

BLACK MAPLE HILL

American Icons: The Enigmatic Story of Black Maple Hill - Whisky Auctioneer

Year Founded: 2000

Founder(s): Julian Van Winkle III (grandson of the legendary 'Pappy')

Fun Fact: Today, the highly sought-after bourbons come from Stein Distillery, an Oregon-based craft distillery famous for its aged whiskeys. All of the grain comes from the Stein homestead except the corn, which is sourced from a cousin up the road in Hermiston.

Black Maple Hill has a sort of notability unmatched in the Bourbon community. At first you may disagree, with names such as Pappy Van Winkle or Buffalo Trace Antique Collection springing to mind. These are whiskeys that see a bourbon-crazed frenzy every autumn as devoted fans race in their droves for the rare chance to get their hands on a bottle (a near impossible task as they sell out almost instantaneously). But what drives a level of singularity for Black Maple Hill is in fact not its ability to inspire an over-subscribed ballot or appear in a Hollywood movie but indeed it is the obscurity and anonymity it exists in.



Black Maple Hill is not a distillery, but rather an 'independent label' first introduced in 2000 by a Californian wine and spirits distributor called CVI Brands. Their catalogue focused mainly on Grappa and Cognac, but it also featured a number of boutique independent Scotch bottlers at the time, such as James MacArthur, Murray McDavid and the Hart Brothers. These were perhaps the catalyst for the company to seek to market its own boutique bourbon brand. The practice of contract-distilling was nothing new in the US, whereby a company would buy casks from a distillery to be marketed as their own product (Diageo buys its Bulleit bourbon from Four Roses for example). Black Maple Hill however was bottled by third-party companies, who neither distilled the whiskey nor made themselves known on any of the labelling.

Like nearly all things that command a premium in bourbon nowadays, this story starts with a man named Van Winkle. Julian Van Winkle III (grandson of the legendary 'Pappy') had opened his own bottling facility at the former Hoffman distillery in the 1980s. His father had been forced to sell the family's Stitzel-Weller distillery ten years before, but they were still able to buy barrels from it. In addition to producing the much-lauded Old Rip Van Winkle products, he also bottled bespoke bourbon brands for various clients. Among these are legendary releases such as Nathan Stones, Very Olde St Nick, and of course, Black Maple Hill. The source of vintage bottlings of WL Weller, Old Fitzgerald and Old Rip Van Winkle, bourbon from Stitzel-Weller is legendary and hugely sought after. The Black Maple Hill bottlings are particularly so, and near impossible to acquire. By the time the brand was conceived however, this was already a finite resource. United Distillers (nowadays known as Diageo) had shut the distillery down in 1992, meaning Julian Van Winkle's stocks were beginning to thin, necessitating him to form a partnership with the Sazerac company in 2002. This resulted in the cancellation of his independent contracts, leaving Black Maple Hill in limbo. Thankfully, a company called Kentucky Bourbon Distillers (KBD) were waiting in the wings. Owned by the Kulsveen family and operating out of the silent Willett distillery, KBD had bourbon in their warehouses from every distillery in Kentucky bar one, Willett itself. By the late 2000s, a global Bourbon boom had catapulted Black Maple Hill into the spotlight. The irresistible prospect of old-aged liquid capsules of Stitzel-Weller and Heaven Hill swept the Bourbon community, and Black Maple Hill bottlings quickly became an absolute must-have. They developed a cult-following of fans fueled by curiosity and connoisseurship. Black Maple Hill bottlings were increasingly becoming harder to find and soon were appearing on the secondary market for values far in excess of their original retail price tag. Sadly, they were not the only benefactors, and KBD's own Willett Family Estate brand had surfed the same wave, and the company increasingly reserved its stock for this, limiting what they could make available to CVI Brands and their other contracts. Black Maple Hill was eventually reduced to a non-age statement product, before disappearing from shelves. As they struggled to find an alternative it appeared as though Black Maple Hill was at the end of their story.

The brand was then suddenly resurrected in 2014. Gone however is the mystique of the label that once promised the chance to own rare old stocks from some of bourbon's greatest dynastic institutions. Instead, the brand now supported a small craft-distillery in Oregon called Stein. To opt-against buying in bulk from one of the states big companies, and shed the iconic name of "Kentucky" from its labels was a bold and refreshing approach that proves that Black Maple Hill, while in its modern manifestation may be less valuable to the collector, is a brand that has always held the quality of its liquid in the highest regard.

Micro-distilled in small batches from the finest locally grown grains using high mountain glacier water. A blend of whiskies aged four to five years in new heavily charred American White Oak barrels.



Bourbon

75% Corn · 25% Barley

Smooth but with heat and butterscotch and oak flavors. A surprisingly mellow finish given the high proof. A chocolatey nose reminiscent of unsweetened cocoa powder and stout beer.



Rye

75% Rye · 25% Corn

On the palate, the rye character is somewhat subdued (it could almost pass as a high-rye bourbon). Sappy, grassy, adding a little cinnamon and clove. The palate contains fistfuls of fresh dill and light peanut brittle. An undulating rye spice joins the mix along with a serving of light sweet oak. The dill provides a bold presence, making the palate vegetative in nature.