

Bourbon Belle Society founder Theresa Stanley; opposite, from left, Christy Cates, Samantha Wallingford and Chrissy Martin at the Bourbon Women Association's June event



Members of the Bourbon Women Association and Bourbon Belle Society bond over their shared passion for the drink



KINDRED SPIRITS

It's not a secret that bourbon is a huge business in Kentucky and that, for many, drinking bourbon is like drinking sweet tea or coffee. Some of the people leading the explosive growth of bourbon popularity are women. To them, it's not a big deal. It is simply a part of life in Kentucky, where approximately 95 percent of the world's bourbon is manufactured.

"I think it's a cultural thing," said Christy Cates while attending the June event of the Bourbon Women Association in Louisville. "In

Kentucky, we make fun of women who don't drink bourbon. If you order a cosmopolitan, we're like: 'What are you doing with your life?'"

Her friends, Samantha Wallingford and Chrissy Martin, agreed, both saying bartenders sometimes mix up their husbands' drinks with their own when they order bourbon neat at a bar.

"Here, you order a bourbon neat and you feel at home. You don't get weird looks," Martin said.

Martin lives in Kansas City; Wallingford moved to Kentucky about six months ago from San Francisco; and Cates, originally from Las Vegas, lives in Louisville. All agree that

bourbon bars outside of Kentucky have a different atmosphere. They described them as pretentious, kitschy, inauthentic and not necessarily places where women are viewed as big bourbon drinkers and knowledgeable about the spirit. Not like Kentucky, where bourbon and women go hand in hand.

Bourbon Women continually creates a culture around bourbon where women can feel at home. The membership-based group is headquartered in Louisville, but Bourbon Women also can be found in Atlanta, Chicago, Indianapolis and the northern Kentucky/Cincinnati area.

TEXT + PHOTOS BY ABBY LAUB

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That list is expected to grow. According to the website, the group’s mission is: “To be an independent resource and inspirational forum, bringing women of all age groups together to share our bourbon affinity.”

Women of all stripes attended the She Said, He Said event in June, held at Louisville Water Tower Park. Other activities include the Annual Holiday Sip and Shop, Bourbon Women Night at Kentucky Peerless Distillery, and Not Your Pink Drink Cocktail Recipe Contest. The premium events are designed to introduce women to new types of bourbon; to provide networking, education and camaraderie; and to just spread the love of bourbon.

Founded in 2010 with an inaugural event at the Kentucky Governor’s Mansion with 100 people attending, the Bourbon Women Association now has 500 members in 23 states and three countries.

Women like Cates, Wallingford and Martin don’t miss a beat when it comes to bourbon events. The three attend association functions as well as many others in the industry. They regularly try new bourbons together, take tours and learn about the state’s signature spirit.

“I love bourbon culture in general because it is such a tribe,” Cates said. “I love that the master distillers support each other and there’s not actual competition. I think that’s really rare. And I love the tradition of bourbon. I think that doing things the same way you did it back in the 1700s and 1800s ... it’s not only commendable, but impressive.”

Cates, whose mother is a Paducah native, said she remembers drinking hot toddies as a kid and thinking it

was normal. She and her friends said they mostly prefer to drink bourbon neat, or with a single ice cube to help open up the flavor.

“In Jersey, it was more about mixing it, so you had bourbon and Cokes or a whiskey sour,” Martin said. “When I lived in Nashville, I started branching out. I removed the mixer and added ice, and it was not until a couple years ago that I started drinking it neat.”

Wallingford said that, as a woman, she takes a lot of pride in drinking bourbon. “In Kansas, a lot of women are afraid to drink bourbon,” she said. “And when you do, you’re perceived as a badass, and men are intimidated by women who drink bourbon. Here, you order a bourbon neat, and you feel at home.”

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Feeling at home with bourbon is literally and figuratively one of **Theresa Stanley’s** missions. Stanley, founder of the Lexington-based Bourbon Belle Society, is a master at cooking with bourbon and mixing up cocktails. But when push comes to shove, she enjoys most of her bourbon neat and could talk all day about flavors, and how those flavors blend with food.

Stanley shares that expertise with her clients at Wild Thyme Cooking, where she and founder **Allison Davis** host cooking with bourbon classes several times a year. The Bourbon Belle Society provides members with opportunities to learn more about bourbon, share knowledge with others, participate in philanthropic activities, and enjoy the bourbon lifestyle.

Stanley posts a treasure trove of mouth-watering bourbon-based food and drink recipes on the Bourbon Belle Society website, bourbonbelle.com, as a way to get people excited to learn more.

“Bourbon is my kindred spirit,” Stanley said. “It’s an all-natural product, sourced straight from farms. When I looked back to the moment I knew I could make a living doing this, I knew exactly where I was. It reminded me of growing up back on the farm.”

“The process of converting [corn] from a crop to something to consume ... the whole process of bourbon resonated with me. I saw **Elmer T. Lee** sitting on the porch at Buffalo Trace. It reminded me of his grandfather sitting on the porch, drinking his favorite spirit. I realized that I could tell the story. It’s families; it’s farms.”

Stanley added that she’s passionate about economic development for Kentucky, and bourbon can teach farmers how to convert lost tobacco base into crops for bourbon, “otherwise family farms will be gone ... Bourbon can bring them back to life.”

She noted that the bourbon industry is sourcing specific varieties of corn with certain farmers and contracting with them to grow it. Maybe corn raised on a Kentucky farm will source the next great small-batch bourbon. That fascination with farming and all things local began for Stanley at a young age, and since becoming an adult, she has felt bourbon is the obvious way—living in Kentucky—to channel that love and interest.

Bourbon also happens to pair well with food, and Stanley uses her knowledge and expertise in that area with her Bourbon Belle Co. Many of the Bourbon Belle projects include food and drink.

The company is the public relations and marketing side of her profession—her full-time job. But it’s



also the umbrella for the Bourbon Belle Society.

“Bourbon was a great conversation starter for the bigger conversation, because still in the South, there is a bit of a stigma for women drinking bourbon,” Stanley noted. “It’s popular, and it’s fashionable, but for women in certain circles, it’s tough to admit to and be seen publicly drinking bourbon. Even professionally, it’s a man’s world. Just this past year, the first female master distiller since Prohibition [was appointed; see story on page 20]. With so many years in between, it shows [women] were overlooked, or they were uncomfortable.”

This is a shame, considering that women can actually taste bourbon better than men, according to Bourbon Women President **Susan Reigler**.

“The bourbon industry tasting panels for their quality control employ a lot of women,” she noted. “Actually, there is scientific evidence that found that women have 42 percent more cells in their olfactory bulbs and 50 percent more neurons going to the brain [than men]. We have larger sensory perception. We can smell better, so there is a biological basis that women can better taste bourbon.”

Growing up in Louisville, Reigler said she didn’t begin drinking bourbon until she was in her 30s and was working as a food and beverage writer.

“In the 1990s, I did a lot of reporting on bourbon just as it was starting to make its comeback, and that’s really when I started appreciating it more,” she said, adding that her memories of the spirit begin much earlier. “I always had great, great memories of bourbon, such as going to Churchill Downs as a kid with my dad, and the place smelled of bourbon and popcorn and cigars. It just was a very, very evocative scent to me.”

Before Reigler appreciated drinking bourbon, she understood the heritage and importance of it.

“I was a very self-righteous little teenager about how drinking kills brain cells,” she said. “But I got over that. My mother loved bourbon; my father did not drink bourbon.”

She has tasted hundreds of bourbons and said one of the more surprising notes she picked up was milk chocolate—that it was like unwrapping a candy bar. Her favorites? “I tend to go to the spicy, fruity bourbons rather than the herbal or tobacco-type bourbons.”

Passing along this expertise to others is what Bourbon Women is all about. Reigler thinks the growth of women in bourbon is largely attributed to the fascination with its heritage. “The history of the United States is tied up with the history of bourbon,” she said.

Reigler said she usually enjoys her

Kentucky Sweet Tea Cocktail

Recipe and photo by **Theresa Stanley**

In days gone by, sippin’ sweet tea on the front porch was the way to finish the day. Thankfully, relaxing on front porches, talking to neighbors and holding neighborhood block parties are still popular today. With this pitcher of sweet tea cocktail, neighbors will flock to your stoop. The drink is citrus- and ginger-infused, offering refreshing and spicy notes to the classic Southern staple. Make it in large batches, and share with friends.

It’s the kind of drink that sneaks up on you, so sip responsibly. Cheers!

- 8 cups water
- 6 individual tea bags
- ½ cup simple ginger syrup (recipe below)
- ½ cup bourbon
- 10 sliced orange rounds
- 10 sprigs fresh mint
- Ice for serving

1. In large saucepan, bring water to a boil. Add tea bags and turn off water; steep tea for 5 minutes. Remove tea bags, cool, then place tea in a large pitcher. Set aside.
2. Place ginger syrup, bourbon, orange slices and 6 mint sprigs in a medium bowl. Muddle ingredients using the back of a spoon. Muddling will juice the oranges, release the mint fragrance and infuse the bourbon. Once the ingredients are pressed together and the aroma tickles your nose, add the mixture to the pitcher of tea. If you prefer a pulp-free tea, strain mixture before pouring into the pitcher. Stir and sample. Adjust for sweetness by adding more syrup; adjust for boldness by adding more bourbon.
3. Fill Collins glasses with ice, pour cocktail and garnish with extra slices of orange and sprigs of mint.

Simple Ginger Syrup

- 1 cup sugar
 - 1 cup water
 - 4 large slices ginger root
- Combine ingredients in small saucepan and boil until sugar is dissolved. Remove ginger slices, cool, and place syrup in a glass jar. Can be kept in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.

Bourbon Women President Susan Reigler, left, with the association's founder, Peggy Noe Stevens



For more information on the Bourbon Women Association and Bourbon Belle Society, visit

BOURBONWOMEN.ORG
BOURBONBELLESOCIETY.COM



bourbon neat with a book, especially by the fire in the winter. In the kitchen, she enjoys preparing chicken and country ham crepes with bourbon cream sauce.

Stanley's recipes include bourbon Popsicles and marshmallows, along with savory sauces for main courses. She encourages other women to learn how to taste it and try their hand with bourbon in new ways.

"Most think they don't like it," she said. "It's their grandfather's drink; it's the boys club. So before they'll try it, there's a conversation about letting go of these preconceptions that they don't like it and they're not supposed to drink it."

"What I like to do is have them try a very small taste so they know what it tastes like on their own, and then I'll create a cocktail and show them there are other ways to try it."

Instead of a normal iced tea, try a Kentucky iced tea (see recipe on page 33), and you can sit on your porch with it after a long day.

"It's all-natural. You don't have to add sugar and false ingredients," she noted. "It creates the experience. I teach them how to fold [bourbon] into their lifestyle. I lead tastings, but it's

about folding it into their lifestyle through cocktail culture, in their kitchen, or the coffee table made out of a bourbon barrel."

Stanley said she finds women greatly enjoy this lifestyle aspect of bourbon, arguably more than men. And she noted that she enjoys a different bourbon for every occasion.

"Kentucky has rich resources in distillery tours," she added. "You'll see a lot more women on tours now. They want to show their friends and family where they live. They're proud."

On the Bourbon Belle Society's philanthropic side, women come together and support one another. For example, the group participates in Habitat for Humanity in central Kentucky, building homes for other women. "They are CEOs, accountants, project managers, and they want to connect to other women and contribute to society," Stanley said.

At Bourbon Women, connectivity is part of the vision that founder Peggy Noe Stevens had when creating the organization. "It's created unexpected and tremendous camaraderie," she said. "Women are networking in a casual environment over bourbon and enjoying conversation with new people

and connections to the industry. They love their girlfriend time together in a lifestyle environment."

Stevens was inspired to start the ever-growing group when she conducted tastings around the globe and noticed the participants were predominantly male, and women would save their questions for the end of the seminar.

"I wanted to create a conversation with women, so they would feel comfortable in a tasting environment," she said, adding that women perceive bourbon differently than men. "Women have a keen sense of smell and love complex flavors that are robust."

Stevens always has been an ambassador in the industry and for Kentucky, so starting the group was a natural fit, especially at a time when bourbon is experiencing exciting growth as an industry, which she called "Southern gentility wrapped around premium quality and tradition."

"We are forming branches across the U.S. and see even more partnerships with the industry as a whole," Stevens added. "These incredibly talented women give us inspiration every day, so ideas are endless!"

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