



spirits moved them

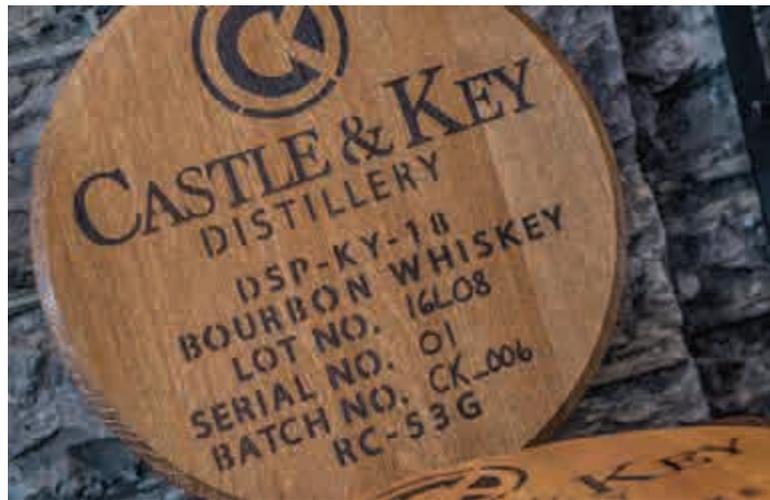
A pair of visionaries
reimagines the
bourbon
experience with
Castle & Key, one
of the most lauded
— and stunning —
new distilleries
in America

By Louis Guida
Photos by Lee Thomas



Artisan gins and vodkas are the distillery's first releases.

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Ten miles west of Lexington, at the edge of the town of Versailles, McCracken Pike begins. It's a picture-postcard Bluegrass road — two-lane, tree-lined, and meandering past horse farms along a karst creek that will meet the Kentucky River. But not far beyond unincorporated Millville — a community center and two churches, Baptist and Christian, mark it — the pike surrenders its representative character to a small limestone fortress and a complex of support buildings.

This is Castle & Key, the reborn and reinvented distillery that has had a range of observers — bourbon aficionados, architects, historic preservationists, landscapers — buzzing since its public opening last fall. The excitement is driven by a singular — in the bourbon world, at least — mix of factors: the uniqueness of the place, the staggering scope of its restoration, and the vision and drive of the people at the center of the project.

"It was overwhelming. There was a lot of property. There were lots of structures. We needed to develop plans for the distillery itself," said Will Arvin, one of two principals who

spearheaded Old Taylor's comeback and created Castle & Key. "Our challenge was knowing where to start."

"There was an iconic-ness here that we could claim as a legacy," said Wes Murry, the distillery's other principal. "We just started going."



Wes Murry



Will Arvin

COURTESY OF CASTLE & KEY

Birthplace of modern bourbon tourism

Start with the place. Castle & Key is the old Old Taylor Distilling Company, founded in 1887 by the idiosyncratic Col. Edmund Haynes Taylor Jr. A descendant of U.S. presidents James Madison and Zachary Taylor, Edmund Taylor (like Kentucky Fried Chicken's Harland Sanders and countless others) was not a military officer but an honorary Kentucky Colonel. Hence his title. He had an eclectic résumé — banker, politician, 16-year mayor of nearby Frankfort. Before Old Taylor, he owned several other distilleries, including O.F.C. in Frankfort, which he bought in 1870 and then expanded and modernized with copper fermenters, column stills, and steam-heated warehouses. The venture ended in a bankruptcy, however, and Taylor sold O.F.C., which is now Buffalo Trace Distillery, in 1878.

Taylor's signature endeavor, Old Taylor, was grand from conception to realization. Dominated by a medieval, Rhenish-style castle, with crenelated walls and two towers, it featured a



The partners restored a peristyle over the distillery's water source, a 10-foot deep, 140,000-gallon spring-fed aquifer.

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sunken garden and a columned peristyle over a keyhole-shaped central spring. The first distillery to produce one million cases of bourbon, Old Taylor became a showcase for Kentucky's identity whiskey and the birthplace of modern bourbon tourism. Taylor built a train line to bring in visitors (as well as supplies and materials) from nearby Frankfort and gave Old Taylor a high public profile, hosting numerous events, conventions, and lavish parties there.

Production at the distillery ceased after Prohibition took effect in 1920. Taylor died in 1923 at Thistleton, his Frankfort estate. (He also owned a nearby cattle farm, which is now part of Coolmore's Ashford Stud.) In 1935, two years after Prohibition ended, National Distillers purchased the property. They more than doubled production and distilled there until 1972, when a national bourbon glut prompted them to close. And so began Old Taylor's decline, though Jim Beam, which took ownership in 1987, used its warehouses to age and store whiskey until 1994, when they idled operations entirely. Abandoned for good, Old Taylor fell into accelerated disrepair.

"...we saw what it could become"

Enter Will Arvin and Wes Murry. Arvin was an attorney in his



Castle & Key's largest aging warehouse can hold 65,000 barrels.

hometown of Nicholasville, Kentucky, when he first thought about making bourbon. "The seed of the idea started when I was having lunch with a friend one day at Keeneland," he said. "I began looking for a distillery to buy or build. Old Taylor turned out to be the only place for sale."

When Arvin first saw the property in 2013, it was in serious decay. "Roofs were caving in," he said. "But I was absolutely blown away by the place. I loved it right away. The architecture ... it was all very spiritual."

In the fall of 2013, while considering how he might make Old Taylor work, Arvin met Wes Murry through a mutual friend. Murry, who is from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, had his own small investment firm in Lexington. "I was doing well, but the work wasn't very exciting," he said. "I was looking for something different."



The distillery's first bourbons and ryes are already aging in its warehouses.



The distillery uses Kentucky-grown corn and rye for its whiskeys.



Master distiller Marianne Eaves, left, oversees the fermentation process.

Over the next few months, Arvin and Murry did their due diligence and formulated a business plan, and in April 2014 they bought Old Taylor for slightly under a million dollars.

The property, 113 acres tucked between McCracken Pike and Glens Creek, was a rough and spectral ruin. Many of its 22 buildings were badly deteriorated, and walls and roofs on some had collapsed. A dense overgrowth of vines and trees and accumulated debris covered the grounds.

“When we first looked at it, we saw what it would become,” Murry said.

He and Arvin soon began to bring Old Taylor back to life. They shored up structures and repaired roofs and walls. They restored buildings, including an historic, 534-foot, aging brick warehouse — believed to be the longest one of its design in the world — that was considered beyond repair. They restored Taylor’s peristyle — Doric and Roman columns, roof, and chandelier — over the distillery’s 10-foot deep, 140,000-gallon spring-fed aquifer. They found Taylor’s sunken garden concealed under a mound of debris and hired Lexington landscaper Jon Carloftis, who made his mark designing New York rooftop gardens, to resurrect it and to transform other green spaces on the property.



Grain mixes, or mash bills, for whiskeys are fermented before distillation and aging.

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Landing Eaves as master distiller was a coup for the partners.

On the production end of their operation — their core raison d'être — they began contracting to distill and warehouse other companies' spirits. They added 24-inch and then 32-inch column stills. They made plans to produce gin and vodka, in part to bridge the gap until their rye and bourbon were ready to release. And, most importantly, they hired Marianne Eaves as their master distiller.

Developing a brand

Getting Eaves was a coup for Arvin and Murry. A rising star in the bourbon world, she was Louisville-based international spirits company Brown-Forman's master taster and in line to succeed Chris Morris, master distiller at Woodford Reserve, the company's high-end distillery that's located only about four miles south on McCracken Pike.

In December 2014, at Arvin and Murry's invitation, Eaves came from Woodford to see Castle & Key. "It was a beautiful, snowy day," she said, remembering the collapsed roofs, broken windows, and knee-high trash. The partners asked Eaves



The Boiler Room serves as a visitor's center and offers locally sourced merchandise.

to consider becoming their master distiller. A Kentucky native with a chemical engineering degree from the University of Louisville, Eaves listened but didn't commit.

"I had a great gig at Brown-Forman. It was a lot for me to leave," Eaves said. "But I could be part of a new team here. And it was easy to see how passionate Will and Wes were. They had a vision for this place."

After Eaves met Arvin and Murry's wives — Shannon Arvin is an attorney (she represents Keeneland) and Anne Murry a dentist — she knew the men “could take direction from strong women” and soon after, in February 2015, accepted their offer. She became a partner in the company and Kentucky's first female master distiller since Prohibition.

“I knew we could grow quickly,” Eaves said. She began production of rye and bourbon in December 2016. Her first gin — an artisan one made with locally sourced botanicals — and vodka were produced and released in limited quantities in the spring of last year. They're labeled “Restoration Releases.”

Castle & Key's first ryes and bourbons are currently aging in oak barrels. The rye — a 63 percent rye/17 percent yellow corn/20 percent barley mash bill — is set for a spring 2020 release. The bourbon — a 73 percent white corn/10 percent rye/17



Original ironwork references the distillery's past.

percent barley mash bill — likely won't be released until 2022. There also will be a bourbon made with 10 percent wheat instead of rye.

The corn and rye are non-GMO Kentucky-grown grains.

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The white corn used in the bourbon and the high percentage of barley used in both the bourbon and rye are unusual in the industry. But they reflect the way Old Taylor was made, Eaves said, and are “an homage to Col. Taylor.”

Castle & Key’s current projected annual production capability, for all spirits, is 50,000 barrels, and its long-term annual sales goal is 100,000 cases. Murry said its expected spirits ratio would be 66 to 75 percent bourbon, 15 to 20 percent rye, and the remainder gin and vodka.

“We’re developing our brand, and we’re invested in the process,” Eaves said. “One thing that sets us apart is that we value consistent quality over consistent flavor, kind of like in wine-making. We embrace what the product

wants, the nuances. And we’re not constrained by the traditions of the industry.”

Castle & Key’s Restoration gin and vodka have been well received, Murry said, and are served to visitors after distillery “experiences,” which the company offers instead of customary tours. Limited to 15 people and costing \$30 per person, the experiences are part of Castle & Key’s brand identity and are intended to carry forward Col. Taylor’s tourism trailblazing and make the distillery an immersive



The Castle & Key campus includes 22 buildings, many of which have been restored.

bourbon destination.

Although it’s increasing its public profile through site visits and media coverage — Travel Channel was there recently — and although its first spirits are well into production, Castle & Key is still a distillery-in-progress. Work on the property, which Murry estimates is a little more than 60 to 70 percent complete, has reportedly cost upward of \$30 million thus far. Meanwhile, the company is growing. It now has 92 employees, full- and part-

time. (It added a non-managing financial partner, Louisville businessman Brook Smith, in 2016.)

“Some days I look around and see how far we’ve come, and other days I see how much we have to do,” Murry said. “You have to keep yourself humble and honest.”

“You never can do enough fast enough,” Arvin said. “There’s maybe still a little frustration when I look at the site. But in a lot of ways, we’ve moved mountains.” **KM**