

# THE OBJECT OF MY OBSESSION

## INTO THE STRANGE WORLD OF BOURBON COLLECTING

by Sean Brock

I BLAME RATHEAD.\* Somewhere around 2006 or 2007, he offered to buy the kitchen a round of Pappy Van Winkle after he had dinner at McCrady's. My reply was, "I've never heard of that." Well, it's all been upward from there. I'm the first to admit that I have a very obsessive nature—you would know that if you've ever heard me talking about Carolina Gold rice. These days, the object of my obsession is collecting bourbon.



After discovering Pappy Van Winkle, I needed to understand why it was so good and what came before it. That curiosity led me to researching the Stitzel-Weller distillery, and eventually to trying a bottle of 1950 Old Fitzgerald courtesy of Pappy's grandson, Julian Van Winkle III. In the years since, I have jumped into the strange world of whiskey collecting. I thought chefs were crazy, but the whiskey community is full of obsessive-compulsive hoarder types, and I seem to fit right in.

In order to become a reputable collector, you have to do your homework. Turns out I'm pretty good at whiskey homework! First, you must read every book you can find about the history of bourbon. It's a bizarre and complicated history, filled with more tall tales and stretched truths than a presidential election. You'll study the history of tax stamps, memorize the UPC codes from various distilleries, and learn about "Bottled in Bond" and DSP numbers. You'll read about all the generations of master distillers from your favorite brands.

Next, you need to develop your palate. This may sound indulgent, but it's not about getting intoxicated. You'll add new flavor descriptions to your vocabulary: wet cardboard, old magazines, and fresh waffles. The key is to sample whiskeys from numerous distilleries and from many different eras.

I invite a group of friends over every month for tasting sessions. Each person brings a bottle based on the theme of the evening. We taste through them, jotting down notes like some sort of over-analytical wine critic. We record the nose, the color, the viscosity and texture. We record the front palate, the middle palate, and the finish. We stand around my kitchen calling out flavors as they come to us: "Wet grass!" "Graham crackers!" "Tootsie Rolls!" We compete to see who can correctly identify a particularly tricky bottle. Those are some of my favorite evenings spent with friends.

Finding rare bourbon is referred to as "the hunt." This entails driving around far-flung neighborhoods, seeking out rarely frequented liquor stores, and peering behind bulletproof glass for hidden bottles that have been collecting dust for decades. Finding a dusty in the wild is exhilarating. There are stories of people who come across insanely

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\*Mike "Rathead" Riley of Bristol, Virginia, is a longtime SFA member and cheerleader.

rare bottles of Very Very Old Fitzgerald from the 1950s—sometimes still in the box—when cleaning out their grandmother’s basement. And that’s when the sharks start to circle. The moment that lucky soul posts a picture on a whiskey forum, innocently wondering what the value of his basement find is, all hell breaks loose.

I’ve always had a weak spot for old stuff, and bourbon is no exception. Distillers like Drew Kulsveen at Willett in Bardstown, Kentucky, and the Van Winkle family in Frankfort are still bottling high-quality bourbon on a small and delicious scale. But the bourbon that was made between 1935 and 1990 will go down as one of America’s greatest treasures. I’ve tasted a lot of whiskey, new and old, and have always wondered what makes the old stuff superior. Was it the age of the trees that the barrels were made from? The well water? The skill of those master distillers? Was it the lower production? Was the whiskey actually much older than stated on the bottle? I’m not sure. Maybe nostalgia just tastes better.

There are few things that make me happier than opening a bottle of whiskey that has remained sealed for over half a century. It transports you like a time machine—what was the conversation around this bottle in 1950? What were people wearing, and what kind of cars were they driving? What damn war were we in? That whiskey bottle is a piece of living history.

The next time you are at your grandparents’ house, peek around the basement for a nondescript old bottle covered in dust. If you find one, call Husk and ask for me. I’ll buy it from you. Trust me, you don’t want it—it may have gone bad and could be poisonous. I’ll help you out and take it off your hands. 🍷

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Sean Brock’s cookbook, *Heritage*, won the IACP Julia Child First Book Award and the James Beard Award for Best Book of the Year in American Cooking.

ILLUSTRATION by Devin Cox.

## KEEPERS OF CHIPPED DREAMS

### THE LIFE, DEATH, AND ETERNAL ALLURE OF CERAMIC BOURBON DECANTERS

by Gustavo Arellano

I CALL HIM EZEKIEL, that 1969 Cabin Still ceramic bourbon decanter on my work desk molded in the shape of a stereotypical hillbilly. Bearded, barefoot, and slouching on a barrel, wearing a floppy hat and overalls and holding a shotgun and a whiskey jug, he looks like an Ezekiel—which is to say, he’s a dead ringer for my favorite uncle, mi tío Ezequiel. A fun-loving guy always up for a nip of white dog (or its Mexican cousin, mezcal), with a great name that somehow never joined Elijah and Ezra in the canon of good, cheap Biblical bourbon.

Ezekiel the Decanter has guarded my office for two years now. I bought him somewhere in Kentucky as part of my pickings from the 127 Yard Sale, that mega-flea market happening the first weekend of every August from Gadsden, Alabama, through Covington, Kentucky. I’ll always keep Ezekiel close to me, not because it cost just \$25 to score him and a two-foot-tall replica statue (his name is Enoch—gotta keep up with the Good Book!), but because that’s the summer I decided to collect as many bourbon decanters as possible.

They had intrigued me ever since I saw a 1997 Simpson episode where Marge told a novelty store owner—played by cult director John Waters—that a Confederate soldier statuette owned by her grandmother

