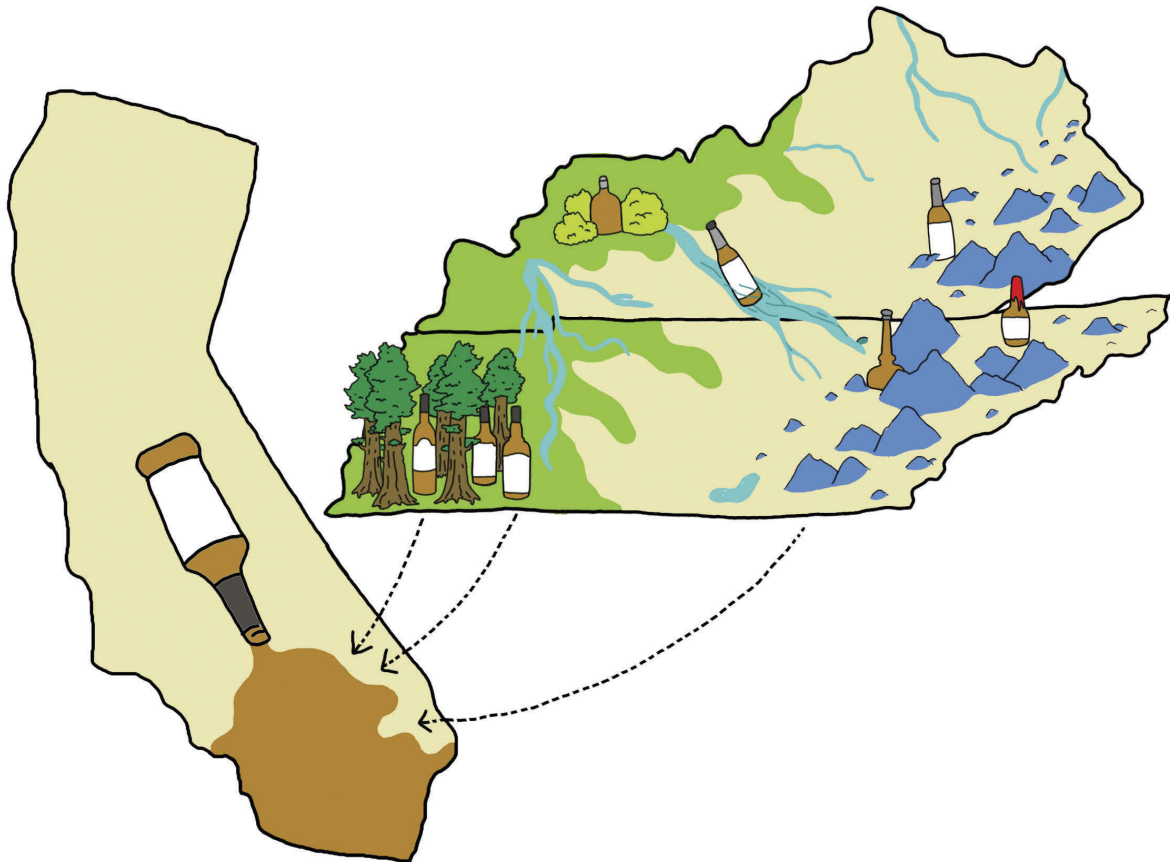


THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

What's lost when rare is everywhere?

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO



Illustrations by Iris Gottlieb

HI-TIME WINE CELLARS IN COSTA MESA, CALIFORNIA, IS A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION. Open since 1957, it stocks an impressive selection of alcohol from around the world and across the United States. I started patronizing Hi-Time in the mid-2000s, around the time I began to visit the South and developed an interest in bourbon. In those early days, I'd come back from vacation in Kentucky and Tennessee with a selection of bottles. Once they ran dry, I'd stop by Hi-Time to see if they carried any of my new bourbon finds.

They rarely did.

In those days, Hi-Time's bourbon selection was mostly the tried-and-true on just a couple of shelves lost in a sea of vodkas and tequilas. Jim Beam. Wild Turkey. Evan Williams. Maker's Mark. Buffalo Trace was the hip brand back then in southern California, and Woodford Reserve was the new kid.

The inventory reflected local tastes at the time, when Orange County's idea of Southern booze was Southern Comfort and Jack Daniel's.

That would soon change.

Every year, Southern drinking trends descended upon Hi-Time. In the early 2010s, it was moonshine in mason jars. Then came bourbon-spiked coffee liqueurs. New bourbons were next, along with whiskeys from across the South. On my recommendation, Hi-Time began to sell Copper & Kings, a brandy distilled in Louisville, Kentucky. They added Mellow Corn, a cheap, yellow-tinted corn whiskey from Kentucky that tastes far better than it looks.

Bars and restaurants around town poured what Hi-Time sold, and bartenders added Southern-inflected cocktails to their menus. My friends in southern California soon drank like my friends in Louisville and Atlanta.

On my most recent visit to Hi-Time, I found a veritable portal to the South.

Southern whiskeys—bourbons in particular—now occupy multiple shelves of an entire side of an aisle. Only tequila, a perennial favorite in southern California, took up more Hi-Time real estate. Apple-flavored Jim Beam lurked in the cordials, and Ezra Brooks Bourbon Cream perched near the Baileys.

Hi-Time keeps its rarest, often priciest selections in locked display cases. Years ago, Cognacs and mezcals dominated these cases, interrupted by the occasional bottle of Pappy Van Winkle. This time, more Southern spirits had joined the lineup, some of them surprising: Since when did Buffalo Trace make a kosher rye?

I saw bottles I was once able to acquire only in the South, even after the bourbon rush. Very Old Barton, an affordable label that's a favorite of bartenders for its robust taste but until recently wasn't available west of the Mississippi. Mainstream bourbon brands bottled in bond — that is to say, aged, distilled, and bottled under the auspices of the federal government to ensure what's inside was never blended with other spirits. Hi-Time now had massive bottles of Willett shaped in the form of a copper still that you used to only be able to buy at the Willett distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky. This was always one of my favorite gifts to friends back home, and it always provoked wide eyes and a big smile.

Part of the joy of my annual visits to the South are phenomena like these: The anticipation of a trip that happened only once a year. The temperance of being limited in my souvenir bottle shopping by budget and trunk space. Once home, the thrill of cracking open a bottle with friends and

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introducing them to something new.

I would try to convince those same friends to join me on a future trip. "Go for the booze and stay for the culture," I'd say. Few took me up on my offer. Now, with half of the equation available at home, they might think they have even less of a reason to visit the South.

Culinary tourism can be an easy way to learn about and appreciate another culture. But it can quickly turn problematic. It allows those with the money and privilege in the touristed area to control what visitors see and taste, and those who have the capability to visit to take certain trends back home.



The bourbons, Tennessee whiskeys, and other Southern spirits at Hi-Time are by and large the ones with the biggest buzz. To my palate, that doesn't necessarily mean they're the best.

When liquor conglomerates buy up formerly independent brands, they can offer nationwide distribution. I get why they do that—alcohol is a business, after all. I don't fault Hi-Time for merely reacting to consumer demand. And it is wonderful to see all this bourbon out here in southern California. But as someone who knows the magic of visiting distilleries, I fear something's lost in transaction.

Distillery tourism in the South allows you to meet the makers and to consider the environment where the spirit came from. In my experience, it makes you want to explore the cities or towns around the distilleries afterward. When you visit a distillery and talk to the folks who work there,

part of what you buy is the story of the product and its place. You come away with a valuable sense of connection, one you think of each time you pour from that bottle.

For more than a decade before the Covid pandemic, I bought hundreds of dollars' worth of bourbon and whiskey each summer to drink at home and give to friends. I knew we wouldn't be able to savor the taste of those particular bottles again until our next visit to the South. This anticipation made me value the experience more, made me drink a bit slower, made me think about what I consumed and where it came from.

That magic is lost when I can drive fifteen minutes to Hi-Time and grab the same bottle.

There was one bourbon I love that Hi-Time didn't stock as of my last visit. It's only available at the Kentucky distillery. I'm not going to name it lest the owners get an idea. 🍷

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