

Who Was Pappy Van Winkle and Why Does His Whiskey Cost So Much?

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For the dedicated whiskey connoisseur, getting a taste of Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve bourbon is a Tolkien-worthy quest. With a small production run and a lengthy 15- to 23-year aging process that creates a limited-supply/high-demand situation, the spirit is decidedly elusive at its starting retail price of about \$120. Bars that stock it can charge \$75 a shot or more, and collectors' sites list the whiskey for \$5,000 a bottle. So, what is it about Pappy Van Winkle?



Wright Thompson sets out to answer that question in "Pappyland: A Story of Family, Fine Bourbon, and the Things That Last." The book is a soulful journey that blends together biography, autobiography, philosophy, Kentucky history, the story of bourbon's origins and an insider's look at how the Van Winkle whiskey is made and marketed. The human ley-line running through all of this is Julian P. Van Winkle III, the grandson of Julian "Pappy" Van Winkle Sr., who opened the Stitzel-Weller Distillery just outside Louisville on Derby Day in 1935 and produced various brands until he died in 1965.

"There was no way to separate the bourbon's mythology from his personal history," Thompson writes of Julian III. To get the story, the author spent part of three years following Van Winkle as he continued the family business he took over in 1981. Now made in partnership with the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, his Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve is a grandson's liquid tribute to his ancestors. Thompson, an ESPN senior writer by way of Mississippi, comes off as the Boswell of bourbon country here - a keen literary observer and respectful fanboy with an obvious affection for his subject, even nicknaming him "Booze Yoda."

"Pappyland" moves smoothly through the family lore with the subtle nuances of a well-aged bourbon; it has top notes of stoicism and melancholy and a lingering finish of pride, even when recounting the hard times. Everyone drinks a lot of really excellent whiskey and Thompson admits: "To be honest, it gets repetitive after a while, I know. I know." But he soldiers on in order to thoroughly report what goes into each coveted bottle bearing the Van Winkle name.

Although flecked with humor and lighthearted moments, "Pappyland" takes a critical approach to the corn-squeezing culture, busting up myth as needed to reveal lesser-known tidbits, like the fact that popular brands such as Elijah Craig and Evan Williams were actually created by Jewish distillers adept in marketing. Although it sometimes feels as if Thompson goes around the block (with a stop for pie and coffee) with some anecdotes, his ability to zoom in and out from the global to the personal level puts things in perspective, particularly with complex topics like the dynamics of the father-son relationship.

Even beyond the playlist on a honky-tonk jukebox, the image of American whiskey is often linked with wistful memories and a high-lonesome longing for the past. As the novelist Walker Percy wrote in a 1975 essay for Esquire, "Bourbon does for me what the piece of cake did for Proust." Thompson echoes this sentiment in his own way: "Vodka is for the skinny and Scotch is for the strivers and bourbon is for the homesick."

It's no longer home to the family business, but Pappy Van Winkle's original 1935 Stitzel-Weller Distillery is still there, now owned by a multinational beverage company and used as a tourist stop for the Bulleit Frontier Whiskey brand. A plaque bearing Pappy's mantra remains on the grounds: "We make fine bourbon, at a profit if we can, at a loss if we must, but always fine bourbon." As "Pappyland" makes clear, the profit and loss are part of life, and yes, the bourbon is always fine.

https://www.amazon.com/Pappyland-Story-Family-Bourbon-Things/dp/0735221251/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Pappyland+Wright+Thompson&qid=1605067754&s=books&sr=1-1&tag=NYTBSREV-20
