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TRAVEL

# Visiting Bardstown: Soaking up the Flavors—and Community—in the Bourbon Capital of the World

Bourbon is booming, and nowhere more so than in Kentucky's second-oldest city, a small town that pours on the hospitality

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April 11, 2023



PHOTO: COURTESY OF BARDSTOWN BOURBON COMPANY

A flight at Bardstown Bourbon Company.

Bardstovwn may be best known for its proximity to bourbon distilleries—there are eleven within a sixteen-mile radius of downtown’s central Court Square—but a palpable community spirit also runs through this tight-knit town of 13,000-plus residents. Neighbors support one another during trying times, such as distillers banding together to help competitor Heaven Hill recover from a devastating fire in 1996, and they celebrate shared prosperity.

This April marks the release of the Bardstovwn Collection, a collaboration among six of the area’s distilleries—Bardstovwn Bourbon Company, Heaven Hill, Jim Beam, Lux Row, Log Still, and Preservation—to showcase Bardstovwn’s status as the Bourbon Capital of the World. Each selected a special three-barrel batch to be included as part of the limited-edition collection, with individual bottles releasing April 13 and 14 on a staggered schedule at each distillery. Opportunities to purchase the collection are also available via two-day VIP tours hosted by Mint Julep Experiences and offered once a month through July. “Where else in the world would you find six strong competitors that come together and say, ‘We’re going to do this not because we want to grow, but because we want Bardstovwn to grow?’” says Jeff Crowe, director of Kentucky experiences with Heaven Hill.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF BARDSTOVWN COLLECTION

The Bardstovwn Collection lineup.

Beyond the distilleries, Bardstown's charming and compact downtown includes nearly two hundred buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, many now occupied by an eclectic mix of shops, bars, and restaurants. Visitors who stop in are as likely to leave with detailed recommendations for the rest of their trip as they are a memorable meal or a Kentucky keepsake. But of course many of those visitors come for the bourbon, and there's plenty of it to go around amid Bardstown's bucolic setting, usually served with a side of genuine small-town hospitality.

## Distillery Hopping

The wealth of distilleries in and around Bardstown range from some of the nation's largest producers to small craft distillers and innovative newcomers. Collectively, they offer an opportunity to sample an array of approaches and styles. "When you visit Napa, you don't just go to one winery—you want the whole experience," says Dan Callaway, vice president of hospitality and product development at **Bardstown Bourbon Company**. "We have the best distilleries right here... and it elevates the entire region."

Bardstown Bourbon Co. opened in 2014 and adopts a thoroughly modern approach to distillation and hospitality. The sleek, glass-walled architecture throughout its hundred-plus-acre campus accentuates its transparency in distilling for dozens of other brands in addition to its own products. Various tours, tastings, and mixology classes allow visitors access to nearly every aspect of its operation.



Barrels inside Lux Row Distillers.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LUX ROW DISTILLERS

**Log Still Distillery at Dant Crossing** likewise emphasizes hospitality on its scenic 300-acre campus just south of Bardstown. Here members of the Dant family have built a destination distillery and more on the site where an ancestor once operated a distillery in the 1800s. In addition to the newly operational distillery, the complex includes a 2,000-seat amphitheater, and guests can stay overnight in a historic mansion, three bed-and-breakfast style lodges, or in cozy bungalows, several of which overlook a twelve-acre fishing lake.

Another more recent entrant, **Preservation Distillery** opened in Bardstown in 2018. Visitors here can see a smaller operation in action—maximum production is about eight barrels a day distilled on traditional pot stills—and sample a few rare releases. Owner Marci Palatella uses older stocks of sourced whiskey to blend releases under the Rare Perfection and Very Olde St. Nick labels, among others. **Lux Row Distillers** also opened in 2018, though it feels much older. Set on ninety acres of former farmland within city

limits, the visitor’s center, distillery, and warehouses blend seamlessly with the rolling countryside. Tour options range from a forty-five-minute tasting to a behind-the-scenes look at the production process.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF PRESERVATION DISTILLERY

Outside Preservation Distillery.

Bardstown’s older distilleries—many of which were founded when distilleries were more factory than tourism destination—are also expanding their visitor experiences. Founded in Bardstown in 1935 by the five Shapira brothers, **Heaven Hill** is today the largest family-owned-and-operated distillery in America. Its Heaven Hill Bourbon Experience opened in 2021 and includes a museum, a theater, and a “You Do Bourbon” tasting where guests can sample various mash bills and bottle their favorite.

The **James B. Beam Distilling Co.** traces its roots in the area back more than two-hundred years and eight generations. Tours of its recently revamped historic Clermont location, about fifteen miles north of Bardstown, tell the story of that heritage in a multimedia progression that touches on all aspects of bourbon production.

**Maker’s Mark Distillery** has distilled, aged, blended, and bottled bourbon at its picturesque Loretto, Kentucky, campus since 1953. Tours blend old with new as visitors see fermentation vessels made from century-old cypress, taste bourbon in historic aging warehouses, and watch workers

hand-press the brand's iconic labels and hand-dip bottles in wax. And at the **Willett Distillery**, founded in 1936 on the Willett family's farm in Bardstovwn, tours detail its six generations of history and conclude with a guided tasting.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF WILLETT DISTILLERY

Bourbons at the Bar at Willett.

## Eat & Drink

If it's been a long night, the Hangover Skillet Breakfast at **Mammy's Kitchen & Bar** downtown will set you right. Early birds also know to beeline for **Hadorn's Bakery**, a third-generation family bakery, before it sells out of its signature Yum Yum doughnuts—glazed, twisted, and drizzled with vanilla and chocolate icing.



A dinner spread at Toogie's Table.

PHOTO: VICTOR SIZEMORE

Even if you're not doing a full tour, the area's distilleries offer some of the best lunch stops around. Don't miss the **Kitchen & Bar** at Bardstovn Bourbon Co., where locals, bourbon professionals, and visitors alike gather for inventive cocktails and a seasonal, Southern-inspired menu. It's also worth a trip to **the Kitchen Table**, recently opened at the James B. Beam Distillery, for duck poppers, fried chicken with hot honey, and wood-fired pizzas made with distiller's yeast. **The Bar at Willett** serves neat pours and cocktails along with small plates like chicken thighs finished with Calabrian chile, lime, and honey. And visit the **Five Brothers Bar & Kitchen** at Heaven Hill to sip a cocktail on the second-floor veranda overlooking aging warehouses set among rolling hills.

For dinner, it's tough to top **Toogie's Table**, which opened at the beginning of the year in the former location of beloved Bardstovn mainstay Kurtz Restaurant. Start with the whipped labneh cream duo and spaghetti squash salad, and make sure at least one person in your group orders the chicken

and spaetzle dumplings. If you need a break from bourbon, downtown’s **Scout & Scholar Brewing Co.** makes for a refreshing stop for a pint of its Jubilee pale ale and a fried chicken sandwich. Finish the evening with a drink at the **Old Talbott Tavern**, which dates to the late 1700s as a way station along the stagecoach route and is now known as the oldest bourbon bar in America.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SCOUT &amp; SCHOLAR

Beer and bites at Scout & Scholar.

## Stay

The bourbon boom—and the growing stream of visitors flowing into town—has ushered in a variety of new lodging options. The **Bardstovn Motor Lodge**, adjacent to Toogie’s Table, offers retro-themed rooms inspired by the heyday of America’s roadways. Tucked off a quiet street downtown, **Bourbon Manor Bed and Breakfast** includes seven tastefully appointed guest rooms in a Greek Revival Manor that dates to the early 1800s.





PHOTO: VICTOR SIZEMORE

The lobby at Bardstown Motor Lodge.

A bit farther out, the family behind Maker’s Mark has renovated its historic family home into the rustic-yet-**Samuels House**. Packed with bourbon memorabilia, the three-bedroom home accommodates up to eight guests and includes a chef’s kitchen and indoor and outdoor entertaining spaces.

## Bonus: More Bourbon

While there’s never really a bad time to sample bourbon, a visit during National Bourbon Heritage Month in September is especially appropriate. It’s also when the annual **Kentucky Bourbon Festival** (September 15–17) takes over downtown with tastings, classes, nightly events, entertainment, and, of course, bourbon aplenty.