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# Whiskey's Iconoclast

Chuck Cowdery is on a mission to keep  
the bourbon industry honest.

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**I**t's easy to believe anything Chuck Cowdery says. It's that voice—a rumbling, gurgling bass that seems to originate at the bottom of a volcano hidden somewhere inside his belly. It's the sound of authority.

Most of his statements, of course, are about one thing. Cowdery is a journalist and author ruthlessly focused on a single subject, American whiskey.

Cowdery is tall and burly, and there's room for a lot of bourbon inside his ample build. He knew Booker Noe—the late, legendary Jim Beam distiller and a man even larger than Cowdery—and recalls an encounter. “At one point, I made some comment about our respective sizes,” Cowdery says, “and he said, ‘Chuck, you and me is full-grown men!’”

But even if you've never seen or heard Cowdery, his crackling confidence comes through loud and clear in his writing: on The Chuck Cowdery Blog ([chuckcowdery.blogspot.com](http://chuckcowdery.blogspot.com)), a must-read for everyone interested in bourbon; his bi-monthly newsletter *The Bourbon County Reader*; and his several books. “When it comes to bourbon, I trust him implicitly,” says Gary Regan, who has known Cowdery for two decades and is a longtime chronicler of American whiskey. “I'm not saying he never gets anything wrong, but I've never caught him getting anything wrong.”

Getting things wrong is something that happens with regularity in the whiskey world—and often intentionally. A particular whiskey's place and manner of manufacture, the circumstances of its aging and blending, and all of the assorted aspects that precede the whiskey going into a bottle are often concealed from consumers via misleading statements or sins of omission from marketers. Cowdery doesn't take to such smokescreens well.

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Story by Robert Simonson Photo by Matthew Gilson



## Chuck Cowdery continued

A good percentage of the posts on The Chuck Cowdery Blog are dedicated to unmasking such malfeasance in the liquor business; recent posts have ranged from digging into misleading marketing and labeling to analyzing the accuracy of whiskey-aging claims. Like his blog, *The Bourbon County Reader* newsletter and his two self-published books—*Bourbon, Straight* (2004) and *Bourbon, Strange* (2014)—are also largely about pulling back the curtain that conceals liquor-industry practices from average consumers. (His short e-book from 2012, *Small Barrels Produce Lousy Whiskey*, is more direct with its poke-in-the-eye title.) His adversaries are big and small; Diageo, which owns Bulleit Bourbon and George Dickel, among others, is his most frequent foil—Cowdery refers to the company as “the big galoot.”

Cowdery’s continued analysis of the truth divide prompts many friends and colleagues to bring up the barnyard. “He has no time for bullshit,” Regan says. Jim Beam scion (and master distiller and global ambassador) Fred Noe agrees (“You can’t bullshit him,” Noe says), as does Alabama-based spirits expert and retailer LeNell Camacho Santa Ana: “He cuts through the crap and gets down to the nitty-gritty,” she says.

“It’s just my personality,” Cowdery explains. “I feel insulted [by being misled]. I’ve got this reputation—people know I know my stuff. And you try to tell *me* a story? You’re going to tell *me* that crap?”

A great part of the reason Cowdery presents so fierce and knowing a figure is he is not simply a journalist. He’s a veteran of the advertising world, having worked for several Midwestern

and Southern firms that represented major bourbon distillers. He’s also a lawyer, having passed the Illinois bar. That means he has an insider’s knowledge of how the bourbon industry works, and he understands the laws that bind it. (He was also a disc jockey for a short time in his youth, further explaining his ease in holding forth.)

One of Cowdery’s proudest moments came years ago when Maker’s Mark sued Diageo over the use of a red wax seal on one of their tequila bottlings—a clear infringement of Maker’s trademark look, in the distiller’s opinion. “I’m cited like 10 times as an expert on the history of the marketing,” notes Cowdery.

Occasionally, Cowdery’s “I want the truth!” attitude lands him in hot water with the industry. When interviewed about Cowdery, Max Shapira, president of Heaven Hill Distilleries (maker of bourbons including Elijah Craig and Evan Williams), kept to a fairly diplomatic line until he was asked if anything Chuck had written had ever made him angry. Shapira laughed, eventually managing to reply, “Yes!”

“I was blackballed at Beam for a while,” Cowdery recalls. “The ad agencies I had been working for were told I was persona non grata.” The kerfuffle involved something Cowdery wrote about Jacob’s Well, a Jim Beam product from the mid-’90s that was being touted as the work of a micro-distiller. “There was no such thing as a micro-distiller back there, and their bourbon certainly wasn’t micro-distilled. It came out of the same big stills as everything else,” Cowdery says.

“I know there were some folks in our corporate world who



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were a little bit upset with Chuck,” says Noe. “I’ve told these PR guys over the years: Tell him the truth, because he knows more than just about any writer out there.”

Cowdery’s advertising work with bourbon brands started in the late ’70s, when he joined Fessel, Siegfried and Moeller, a Louisville advertising agency that did work for Heaven Hill. After a couple of years there, he moved to another Louisville firm, PriceWeber, which handled Brown-Forman (the parent company of brands including Jack Daniel’s and Old Forester). Cowdery was a Scotch drinker at the time—(“My parents always drank bourbon, so naturally I drank Scotch,” he says)—but he grew interested in the local whiskey and the culture that surrounded it. “If you were there at a meeting at Brown-Forman and the clock hit 5, whatever room you were in, one of the Brown-Forman people would get up and open the bar,” he recalls.

In the early ’90s, Kentucky Educational Television, looking to commemorate the state’s bicentennial, was handing out grants. Cowdery’s proposal for a documentary on bourbon was accepted. He collected a second grant from the Kentucky Distilling Association and, with \$40,000 in his pocket, wrote, directed and produced “Made and Bottled in Kentucky,” which aired in 1992. “One of the things that I learned when I did this was that virtually everything that was published on the subject was wrong,” Cowdery says.

To right this, and to keep his hand in the bourbon world, Cowdery launched *The Bourbon County Reader*. As advertising work diminished over the years, he threw himself more into writing. By 2004, he thought he had enough material for a book and self-published *Bourbon, Straight*, an idiosyncratic gumbo of whiskey history, opinion pieces, reviews and tasting instructions.

Today, Cowdery has enough of a reputation as a whiskey authority that he could have sold his second book, *Bourbon, Strange*, to a major publishing house. But, with a Ron Swanson-esque aversion to outside interference, he chose once again to paddle his own canoe. “I like the independence,” he says, “and I’d have to sell many more times of books to get the same amount of money.” His first book, he points out, has “sold better in the last three years than it ever has.”

One chapter in *Bourbon, Straight* was titled “The Elusive Bourbon Renaissance.” That revival has, of course, since arrived, and with a gusto no one could have foreseen. Cowdery’s still surprised by it. “I never would have expected it,” he says.

He doesn’t worry about the much-reported downsides of such a boom, such as hiked prices and whiskey shortages. “Did you have trouble ordering a bourbon today?,” he observes dryly as he takes a sip.

For all the time he’s put in, and the attention now enjoyed by the industry he’s chosen to devote his life to, Cowdery still barely makes a living from his writing. But that’s fine; he’ll keep at it, and at 64, he now thinks of himself as semi-retired. He wishes, however, that distillers would send him small samples of new bourbons, rather than full bottles. He has enough whiskey. “I tell people, when the end comes, come over to my place,” he says. “There might not be any electricity, there might not be any water, but I’ve got enough bourbon to get us through.” ■



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