

## BOURBON BALLS

I just got back from a week in Louisville, Kentucky. Kentucky is a great state that has two main industries, horses and bourbon. Bourbon is an American whiskey, or distilled spirit, made primarily of corn and aged in charred oak barrels, which give them color and flavor. Despite local legends, distilling probably came to this region when Scotch, Irish, English and German settlers started farming after the Revolutionary War.

One of the largest counties in this region was Bourbon County, named for the French royal family. The casks of whiskey shipped from Louisville, the Ohio River port in this county named for King Louis of France, were stamped Old Bourbon to indicate their origin—and before long the whiskey itself began to be called bourbon. In time, bourbon became the name for any corn-based whiskey. Nowadays, to be called bourbon, by federal law the whiskey must be distilled from at least 51% corn and must be aged in new charred oak barrels. Most bourbons today are made from at least 2/3 corn and are aged for at least four years. The rest of the grain is rye and malted barley.

This mixture, called a mash, is fermented through a process called sour mash, when some of the mash from a previous distillation is added to begin the process. The fermented mash is then distilled and aged. The aged bourbon is then diluted with water to a precise alcoholic content and bottled. The water used is naturally filtered through limestone and is free of iron.

Kentucky has a Bourbon Trail, which is a route that takes you to eight well-known distilleries. I visited Woodford Reserve, outside of Versailles. The small distillery, in a beautiful park-like setting, makes premium bourbon and is located in some beautiful horse country. They even give free samples after the tour!

Besides being America's national whiskey, bourbon is also the main ingredient of some great cocktails, like the Old Fashioned, the Manhattan, the whiskey sour, and the mint julep. Great brands include Makers Mark, Jim Beam, Four Roses, Heaven Hill, and Wild Turkey. By the way, Jack Daniels is made in Tennessee and is filtered through layers of maple charcoal rather than being aged in a charred oak cask. Hence it is not called bourbon.

One of the signature foods of Kentucky is made with bourbon. This is the delightful confection called bourbon balls. There are two types, the store-bought which are chocolate candies with a soft and chewy filling flavored with bourbon, and the homemade kind which are made with crushed cookies, chopped pecans, corn syrup, and bourbon and are coated in powdered sugar to prevent the evaporation of the bourbon.

To make homemade bourbon balls, sift together in a bowl one cup of powdered sugar and two tablespoons of unsweetened cocoa. Whisk together ¼ cup of bourbon and 2 tablespoons of light corn syrup. Stir this into the cocoa mixture. Crush 2 ½ cups of vanilla wafers in a food processor or electric mixer. Or you can put the vanilla wafers in a sealable plastic bag and crush them with a rolling pin or the bottom of a heavy saucepan, which is what your Southern grandmother did.

Coarsely chop one cup of pecans. Mix the chopped pecans with the crushed vanilla wafers and stir them into the cocoa, corn syrup and bourbon mixture. Roll the mixture between your palms into 1-inch balls. This doesn't have to be exact or even. Then pour ½ cup of powdered sugar on a plate and roll the bourbon balls in the powdered sugar. Store them at room temperature between layers of wax or parchment paper in an airtight container for up to three weeks. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.