

A Conversation with Lee Kennedy, Proprietor and Distiller of Leiper's Fork Distillery

Q. First of all, congratulations! The Leiper's Fork Distillery Grand Opening is October 1, 2016. How did you get here? Have you always wanted to operate your own distillery?

A. Thank you! For some reason, I've always had a fascination with the production of whiskey. It goes back to when I was about 16 years old—I really can't explain it. I remember my uncle drawing a still on a cocktail napkin, and then built a little still out of a five-gallon pressure cooker, some copper line, and a five-gallon bucket.

That was all pre-internet, so there wasn't a lot of information available. I couldn't just google "how to produce whiskey." So I had to read some old literature. I had the Foxfire books, which were written back in the 1920s by a man who went to Appalachia and wrote down all of the how-to knowledge of those mountain people. There is a chapter in one actually entitled "Moonshining is a Fine Art."

So anyway, I gained just enough information from that to be dangerous. (laughs)

Q. When did you first start really making your own whiskey?

A. I took the little still I made to college with me and played around with it. Then, in 2002, I moved to a farm back in Middle Tennessee, and I finally actually had the room and mental capacity to dig deeper. By this time, a lot more literature had come out for home distillers as well.

So I bought a 30-gallon still in 2002, and really, it became a major hobby—an obsession. I read everything I could get my hands on about it. I started making whiskey at my house, putting it back into small barrels, stuff like that. I'd go to work during the day in finance and come home at night, put the kids to bed, then head down to the barn until midnight. That kind of got my wheels turning.

Q. And you began to pursue the idea of opening a large, family distillery in earnest—but it'd take years to make it happen.

A. Yes. In 2008, I contacted a friend of mine who's an attorney and asked him what it would take to open a distillery in Williamson County. At that time, it was crazy what you had to have—40% of registered voters needed to sign a petition to get it on a ballot. But in 2009, the state changed their distillation law for the first time since prohibition ended, which was in 1933.

When they did that, it opened most of the counties in Tennessee to the distilling industry. At the state level, the framework was finally there again to be able to operate a distillery legally.

So I went and sat down and built a little business plan. I had a piece of property in Leiper's Fork—where the distillery is now—that had been in our family since the late 90s. I went to my uncle, who was in the manufacturing industry for decades and is a very financially minded guy, and he and I basically built the business on paper.

Once we did that, I sat down for my first meeting with Williamson County in January 2012. I told them what I wanted to do, and it all ended up taking about three years. We finally got our approval for the distillery in the summer of 2014, and then we got our building permit in January of 2015.

In the meantime, we went everywhere from Scotland to Texas, visiting distilleries to make sure we were doing things right.

Q. You're committed to the old-world distilling process. What is the old-world distilling process, exactly, and why is it better?

A. Back pre-Prohibition—well, between the years of 1898 to 1910, because Tennessee actually enacted its own prohibition in 1910, about 10 years ahead of the Volstead Act—which was the federally mandated prohibition.

Anyway, between 1898 and 1910, there were 270 distilleries in the state of Tennessee. In 1886, the *Nashville Union* reported that the distilling industry was the largest manufacturing industry in the state. A lot of those distilleries were characterized by batch distillation, which means you are distilling by batch instead of in a continuous refinery type process, which is how most of the commercial distilleries craft their spirits today.

Back then, everything was done on a smaller scale. That's part of it. Another aspect is the barrel-entry proof. Pre-Prohibition, the federal limit on barrel-entry proof was 110 proof—that means you couldn't go in at more than 110. Today's barrel entry proof limit is 125. But science has actually shown that at 110 proof, you're extracting more vanilla and sugars from a charred barrel than you are at 125 proof.

So, we go in at 110. We think it makes a softer, more flavorful spirit.

Another thing we're doing is using open-top cypress fermentation tanks with old-world technology. We like the cypress wood—it helps create a signature flavor for our distillery. You know, everything else today is stainless steel.

Q. You're fascinated by history, aren't you? Not just the process of distilling, but the culture and everything else that surrounded it.

A. I am a big history guy. Part of our mission at the Leiper's Fork Distillery is to tell a lot of forgotten history of Tennessee distilling—and not just whiskey. There were all kinds of distilling processes going on here from roughly 1799 up until 1910. In addition to whiskey, we were making bourbon in Tennessee then, along with some brandy.

Tennessee has a rich heritage, but because of Prohibition, so much of it has been forgotten. So we have done an extensive history project with the goal of bringing some of the history back to life, through our process and the space we operate in.

Q. You have a complicated personal history with whiskey production. Tell me about your third-great uncle. Who was he? What happened to him?

A. (Laughing) Yeah, we do. My third-great uncle was named Sam Locke—my middle name is Locke, which is my mother's maiden name. My grandfather was actually born in Leiper's Fork. The Locke family actually moved into the area around 1805. During the Depression, my great grandfather moved his family out of Leiper's Fork to pursue work—they went to East Nashville.

But my third-great uncle was a revenuer during Prohibition in Williamson County. Over a three-month period in 1923, he busted over 60 stills. That was dangerous. There were two other constables who were also revenueurs on staff with the county, but they were indicted for bribery charges. They were taking money from what was called the Williamson County Whiskey Ring.

Leiper's Fork was actually a supplier of corn whiskey to places as far away as Chicago and Philadelphia. A lot of crime syndicates would come to Tennessee and buy this illegal whiskey to take back with them.

Anyway, my uncle was murdered while he was unlocking his gate to go home one night. Two hired men with the Williamson County Whiskey Ring shot and killed him. He's buried in Leiper's Fork.

So yeah. We have some people on both sides of the fence when it comes to whiskey. (laughs) But we're legal now. So I don't think he'd mind.

Q. Leiper's Fork Distillery is a family business, right? Who works with you?

A. Yes. It was my brainchild, and then along the way, family joined me. My brother Wes Kennedy is an owner in the business as well, and he's also the general contractor for the entire distillery. He's built all of our beautiful buildings out there.

My wife Lynlee is handling the retail aspect of the business, as well as some brand ambassadorship. My mother, Gayle Kennedy, is the matriarch of our family and is a part

owner as well. She's very involved. We call her Quality Control. (laughs) My uncle Nick Locke is also a part-owner and is my CFO. I brought him out of retirement to keep me financially out of the ditch.

We have no other outside investors—just our family. And everyone who works with us has become a friend. Everyone at the distillery is invested emotionally—we all share a passion for what we're doing there.

Q. When it comes to making whiskey, place is important—the land influences the spirits you create. So what makes Leiper's Fork an ideal location for a distillery?

A. For one thing, traditionally distilleries have been in rural areas. I could have gone to Nashville and been open roughly two years ago, but I might be next to some guy in an industrial area making plastic.

We jumped through all of the hoops with Williamson County because of the location. We sit on 27 rolling acres just outside of Leiper's Fork. We have access to limestone-filtered Tennessee water that comes out of a limestone-filtered well 1,200 feet underground. We are closer to where our grains are grown: all of our grain is grown along the Harpeth River Valley, with the exception of our malted barley, which is a specialty product from North Carolina.

Really, you can make whiskey anywhere. But we feel like our facility and surroundings carry the traditional whiskey industry's torch.

Q. You're in the process of aging barrels of your own Leiper's Fork Distillery whiskey right now, right? And then you'll have two other brands that you offer right away?

A. Yes, so out of the gate, we'll have two brands. The first is Old Natchez Trace. It's a white Tennessee whiskey and a white rye whiskey. We named the brand Old Natchez Trace because Southall Road—where the distillery sits—is the original south fork of the Old Natchez Trace.

Back in the late 1700s and early 1800s, settlers were moving out of Nashville along that path. And those guys were some of the early farm distillers—everybody back then had a farm still. It was just part of the culture. They used corn whiskey as a beverage, a solvent, and a medicine. They also used it as a currency. You could barter a barrel of whiskey for “x” amount of head of cattle.

So we partnered with master distiller, Dave Scheurich to hand select premium barrels of Tennessee Bourbon, bottled in small batches, that evokes the bourbon made in Tennessee during the early and mid 1800s, all in commemoration of Colonel Hunter.

Q. And the second brand?

A. The next brand will be our Hunter's Select Barrel. It has deep historical significance as well. In 1850, there were seven legal distilleries in Williamson County that dotted the landscape. They were primarily entrepreneurial distillers—small-batch operations.

One of the guys who operated one of the distilleries was Colonel Henry Hunter. He actually owned the property where our Leiper's Fork Distillery now sits. He built the beautiful antebellum home that's now next-door to the distillery.

Colonel Hunter was a War of 1812 veteran. He rode down to New Orleans and fought the British with Andrew Jackson. When he came back, he opened a distillery on Old 96 outside of Leiper's Fork.

So we went and partnered with master distiller Dave Scheurich to hand select blended barrels of Tennessee whiskey, bottled in 5-barrel batches, that evokes the pre-Prohibition whiskey originally distilled in Middle Tennessee, all in commemoration of Colonel Hunter.

As you can see, we're just trying to tell some of that forgotten history of distilling.

Q. And then there will be the Leiper's Fork Distillery brand.

A. Yes, our flagship brands will be under Leiper's Fork. That'll be three whiskeys: a Tennessee rye, Tennessee whiskey, and a bourbon. Those won't see the light of day for five to seven years.

Q. Why did you settle on the name Leiper's Fork Distillery instead of, say, Kennedy or Locke Distillery?

A. A lot of distilleries are traditionally tied to places. Plus, I didn't want to be vain and name it Kennedy Distillery. (laughs)

The original name of the distillery was Leiper's Creek Distillery because we sit off of Leiper's Creek. But one day, I sat down and talked with Lisa Fox, owner of Leiper's Creek Art Gallery - the longest-running business in the area. She said if she had it to do all over again, she would have named it Leiper's Fork Art Gallery—just embraced the name of the place where we are.

The heritage foundation here and so many others have poured so much effort into getting the word out about what a special place Leiper's Fork is. So tying into that established, already beloved brand made a lot of marketing sense. It all just felt right.

Q. Y'all have a beautiful, pretty intricate logo. What does it mean?

A. We worked with a great group to develop that logo. I had in my head what I wanted, but I can't get it from my head to pen to paper. It's just not a skill set I have. (laughs)

I was very adamant about putting our copper still in our logo. That swan-neck still is a functioning work of art that is so distinct. So that's there, in the center, flanked by the blue iris, which is the state flower of Tennessee. And then there's a wheat stalk, which designates the wheated bourbon we're making.

All together, the logo represents everything we're about: local grains, state tradition, and quality whiskey. One of our taglines is the "Spirit of Tennessee." We have tried to encapsulate the spirit of Tennessee, and we're producing a spirit of Tennessee—pretty perfect.

Q. Let's talk a little bit more about the space you've created in Leiper's Fork—what you've added to the natural beauty there. What kind of construction has been going on? What can people expect to see when they visit the distillery?

A. Once we got local approval, we took a step back and really thought about what kind of complex we wanted to have. We are telling the story of the history of distillation in Tennessee, and we wanted our buildings to reflect and enrich that.

I've always loved old log cabins. The history and heritage of those structures are such a trademark of early Tennessee. So we have a cabin on the property that was originally built in 1825 by a man named James Daniel in Dickson County, Tennessee, just to the west of us.

We sat down with the Dickson County Historical Society and got all of the information about Daniel. He and his family actually owned a gristmill and general store in a little community called Van Leer, Tennessee, where they provided grain to a local distillery.

So we took the cabin down and called on a gentleman named Kenny Smith from Lawrenceburg, Tennessee who has been restoring old log cabins for the last 50 years. Everything in the cabin is custom, old-world construction. James Daniel actually carved his name in the back wall of the cabin, which you can see in one of the rooms. That's pretty neat.

The people who have already visited have told me it's like stepping back in time.

Q. And that ties into the bigger history lesson you're trying to impart.

A. Right. People like whiskey because it's a link to our past. I think our buildings reflect that too. The still house is actually a 5,000-square-foot timber frame structure. It's mortise and tenon—there are no nails in it. It's all hand-pegged together with timbers. There is an exposed conduit mixed in with these massive timbers.

It came out really well, and the entire space goes hand-in-hand with the whiskey industry.

Q. What do you hope someone experiences when they taste one of your whiskeys?

A. We're trying to craft a local, superior whiskey. We're are obsessed with attention to detail, from our own local limestone-filtered water and local grains, to the sugar maple for our charcoal filtering process that was grown in Williamson County. When you sip one of our products, you're getting a taste of the environment of Leiper's Fork in Middle Tennessee.

At the end of the day, I want somebody to be able to enjoy a Leiper's Fork Distillery spirit and get as much out of it as we put into it.

About Leiper's Fork Distillery

Leiper's Fork Distillery is partnering with its small Middle Tennessee community namesake to bring back art of small-batch whiskey production to Williamson County. An artisan distillery committed to quality and taste, Leiper's Fork Distillery uses local ingredients and limestone-filtered water to create a superior product with a signature taste. Nestled in the rolling hills of Leiper's Fork and operated by the Kennedy/Locke family, the distillery is retelling the lost history of Tennessee's rich distilling heritage through authentic, handcrafted spaces and premium spirits. For more information, please visit <http://leipersforkdistillery.com>.