

SMOOTH AS (NOT QUITE) TENNESSEE WHISKEY



The Joy of Stumbling Upon Samuel T. Bryant Distillery


Written by Rich Manning /// Photographs by Kristina Byrd

It's April 2018, and I'm traveling down I-40 from Memphis in the middle of a family vacation. The trip's been full of discoveries, both anticipated (Graceland is as kitschy cool as I hoped) and unexpected (doughnuts and champagne are a superb breakfast combo, especially when it's your wife's birthday). Our sights are eventually on Nashville, but I'm not ready to hit Music City just yet. It's time to sip some spirits, and I'm not going anywhere near Lynchburg. I'm heading to the small town of Jackson, to a little craft spot called Samuel T. Bryant Distillery. I'm intrigued, and not just by the opportunity to imbibe in local hooch.

I discovered Samuel T. Bryant Distillery purely by happenstance. I was scouring the route between Memphis and Nashville on Google Maps, in search of a lunch spot that wasn't festooned with golden arches or didn't serve their hash browns scattered, smothered, or chunked. I did find a joint that ended up serving killer hushpuppies, but I also stumbled upon Samuel T. Bryant's tiny dot, pinned to Jackson's outskirts just off the interstate. A quick visit to their unassuming website revealed no hint of mega-corporate tomfoolery, no flash and dazzle of a big PR engine. It was just a humble craft distillery selling their creations, just as they'd been doing since they launched in the summer of 2016. It was the drinkable match to my independent culinary search. I was in.

We arrive at the tasting room and walked to the counter. It's a long walk by design. The space is 3,600 square feet and doubles




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as an events center, and it's drenched in rustic barnyard charm. Sam, the fellow that lends his name to the distillery, stands at the counter along with a couple of spirits and several jars of moonshine. The crooked slapped-on labeling on a few of the bottles provides insight to the operation's small size. Before we taste what's behind the skewed packaging, Sam directs our attention to the door we walked through. "If you look up from the door, you'll see an old still," he says. "That was my grandfather's." The word bootlegging is winked instead of uttered, and it conveys plenty of family history and tradition. I smile wide.

We start with the first brown spirit, a whiskey-style concoction called Tennessee Sam. "We can't technically call this whiskey on the bottle," Sam says as he pours. "It has to be made a certain way to meet Tennessee whiskey standards, and we don't do it in that way. We do our own thing." I don't press for details, but that's because I'm enjoying whatever method he uses far too much to care. Its oaky, slightly sweet nose gives way to a luscious peach and stone fruit palate before transitioning to a smooth finish with just enough burn to remind you what you're really drinking. We buy a bottle and eventually regret we didn't by two more.

The rest of the tasting proves Sam isn't just a hobbyist carrying on grandad's legacy. The next spirit he pours is an agave-based spirit named TNKilla (those pesky naming regulations strike again), and it's the first spirit of its kind made in Tennessee. The moonshines range from traditional apple pie to more exotic flavors like coconut. They display a level of craftsmanship that I wasn't anticipating, and it compels me to go into journalist/spirit geek hybrid mode.

"So, what's your distribution like?" I ask.

"Right now, my distribution goes from that wall to that wall," Sam says as he slowly points his index finger to the left before dragging it to the right. "Hopefully that will change one day, but that's all we got right now."


The rest of the tasting experience probably can't be replicated in Lynchburg. Sam shares stories about how he, his dad, and a few of his friends built the tasting room from scratch. His dad, Samuel P. "Pete" Bryant, pops into the tasting room and chats with us for a couple

of minutes. It's all so damn special. Nashville beckons, but I'm reluctant to leave.

A few things have happened over at Samuel T. Bryant since Google Maps put them in my consciousness a year ago. They've struck a distribution deal with Great American Craft Spirits that gets their juice into 47 states — from that coast to that coast, if you will. Sam's also working on getting his products into local liquor stores. When I catch up with Sam over the phone, he tells me the distillery's not quite as hidden anymore, either. "We get all kinds of people coming in here these days," he says. "We'll get tour groups from Europe stopping by here on occasion."

Sam embraces the growth. At the same time, he's also very conscientious about growing on his own terms. "If we're going to grow more volume, we have to do it without sacrificing quality," he says. "We've actually delayed expansion because we want to make sure we'd be able to maintain the quality that we have now. We know taking it slow like this may cost us a new customer or two, but we need to make sure we're making our existing customers happy first. I don't want to lose the whole ball of wax by not taking care of what we already have."

Sam's still not allowed to call Tennessee Sam whiskey. He's okay with this. Instead of getting the green light from the Volunteer State, he'd rather keep using his distilling method, which involves cutting and toasting his own oak staves instead of buying pre-made barrels. "I started making whiskey with my own staves because I couldn't afford to buy barrels at first," he says. "It was initially out of necessity, but I think it actually produces a better product. There's no need for us to change just so we can officially be called something. We're comfortable with just doing what we do. The important thing is that our customers appreciate what we're doing."

Speaking as a customer, Samuel T. Bryant's work is indeed much appreciated. 

Samuel T. Bryant Distillery is located in Jackson, Tennessee. For more information visit www.samueltbryant.com or call (731) 467-1221.



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