they made could still be called bourbon. "I went to the design firm and told them that they needed to imagine the final judge for the design would be my mom and her sensibilities. What would she do in 2011 that was a companion to the original bottle, slightly modernized? We even went back to the original cork, which had been a real pain."

Looking for a name, Bill and Kevin wanted to pay homage to Bill, who helped solve the problem of creating a bourbon that had a long finish with no harshness, "We couldn't call it Bill's Bourbon, but we found his log book that he left behind on one of his visits. We saw that we were project #46 in his log book and felt like Maker's 46 was a good way to honor him. I don't know if it makes sense commercially, but it was the right thing to do."

"We took Maker's 46 to the government to see if we could still call it bourbon. They said flavoring it naturally with oak doesn't take anything away from it, so it's still bourbon. I feel my real contribution isn't just 46, but an expansion to the world of bourbon."

True to his father's vision of not doing market research or testing, Bill invited 5,000 of Maker's Mark's ambassadors to come out to be the first to try Maker's 46. "I didn't need anyone to tell me if they liked it or not, I could see it on their faces." Maker's 46 was a smash hit among Maker's fans right out of the gate. As with quick success in the past, it created issues. "This process is a huge pain in the ass. We hadn't anticipated how delicate the process is. The first summer we noticed the acidic notes creeping in from the barrel and had to shut production down. There were four months we couldn't make Maker's 46." To solve these issues, Maker's Mark is building a climate controlled rackhouse to keep the temperature consistent with more control over the finishing process.

Rob Samuels Takes over Maker's Mark

Maker's Mark is often a victim of its own success. Even though the distillery is located in fairly remote Lorreto, Kentucky, they receive over 100,000 visitors a year. "These aren't visitors, they are fans," explains Bill Samuels, Jr. "You don't just happen upon us - you really have to make

the trek out to see us, and the people who come are excited to see where Maker's Mark comes from." One of Rob Samuels' major projects is a huge visitors center and new tasting room. Maker's expects as many as 150K people this year. They're also building a new bridge to help separate visitors from the trucks that move barrels in and out of the facility.

"Maker's is at a real tipping point. Rob is going to have to deal with much more severe allocation issues than I ever had," laments Bill. While officially retired, Bill Samuels, Jr. is still a fixture at Maker's Mark. "Instead of working 90 hours a week, it's now more like 80." Bill often reminds people that he's no longer in charge and continues to shift his attention to a myriad of community service projects. Indiana and Kentucky Governors recently announced a bridge that joins the previously broken loop of highway. It was a bridge that everyone thought would be impossible to realize, but it was Bill behind the scenes working with the other major industries in the area to help make it happen.

As you walk around the Maker's Mark distillery, it's hard to imagine that one of the world's most beloved bourbons comes from this old distillery. Maker's is one of the few distilleries that is registered as a national landmark. The status has made growing and changing difficult, but the ingenuity that Bill Samuels, Jr. and company apply is as much a testament to their commitment to keeping Marker's Mark the way it's always been, something different in the bourbon space, and the actualization of a dream that once seemed impossible: a sweet bourbon without any harshness that doesn't "blow your ears off."

For a complete interview with Bill Samuels, Jr. Visit <http://www.DrinkSpirits.com>

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