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It's "not your granddad's drink anymore," says a new generation of craft bourbon enthusiasts. Is there room on Arizona's barstools for the new bourbon boom?

The New 'Bourbonaires'

Text by JIMMY MAGAHERN ♦ Photos by MARK LIPCZYNSKI

Before visitors get to see Larry Winget's personal bourbon collection, they must first pass by his bookshelf holding more than 125 pairs of custom-made cowboy boots. The shelving lines an entire wall in the guest house of the sprawling ranch-style Paradise Valley home the professional motivational speaker and author shares with his wife of 35 years, Rose Mary.

“It sounds really cliché, but there’s something manly about having a good shot of whiskey and smoking a cigar.”

- Larry Winget

Larry Winget and Jason Grossmiller, Arizona Distilling Company founder and distiller, sample their favorites



“He’s got way more shoes than me,” says Rose Mary, with a laugh. Larry, a former Okie (and telephone operator) from Muskogee, Okla., who made his fortune advising business conference audiences to *Shut Up, Stop Whining & Get A Life*, to quote the title of his first New York Times best seller, adds, “I’ve also got over 400 cowboy shirts and about 20 cowboy hats. If you know me, one of anything is never enough!”

That certainly applies to Winget’s bourbon collection, a walk-in closet full of 250-plus varieties of the barrel-aged brown liquor in addition to some 60 to 70 Scotch and Irish whiskies. He hides his most valuable Pappy Van Winkle, a ridiculously sought-after 15-year-old blend purchased on the “brown market” for somewhere between \$7,500 and \$15,000 (he won’t specifically quote the price in front of Rose Mary), behind a \$65 bottle of Breaker Wheated Bourbon. But his pride and joy is the 1982 Elvis Presley porcelain decanter depicting the king of rock ‘n’ roll with outstretched arms forming an angelic figure with his

cape – one of about 20 limited-edition Elvis decanters produced for Jim Beam that Winget proudly displays atop the wraparound shelves. “That’s what my ashes are going to be buried in,” Winget says, in all seriousness. “My sons will pop the lid on that one, have a drink out of it and then they’ll fill it.” Rose Mary winces. “What can I say? I’m a big Elvis guy.”

Though he’s certainly on the extreme end, Winget, with a grey handlebar moustache now topping his trademark goatee, embodies the classic image of the good ol’ boy bourbon drinker. It spills out into the aggressively Western décor of his guest house/home office (complete with decidedly non-PC cigar store Indians), and seeps through Winget’s high-testosterone world view, parlayed into the weekly *How to Be a Real Man* podcasts he records in the guest house with fellow motivational macho man Chris Widener. “It sounds really cliché, but there’s something manly about having a good shot of whiskey and smoking a cigar,” says Winget, who won’t go anywhere near an umbrella-topped

daiquiri. “It just ties it all together.” Winget even has his own *Ocean’s Eleven* rat pack of old drinking buddies he assembles each year in different party destinations. They jokingly call themselves the “Bourbonaires.”

But his kind of bourbon drinker is slowly disappearing – and the 65-year-old man’s man knows it. “I’ve only been to one meeting with the Arizona Bourbon Society,” Winget says, referring to the invitation-only Facebook group of local bourbon enthusiasts that now boasts 1,300-plus members. “They’re all half my age, first of all. And they get a little snooty about the stuff: ‘This is about a 94.5 proof.’ ‘No, I had it at 94.7.’ I just shake my head and say, ‘You guys have made drinking work!’”

Indeed, younger drinkers have made bourbon drinking a popular hipster pastime, fueled by the foodies’ drive for all things authentic and the scenemaker’s thirst for something beyond craft beer. Fully a third of today’s bourbon consumers are younger than 35. Women comprise 33 percent. Together, this new





generation of artisan bourbonaires is propelling a major boom. In 2016, U.S. bourbon sales topped 20 million cases for the first time in more than three decades, raking in over \$3 billion.


"Look, it's not your granddad's drink anymore," says John Amann, the 40-year-old president of the Arizona Bourbon Society who works by day as a senior district manager at Bed Bath & Beyond and taste-tests by night with fellow Generation X-ers. "Authentic is trendy, and bourbon is authentic. It takes patience to make, and there's always a story behind it. Every step of American history is littered with bourbon. And I

think the younger generations are drawn to that now."

Of course, they're also Instagramming each storied bottle and engaging in the inevitable social media one-upsmanship, in the process willingly paying more for "super-premium" brands like Maker's Mark, Knob Creek and beyond (what delighted marketing executives call "graduating within the segment"). As a result, higher-priced bourbons rose in sales by 10.5 percent last year to 5 million cases, buoying a new golden era for the distillery industry – and new opportunities for social media "influencers."

"I started with Jack Daniels, then I went to Maker's, and then I found High West, which is a non-mass-produced craft whiskey," says Maggie Flores, a 31-year-old former model who blogs about whiskey and bourbon on Instagram, where she has nearly 7,600 followers, and Facebook, where she has another 300. "I call High West my Aladdin, because it showed me there was way more out there than I knew before."

Snapping selfies while holding bottles of her latest finds ("For a while I paired a look with the bottle, changing my makeup and hair to go with how the bottle made me feel"), the Tempe beauty has become

A man with a goatee and short dark hair is sitting in a dark wooden chair. He is wearing a white long-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans. He is smiling at the camera. In his right hand, he holds a small snifter glass containing a small amount of amber liquid. In his left hand, he holds a bottle of Copper City Bourbon. The bottle has a dark label with 'COPPER CITY' in gold and 'BOURBON' in white. The background is a dark wood panel wall.

*“We want to show
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bourbon outside
of Kentucky.”*

- Jason Grossmiller



Larry Winget

an in-demand endorser in the suddenly lucrative field of influencer marketing, although her end game is more ambitious. “I’d like to get into distilling here in the Valley,” she says, citing Marianne Barnes, Kentucky’s first female master bourbon distiller, as inspiration. “I want to create something magical of my own.”

Her friend Brittnei Koski is already there, working as an assistant distiller at Adventurous Stills in Tempe, where the 30-year-old helps mash the grains, adjust the pH during fermentation and handle other key parts of the process. “In Arizona, we actually have four distilleries with women in ownership roles, and three distilleries with female assistant distillers, including myself,” says Koski, who started out brewing craft beer in Denver. “So women are already in the industry a little bit more than people realize.”

For Arizona Distilling Company founder and distiller Jason Grossmiller, who got into home beer brewing while working as a blackjack dealer at a Valley casino but decided there were already too many craft beer brewers in town, making bourbon is a way to reclaim some of Arizona’s rich frontier history while forging new frontiers himself.

“That’s the whole reason we came out with a bourbon first, because that’s what they were drinking back in the olden days: bourbon and rye,” he says, admitting that he first sourced the juice from a mega distillery in Lawrenceburg, Ind., that actually supplies most of the bourbon many so-called craft distilleries merely finish in their own barrels. The Tempe company now distills six different spirits using almost exclusively Arizona ingredients, most notably a unique grain harvested in Casa Grande primarily used in pasta. Its Desert Durum Wheat Whiskey recently took home a silver award in the San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

“Truthfully, I’m surprised it took Arizona so long to get back into distilling,” says Grossmiller, noting that his company’s Copper City Bourbon, when introduced in 2013, was the first legally distilled spirit made in Arizona since Prohibition. Grossmiller estimates there are now about 20 micro-distillers in the state, up from only three when Arizona Distilling Company started.

“We want to show the world that you can make good bourbon outside of Kentucky,” he says. “But it’s hard disrupting an industry that loves tradition.” ♦