

## Flights of fancy



Mark Brown with some his more expensive and rare bourbons.

By **David Maurer**

Published: April 29, 2008

The bottle's label features a profile of a distinguished gentleman enjoying a cigar and gazing into the distance. Restaurateur Mark Brown recently directed a visitor's attention past the picture of Julian "Pappy" Van Winkle to the bourbon within. What the owner of the Upstairs restaurant on the Downtown Mall wanted to point out was the liquor's hue.

"This is considered the best bourbon in the world, hands down," Brown said as he held a bottle of 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkle Family Reserve bourbon up to the light. "You see how it has this deep, dark red color? Bourbon is aged in oak barrels, and it goes in clear. In the summer when it's hot, the oak expands and the liquor oozes into the wood.

"In the winter when it's colder, the wood contracts and the liquor gets ejected. Each time it goes across that barrier it picks up color and flavor off the barrel. This is such a dark red, because it's aged four times longer than most ordinary bourbons."

Before Brown opened his new restaurant on April 22, there wasn't an eating establishment in Virginia where you could order a shot of 23- or 15-year-old Pappy Van Winkle bourbon. The company's 20-year-old bourbon was available in just a handful of places in the commonwealth. The reason is due to the limited amount of bourbon produced each year by the Louisville, Ky., distillery. According to Brown only 900 bottles of the 23-year-old bourbon were marketed last year.

"Our concept here is to get the best of everything in food, wine and liquor, but especially liquor," Brown said of the renovated establishment above Escafe at 225 W. Main St. "We basically have the best liquor you can get in virtually every class of liquor available.

"The only thing we couldn't get was Pappy Van Winkle bourbon. I grew up on the same street in Louisville that Pappy Van Winkle's office was on. The people who own the distillery and my family have mutual friends, so I made some phone calls to people I know.

"I basically told them that I grew up next door, I really appreciate their product and I was going to take the care and time to educate people about it. And I wanted to introduce their bourbon to

people who have never had it before.”

With a plan that called for the best of the best, Brown’s bourbon list wouldn’t have been complete without the Van Winkle name. Its 20-year-old bourbon was rated No. 1 in the world by the World Spirits Championships with 99 out of 100 points. The company’s 15-year-old bourbon is ranked No. 2.

What Brown told the folks at the Kentucky distillery was exactly what they wanted to hear.

“They were able to arrange a shipment of what I thought would be basically a couple of bottles of Pappy’s 20-year-old Family Reserve,” Brown said. “What I ended up getting was what the person at Virginia ABC [Alcoholic Beverage Control] told me was the biggest shipment of premium bourbon in the history of Virginia.

“I got a 12-bottle case of 23-year-old, a 12-bottle case of 20-year-old and then three-bottle cases for everything else in their line. Once I had committed to buying these from Van Winkle, another company called Buffalo Trace decided this was a concept they would be willing to support.

“They own brands they call their ‘antique collection,’ which are made in very small runs. For example, this is a bottle of George T. Stagg, which is a 16-year-old bourbon that’s uncut and unfiltered and is 144.8 proof.”

Brown said when a regular bourbon comes out of the barrel after the aging process, distilled water is added to get the alcohol content down to a palatable level. This is usually between 80 and 100 proof.

Uncut and unfiltered bourbon goes right from the barrel to the bottle. The consumer may add water to suit his own taste or drink it neat, if he prefers.

“When you get into a really premium liquor, there’s no harshness to it,” Brown said. “The difference between good and great bourbon is in the smoothness of the drink. It’s all about the flavor, and it won’t burn your chest or make you feel uncomfortable. A very good bourbon is less

harsh than an average wine. A great bourbon isn’t harsh at all.

“Even if it’s a very high proof, it might have some heat on it, but not enough where it might make you feel discomfort. There’s a drinkability to the fantastic stuff that’s not present in the lesser stuff and it’s obvious.”

For a liquor to qualify as a bourbon it must contain no less than 51 percent corn mash and be aged in an oak barrel for at least one year. Connoisseur-level bourbons represent the state of the art. And they’re costly.

Savoring a standard two-ounce shot of Pappy Van Winkle’s 23-year-old bourbon will set you back \$60. A shot of Hennessy Richard cognac that has been aged up to 200 years is \$300.

Brown realizes that’s a steep price to pay for a shot of booze, particularly if one has never tried it before. So he offers tasting flights for his high-end liquors. Each flight consists of three individual half-ounce pours, neat or on the rocks.

“A regular drink is 2 ounces,” said Brown, who is a graduate of the University of Virginia. “But you can come in and get a half-ounce pour of Pappy Van Winkle’s 23-, 20- and 15-year-old bourbon for \$25. That way you can try the entire line and see what you like best. Pappy’s 23-year-old bourbon is the rarest, the 20-year-old has a reputation of being the best and the 15-year-old is the strongest at 107 proof.

“It’s really a matter of preference. Some people might not like the super-premium Kentucky bourbons. They may like Booker’s bourbon, which is \$16 for a 2-ounce shot.”

The Upstairs’ wine cellar focuses on French and Californian wines and champagnes. If your ship has come in, or you own one, you might want to try a bottle of Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 1986

Pauillac for \$2,600. Perhaps a red burgundy such as the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti Richebourg 2005. That will be \$2,000. Folks can find less expensive wines on the list, such as the Sebastiani Sonmo Coast 2004 for \$36.

And liquor drinkers don't have to break the bank to enjoy some fine sipping whiskey. A shot of Jack Daniel's No. 7 Black is \$7; a two-ounce pour of Johnnie Walker Black Label scotch is \$11. To go with one's beverage of choice, head chef Jaison Burke embraced the best-of-the-best concept and created a menu that includes USDA prime steaks, ostrich fillets, pheasant and seafood, such as king salmon and seared diver sea scallops. A 12-ounce prime tenderloin with roasted red potatoes, haricots verts and bourbon demi-glace is \$45. A pheasant breast with roasted mushrooms, risotto and pan sauce is \$25.

"If I can offer something that people aren't accustomed to, I try to do that whenever I can," said Burke, a graduate of the New England Culinary Institute. "All our beef is USDA prime, and our pork products, such as bacon and chops, come from a local butcher in Fauquier County.

"I think Mark's concept for the restaurant is a great idea and hopefully we'll find a nice niche for ourselves here."

Brown wants his new restaurant to be a place that generates the sort of down-home warmth and contentment that Pappy Van Winkle seemed to be enjoying when his picture was taken.

"We basically try to carry the best of everything whether it's liquor, food or wine," Brown said.

"And although we have a formal dining room, we don't have a dress code, and it's somewhat casual.

"It's like appreciating a fine bourbon, which is all about enjoyment. It's not a snooty sort of deal. If you look at the book that tells the story of Pappy Van Winkle's bourbon, you see pictures of old guys drinking bourbon from a cup.

"Probably the official Kentucky way of drinking bourbon is out of a red plastic Dixie Cup, not a silver goblet on Derby Day."

The Upstairs is at 225 W. Main St. on Charlottesville's Downtown Mall. It opens at 5:30 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. For reservations call 872-0072.