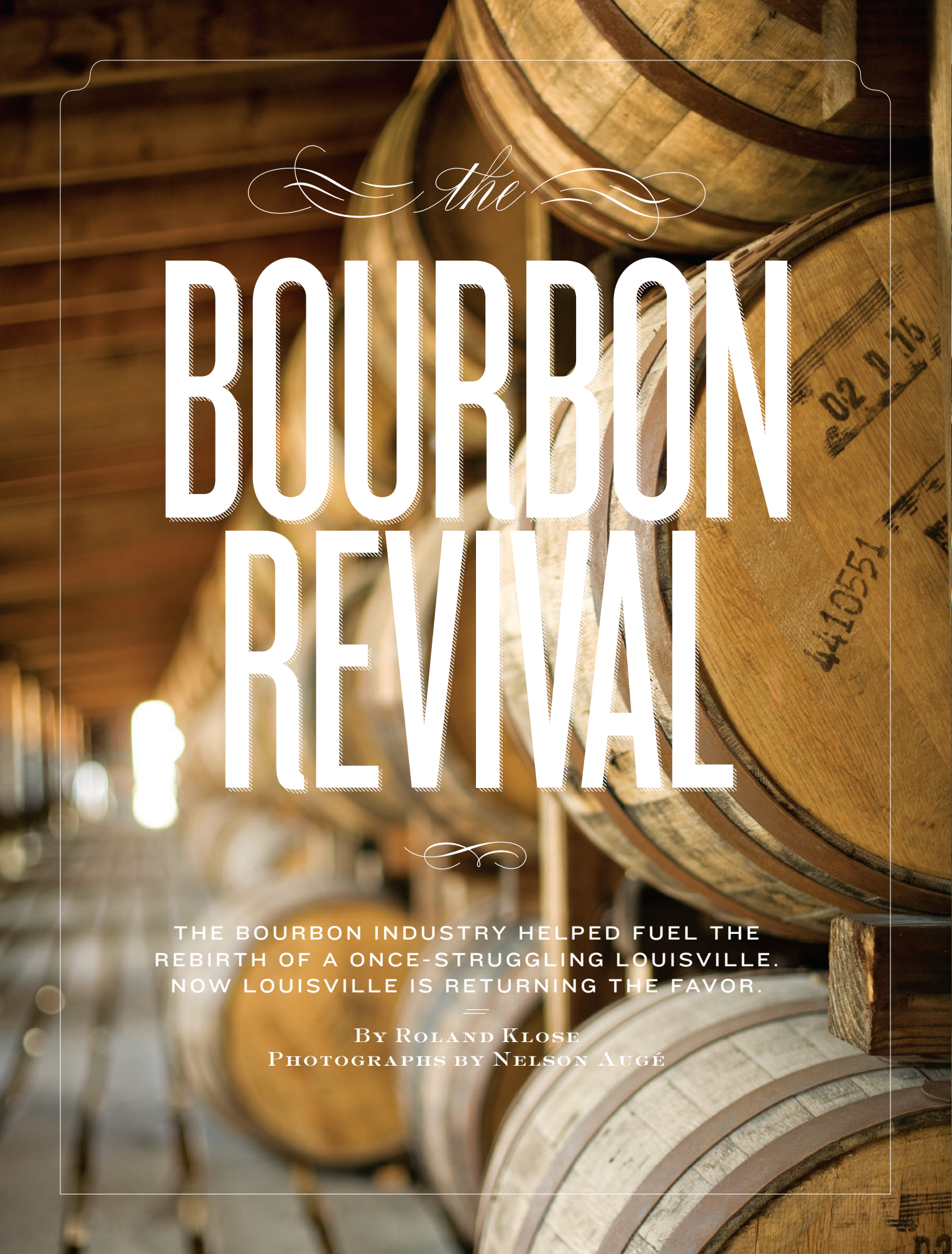

the BOURBON REVIVAL

THE BOURBON INDUSTRY HELPED FUEL THE REBIRTH OF A ONCE-STRUGGLING LOUISVILLE. NOW LOUISVILLE IS RETURNING THE FAVOR.

By Roland Klose
Photographs by Nelson Augé

This page: Downtown Louisville
Opposite: Bourbon barrels at Heaven Hill Distillery

WHEN LOUISVILLE MAYOR JERRY ABRAMSON comes calling, he arrives bearing gifts. ¶ In recent years, Abramson has hosted "reunion" parties in big cities across the country, hoping to persuade young professionals who have Louisville ties to return home. As part of his pitch, Abramson plies his guests with samples of top-shelf bourbon. ¶ "The bourbon tasting at the beginning of the evening seems to be a crowd-pleaser," he says, laughing. ¶ Whether his spiel works almost doesn't matter. Abramson manages to do something that would have been nigh impossible a generation ago: He makes Louisville sound exciting and bourbon seem special. ¶ "It's a new day," he tells the hundreds of ex-Kentuckians who gather for the meet and greets. And he's right.

Left: Downtown Louisville
Below: Bottles of Maker's Mark at the Louisville distillery

Thirty years ago, Louisville was just another mostly blue-collar town. Its downtown was shabby and uninviting. Well-paying manufacturing jobs were leaving. The only new development seemed to be taking place in the suburbs.

As for bourbon, a mainstay of the local and regional economy, it was steadily losing market share. It had become an afterthought in the increasingly competitive distilled-spirits business.

But those earlier times apparently belong in the past: Today's Louisville is, well, cool, and bourbon is hot.

No longer just the first stop of the Triple Crown, Louisville is a must-see destination for lovers of architecture, the visual and performing arts, history, fine dining and indie music. It's a city of parks, museums and dynamic neighborhoods and is home to Fortune 500 companies like Humana, Kindred Healthcare and Yum! Brands, the world's biggest operator of fast-food chains.

And bourbon, once dismissed as the liquor of choice for working-class stiffs, has evolved into a global drink of choice for connoisseurs and upwardly mobile professionals. The Beverage Information Group reports that America drinks more than 20 million gallons of the stuff a year — and, according to the Kentucky Distillers' Association, 95 percent of the world's bourbon, worth more than $1.5 billion a year, is made in Kentucky.

That both transformations took place at the same time is more than a coincidence.

BOURBON HAS BEEN a big part of the Louisville narrative since the 1780s. Popular (though likely apocryphal) accounts credit a Baptist minister, Rev. Elijah Craig, with bourbon's invention near present-day Georgetown, Ky. As the story goes, Craig had a fire sometime in the 1780s, and his whiskey barrels were scorched. A frugal man, he used them anyway, and it paid off. Contact with the charred oak gives whiskey an amber hue and pleasing, sweet hints of caramel and vanilla. In 1783, a settler named Evan Williams started cooking mash on the banks of the Ohio River and became the first local commercial distiller.

> "THE FIRST COUPLE OF YEARS, THE BOURBON TOURISM WAS GOOD, BUT WE DIDN'T REALIZE WHAT WE HAD HERE IN KENTUCKY."

Despite Kentucky's conservatism — even today, more than one-third of the state's counties are dry, barring alcohol sales of any kind — whiskey-making flourished there because of natural advantages that few other states share, namely, ample supplies of limestone-filtered, iron-free water and optimal weather conditions for aging liquor.

By the end of the 19th century, Louisville

Left: Mayor Jerry Abramson
Below: Wax dipping along the assembly line at the Maker's Mark Distillery

had more than 20 registered distilleries. Its bustling liquor-warehouse district, along Main Street, became known as Whiskey Row.

Prohibition's enactment in 1920 didn't stop people from drinking, but it did close hundreds of American breweries and distilleries. And, thanks to smugglers, it also gave Americans an appreciation for other kinds of liquor.

Before bourbon could regain lost ground once Prohibition was repealed, the U.S. entered World War II, and distillers were pressed into making industrial alcohol, which was used in the production of pharmaceuticals, household cleaners, cosmetics and the like. When the war ended, distillers rushed to ramp up production but found the market had again shifted. Returning veterans had acquired a taste for scotch and other smoother blends. Bourbon became viewed primarily as a working-class drink. Marketing accordingly, distillers competed on price, and a few took shortcuts. Some once-venerable brands were damaged.

"There was a real race to the bottom, in terms of taking a lot of the quality out of the product," says Charles Cowdery, a Chicago lawyer and writer who edits and publishes *The Bourbon Country Reader*.

By the 1970s, the bottom fell out on bourbon and sales plummeted.

Louisville, too, was having troubles. About 40 percent of its work force was in manufacturing in the '70s, but that was about to change. General Electric, which employed more than 20,000 at its sprawling Appliance Park, permanently cut more than three-fourths of its work force. Other big employers, such as International Harvester, American Standard, Brown & Williamson and Philip Morris, eventually closed their Louisville plants.

"Louisville had a lot in common with other Southern cities, such as Birmingham, Memphis and Chattanooga, which were effectively Rust Belt cities, with traditionally a lot of heavy industry," says Aaron Renn, a strategy consultant and urban affairs analyst who grew up in southern Indiana, near Louisville. "The 1970s were the low watermark. There was a lot of labor unrest, and Louisville went through a period when many of the jobs just disappeared."

It took a visionary to start turning bourbon's — and thus, the city's — fortune around.

BACK IN 1953, Bill Samuels Sr. set out to make a smooth, gentler bourbon that would rely on wheat instead of rye as the secondary grain in the mash bill. By emphasizing quality, he hoped to command a higher price.

His Maker's Mark carved out a niche, but the big distillers didn't pay attention — until 1980, when the *Wall Street Journal* featured Samuels in a front-page story. The story suggested a new direction for an industry that had been stuck doing the same old thing. It made the case that bourbon could be sold on the basis of quality and that premium bourbon could build a customer base, Cowdery says.

One by one, the distillers started adding premium brands. Buffalo Trace, in Frankfort, introduced Blanton's, the first single-barrel bourbon, in 1984. Heaven Hill, in Bardstown, started selling 12-year-old Elijah Craig, a small-batch bourbon, in 1986. Jim Beam, in Clermont, began rolling out new premium bourbons — its small-batch collection comprises Knob Creek, Booker's, Baker's and Basil Hayden's.

By the early 1990s, there was a veritable explosion in the premium category, with ever-escalating price points. Single-barrel bourbons, which, by definition, are produced in small quantities, easily fetch hundreds of dollars a bottle and still sell out quickly.

"We were tapping into the demand for better bottling of these American whiskeys, which reflected the groundswell of interest in traditional handmade, heritage-laden products," says Larry Kass, spokesperson for Heaven Hill Distilleries. "It wasn't really until that point that the industry really started to get it right."

Distillers have continued to up the ante.

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Four Roses Distillery

The iconic brand Wild Turkey, distilled in Lawrenceburg, offers Rare Breed, a melding of bourbons of various ages, as well as Kentucky Spirit Single Barrel, bottled from select barrels chosen by legendary master distiller Jimmy Russell.

Getting consumers to appreciate the value of pricier bourbons meant helping them appreciate the craftsmanship and traditions involved in producing a quality product. Many of the distillery companies, especially those clustered around the historic town of Bardstown, just south of Louisville, have long welcomed visitors, but they increased their efforts in the '90s.

In 1999, borrowing a page from California's wine country, the distilleries launched the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. Makers along the trail offer museumlike exhibits as well as an opportunity to see bubbling mash in giant fermentation vats, bottling lines and warehouses stacked with barrels. For many people, though, the free bourbon is the highlight of a visit.

In the past five years, the trail has attracted 1.5 million visitors, and it's likely to continue to grow in popularity as distilleries keep adding to the visitor experience.

"The first couple of years, the bourbon tourism was good, but we didn't realize what we had here in Kentucky," says Eric

TRAILING SPIRITS

Eight Kentucky distilleries, all within a 65-mile radius of Louisville, offer tours and tastings. The six that follow are on the official Kentucky Bourbon Trail. For more information, visit www.kybourbontrail.com.

Jim Beam Distillery
526 Happy Hollow Rd.
Clermont, Ky.
(502) 543-9877
www.jimbeam.com

Beam brands include Jim Beam Black, Knob Creek, Basil Hayden's, Baker's and Booker's.

Heaven Hill Distilleries
1311 Gilkey Run Rd.
Bardstown, Ky.
(502) 337-1000
www.heavenhill.com

Brands include Evan Williams, Elijah Craig and Old Fitzgerald.

Maker's Mark Distillery
3350 Burks Spring Rd.
Loretto, Ky.
(270) 865-2099
www.makersmark.com

Maker's Mark is the signature brand of this distillery.

Four Roses Distillery
1224 Bonds Mill Rd.
Lawrenceburg, Ky.
(502) 839-3436
www.fourroses.us

The distillery makes a number of bourbons, including several produced exclusively for the export market.

Wild Turkey Distillery
1525 Tyrone Rd.
Lawrenceburg, Ky.
(502) 839-4544
www.wildturkey.com

Brands include Wild Turkey, Russell's Reserve Rye and American Honey.

Woodford Reserve Distillery
7855 McCracken Pike
Versailles, Ky.
(859) 879-1812
www.woodfordreserve.com

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Gregory of the Kentucky Distillers' Association. "We didn't realize how popular it'd be."

LIKE THE BOURBON business, Louisville needed to do things differently. Fortunately, it had a few cards up its sleeve.

One was United Parcel Service (UPS), which based a small hub at the airport in 1980. Not long afterward, Humana — a fast-growing hospital chain that's now a health-insurance company — sealed its commitment to downtown with the construction of a 26-story corporate headquarters.

The UPS hub has since mushroomed into Worldport, a sprawling operations center for express and international business and Louisville's top employer, with 20,000 workers. And the Humana Tower,

"LOUISVILLIANS, IN GENERAL, HAVE EMBRACED THEIR HERITAGE MORE THAN IN THE PAST."

completed in the mid-1980s, served as a catalyst for an estimated $2.5 billion worth of downtown development.

Since then, Main Street has been transformed into a veritable museum row, including the kid-friendly Louisville Science Center and the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory. The new Frazier International History Museum boasts an eclectic collection of artifacts, including medieval armor and weaponry.

Abramson says Main Street is an example of how an ongoing preservation ethic paid off for the city, attracting new investments like 21c Museum Hotel — voted the top hotel in the U.S. by *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2009 — and its signature restaurant, Proof on Main. "We made a commitment to keep what was special," he says.

Right around the corner from Main, on Sixth Street, is the Muhammad Ali Center, opened by "the Greatest" and his wife,

Lonnie, in 2005. The old pedestrian mall that blocked traffic on Fourth is a distant memory; it's been replaced by Fourth Street Live, a dining, entertainment and retail complex that draws thousands downtown.

Arguably, the crown jewel of downtown development has been the transformation of the land along the Ohio River. This area has been turned into an 85-acre swath of green known as Waterfront Park, complete with trails, picnic areas, playgrounds and other amenities. "What was a working waterfront of piles of junk and sand and steel and scrap is now acres and acres of green, open space and a wonderful gathering space," Abramson says. "It's a wonderful front door for our city."

Abramson, who held the mayoral seat from 1985 to 1998 and was re-elected in 2003, has gotten credit for helping shepherd the city's transformation. He says a high level of civic involvement was what made the difference.

"Without the Brown-Forman Corp., there would not be a Kentucky Opera. Without Humana's commitment, there wouldn't be an orchestra," he says. "We had people who cared, business leaders who were native Louisvillians who cared."

IT COULD BE said that Louisville is open to possibility but determined to protect its history.

That was no more evident than in 2008, when Abramson announced the launch of an Urban Bourbon Trail to guide visitors to local bars and restaurants that promote bourbon's legacy. Abramson says he intends to make Louisville the "gateway" to the Kentucky Bourbon Trail.

To be on the urban trail, an establishment must stock at least 50 Kentucky bourbons and have a staff conversant in the "history and culture" of bourbon in the state. Stops include bars at Louisville's two historic downtown hotels, the Brown Hotel and the Seelbach Hilton, and restaurants, such as the Bourbons Bistro, located two miles from downtown on Frankfort Avenue.

Cowdery, who lived and worked in Louisville years ago, says there's definitely been a change in attitude from the time when many locals were almost embarrassed by their association with legal vices, such as drinking.

"Louisvillians, in general, have embraced their heritage more than in the past," he says. "They're proud that Louisville is the capital of the American whiskey business."

Seems ex-Louisvillians are too. Abramson, who is leaving the mayor's office in late 2010 to run for state office, says more and more people are returning home. "I can point to physicians, IT people, marketing and financial folks — all former Louisvillians who went away to larger cities, got married and are either expecting or have young children — [who are coming back]," he says.

Maybe Abramson's bourbon handouts didn't have everything to do with it. But they surely didn't hurt. AW

ROLAND KLOSE is a newspaper editor who grew up in Louisville and whose best writing is fueled by Kentucky bourbon.