

UPFRONT

An Oddly

PERFECT PAIR



PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM

The Basil Hayden's Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, Rye Whiskey, Two by Two Rye, and Dark Rye expressions were paired with an assortment of cheese during the brand's recent tasting event at Employees Only in West Hollywood, CA.

BASIL HAYDEN'S WHISKEYS PLAY NICE WITH CHEESE AT TASTINGS IN SAN DIEGO AND L.A.

by Rich Manning and Abby Read

Pairing whiskey with cheese is an esoteric experience. For the uninitiated or unsure, it's a duo likely best enjoyed in a relaxed, unpretentious setting. Basil Hayden's took note of this notion when it hosted a pair of recent tasting events in Southern California, enlisting the help of two cheesemongers to guide attendees through the pairing process.

In a private event space named The Lion's Share, a game-centric gastropub located in the southwestern tip of San Diego's Gaslamp District, cocktails emerged from behind a gold semi-circular bar as a record player spun vintage R&B. It felt less like an events venue and more like the home of a close friend right before the host puts out the appetizers and a solid couple of hours before the karaoke machine gets plugged in.

There were no karaoke machines to be found on the warm day of the tasting last year, however, which felt appropriate: The 20 or so souls gathered in one of the upper-level rooms weren't there to warble, but to experience the intriguing flavor possibilities of what seemed like a novelty combination. The fact that we viewed the afternoon's festivities as unconventional, however, inadvertently confirmed that none of us had lived in true bourbon territory.



PHOTO: JUSTIN GALLOWAY

**Getin Barlas,
Master Cheesemonger at
Venissimo Cheese in Del Mar, CA,
curated four rounds of cheese to pair with
four Basil Hayden's whiskeys at the San
Diego tasting event.**

"Back when I lived in Kentucky, we would bring bottles of bourbon to dinner, not wine," said Megan Breier, the West Coast American Whiskey Ambassador for Beam Suntory. "If you were hosting a dinner, it would be common to create a meal with a bourbon pairing in mind—it was part of being



PHOTO: JUSTIN GALLOWAY

**Megan Breier, West Coast American Whiskey
Ambassador for Beam Suntory, hosted the San
Diego and L.A. events.**

hospitable. Matching Basil Hayden's with cheese is an extension of that kind of hospitality."

The four-course tasting highlighted Basil Hayden's original Kentucky Straight Bourbon and the Port-infused Dark Rye, as well as two of its limited-edition ryes: the Quarter Cask-Finished Rye Whiskey and the Two by Two Rye, a blend of two aged ryes and two aged bourbons.

They represent the easy part of the pairing equation, as Basil Hayden's whiskeys are complex yet approachable and appealing across the board. Finding cheese to match these expressions is the tricky part, primarily because there aren't any intrinsic guidelines to help streamline the process. "It's more difficult to pair cheese with whiskey than it is with wine because nothing is based on regional matching," Getin Barlas, Master Cheesemonger at Venissimo Cheese in Del Mar, told us. "For example, Bordeaux wines match with Bordeaux cheeses because you can pick out similar regional characteristics in both. You can't do that with whiskey—instead, you really have to expand your search to find cheeses that can stand up to whiskey's strength and intensity."

Barlas' quest to match the quartet of Basil Hayden's spirits encompassed a global reach of cow's, goat's, and sheep's milk cheeses that spanned from Scandinavia to Wisconsin. "These aren't Costco cheeses," he joked as he introduced the first course. As the tasting progressed, it became increasingly clear Barlas had done his homework: The Dutch honey goat gouda cajoled nuanced sweetness from the traditional Kentucky Bourbon, while the barnyard funkiness of the German Sternschnuppe cheese made the Rye Whiskey's

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The cheese Getin Barlas served at The Lion's Share in San Diego's Gaslamp District included a global selection of cow's, goat's, and sheep's milk cheeses with origins spanning from Scandinavia to Wisconsin.

spiced notes more pronounced. The texture of a caramel cube-like mango-ginger Stilton from England, meanwhile, helped the Dark Rye cling to the tongue like a sweater freshly pulled from the dryer.

The afternoon's wildest discovery arrived via the Dutch Ewephoria sheep's milk, whose bold butterscotch notes joined the complexity of the Two by Two expression in creating a labyrinth of flavors that unfolded distinctively with each sip. And while the afternoon's pairing excellence resulted from thoughtful planning, Breier noted the existence of an underlying connection between whiskey and cheese.

"When you work your way through these pairings, you realize that everything you have starts from the farm, whether it's a grain for the whiskey or an animal for the cheese," she says. "They may be from different parts of the world, but the fact that they both originate from farming gives each a sense of place that binds them together. This bond allows their nuances to really stand out when they're paired."

Throughout the session, whatever preconceptions existed amongst us beforehand were steadily supplanted by feelings of sensory bliss: It turns out that whiskey and cheese do indeed work together, and they do so remarkably well. —Rich Manning



Guests in West Hollywood enjoyed Basil Hayden's with an array of cheeses curated by cheesemonger Tony Princiotta.

THE KENTUCKY WAY MEETS L.A.

In Los Angeles, pairing kale and quinoa might seem more crowd-pleasing than serving bourbon with cheese, but the city's event with Basil Hayden's proved the taste-bud tide might be turning.

West Coast newcomer Employees Only settles nicely into its surroundings on a stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood: Dark wood paneling and bronze accents create a sense of exclusivity and intimacy inside the retro-style bar. As we passed through a curtain into Henry's Room—a private area tucked in the back of the venue—we were greeted with a variation on the Paper Plane featuring Basil Hayden's Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, white peach puree, apricot liqueur, Campari, and lemon at the posh bar in the room's center. A light and refreshing cocktail ideal for Southern California's temperate winter weather, the drink immediately awakened our palates.

According to Breier, Basil Hayden's collaborated with The Cheese Store of Beverly Hills on the pairings to prove that "it's a misconception that you can't pair a spirit with food."



PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM

Breier then walked attendees through the steps for a successful tasting, first and foremost a method known as the “Kentucky chew.”

“[Master Distiller] Booker Noe looked like he chewed on his bourbon when he tasted it,” Breier explained, “because he allowed it to really spread around in his mouth and under his tongue.” After you taste, she continued, “then you swallow, which is the start of what I call the nice, long Kentucky hug.” (From then on, the welcome cocktail was fittingly referred to as The Kentucky Hug.)

The four-course tasting menu began with the Basil Hayden’s Kentucky Straight Bourbon. With vanilla and caramel notes developed during its time spent in barrel, it’s a smooth sipping spirit that requires little fuss, so it made sense when cheesemonger Tony Princiotta, The Cheese Store’s General Manager, selected a low-maintenance “pub cheese” to pair with it. The noticeably nutty English farmhouse cheddar brought out the bourbon’s mid-palate while intensifying the nuttiness of the corn in its mash bill. The peppercorns in the second cheese, the Marco Polo cheddar from Beecher’s Handmade Cheese in Seattle’s Pike Place Market, popped with flavor and enhanced the spirit’s finish.

During the second round of tasting, the limited-edition Basil Hayden’s Rye Whiskey, which has a crisp, almost menthol-like finish, matched well with an aged Comté from the Alpine area of France. According to Princiotta, the salty, long finish of the cow’s milk



Tony Princiotta.

PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM



The welcome cocktail served at the West Hollywood event was a variation on the Paper Plane featuring Basil Hayden’s Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, white peach puree, apricot liqueur, Campari, and lemon.

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cheese works to smooth out and reinforce the delicate, clean character of the rye due to the moisture content left after 36 months of aging.

Next, for the Two by Two Rye expression, he first served Piave, a cheese from Italy’s Veneto region; very fruity and a little sweet, it complemented the caramelized notes of the rye. Princiotta took a big swing, however, with his second cheese: the bold Castrum Erat Maximum. A Spanish cheese made from raw sheep’s milk that he described as “rustic and a little funky,” it garnered mixed reactions and disrupted what had been a unanimous enjoyment of each previous cheese. After one attendee referred to it as a palate cleanser akin to “a slap in the face,” Princiotta reminded us that in the cheese business, “there is no right

or wrong. Cheese makes people happy.” (This one subjectively so.)

The final pairing married Basil Hayden’s Dark Rye with a variety of smoked cheeses. The California Port finish of the spirit leaves sugar lingering on the palate, so to counter this sweetness, Princiotta steered toward a naturally smoked raw sheep’s milk cheese, Fumaison, and a creamier yellow cheese from England called Shropshire Blue. The cheesemonger wrapped things up by suggesting that the first cheese of the evening would also make a nice pairing for this rye, bringing the tasting full circle. “All of our palates are different, so a tasting event may seem particularly subjective, but that is part of the fun and why we do pairings—to interact with one another,” Breier said. —Abby Read ■■