

The Mark of the Maker

An Interview with Rob Samuels,
Global General Manager and Chief Distillery Officer, Maker's Mark

EDITORS' NOTE Rob Samuels, the grandson of Maker's Mark founder, Bill Samuels Sr., is Global General Manager and Chief Distillery Officer of Maker's Mark. Prior to this, he served as Chief Operating Officer. In addition, Samuels serves as General Manager of the Maker's Mark Distillery in Loretto, Kentucky. He has also served as Director of Global Brand Development for Maker's Mark and as Manager of the Florida and Ohio territories for the distilled spirits portfolio of Allied Domecq Spirits & Wine. Samuels received a B.A. degree in applied sciences from the University of South Carolina, and subsequently completed both the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business Executive Education Program as well as the Harvard Business School General Management Program.



Rob Samuels at the Maker's Mark Distillery in Loretto, Kentucky

COMPANY BRIEF With a corporate office in Louisville and distillery production centered in Loretto, Kentucky, Maker's Mark Distillery, Inc., is America's oldest continuously operating producer of bourbon. Historically known as Burks Distillery, the Maker's Mark site was used to produce liquor as early as 1805. Maker's Mark was established commercially when T. William "Bill" Samuels Sr. purchased the "Burks' Distillery" for \$35,000 on October 1, 1953. Production began in 1954, and the first run was bottled in 1958 under the brand's distinctive dipped red wax seal. Maker's Mark (makersmark.com) is a handcrafted, small-batch bourbon whisky, and the site of its production was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1980, becoming the first distillery in America to be recognized as a national treasure. Historically known as Burks Distillery, the site was used to produce liquor as early as 1805.

Will you discuss Maker's Mark heritage and how important it has been that the culture of the brand has remained so strong?

We keep the founders', both my grandmother and my grandfather, vision embedded in everything we do. Who they were and their vision are not just fond stories of the past, but they are the guiding light for the future.

After finishing college in 1937, they got married, resurrected the legacy family distillery and brought it out of prohibition – it was only the fifth distillery to reopen after prohibition.

Later they found the courage to break from that legacy tradition in order to follow their own vision, which was to bring bourbon and good taste together. They wanted to create a soft, rich, creamy, handmade bourbon.

My grandfather's passion and focus were all on the distillery and that famous place that we call home, which today is a national historic landmark. They settled there because of the water source; to my knowledge, we are the only distillery today in North America that only uses water from our own natural source in all of the whisky we make. We also own an entire watershed, so we have 600 acres between our two lakes – every drop of water that has ever been in a cooker has come from a natural source.

He broke down each and every step of the process and was guided by his taste vision.

My grandmother was the one who created the name and designed the bottle, which she wanted to celebrate the essence of my grandfathers' handmade whisky. The Maker's Mark – the mark of the maker, much like those used by pewter makers – would always be the finishing touch reflecting the handmade quality and celebrating the values behind the product. She also designed the distillery with the idea of having friends come to visit – it's the first distillery in America to ever host visitors.

They didn't think about marketing their brand in traditional ways; they thought about sharing what they were making with friends. Once a few friends were interested, then they figured friends would come visit them. She designed the distillery much like someone would design their home. She would become the first female directly connected to a distillery to ever be inducted into the Kentucky Bourbon Hall of Fame.

Maker's was a 30-year overnight success. It was a Kentucky only brand with little interest from consumers. Kentuckians, in many ways, kept us in business through the '60s, '70s, and '80s.

When we talk about the founders' vision and the consistency in the distillery, my dad's greatest legacy was that, when

he chose to expand our distillery in the early 2000s, he chose to expand our distillery in a way that no distillery in the world had ever done. He resisted the temptation to scale up with the focus being reducing the cost. He actually built a second set of stills identical to the first with the same equipment and process, which meant the same consistency over time.

Four years ago, I built our third set of stills so, under one roof, we have identical triplets which is unique to Maker's Mark. We have a single source of supply, which means every drop of whisky that has ever been in a bottle of Maker's Mark has been made here, and it has never been anywhere other than a bottle of Maker's Mark.

My family's legacy within whisky is so much more than founding Maker's Mark. Many in the industry credit Maker's Mark as the vision that began the modern era of bourbon.

Has the Maker's Mark production process been impacted by technology or is it still about the hand touch?

The Wall Street Journal summed it up beautifully when they said Maker's Mark is purposefully inefficient. Our founders' goal was never to be the biggest or most efficient – irrespective of cost, he was a craftsman in pure pursuit of his taste vision.

As we've grown over time, our handmade tradition and the principles we employ continue to be executed by people who guide each and every

step of the process. The technologies we employ are more around helping us manage the consistency from a quality standpoint.

We've also been able to innovate in a thoughtful way based on our founders' taste vision. My father, with his creation – Maker's 46, essentially set out to create a product based on the flavors and characteristics that define what Maker's is. He looked to create the perfect expression of what Maker's Mark had become and amp up those specific flavors that live within Maker's that he loves the most.

Maker's 46 is finished with ten French oak staves for nine additional weeks. We also introduced an industry first when we carved out a limestone shelf in the hillside of the distillery and created a limestone whisky cellar used to mature our Maker's 46 and Maker's Private Selection bourbons. Maker's 46 is a time and temperature sensitive whisky. The finishing process can only occur at 50 degrees or cooler. We now have a temperature-controlled environment in our cellar.

It was that idea of creating our own perfect expression that led to creating another industry-first, a custom barrel program called Private Select. It was rooted in letting the best restaurants and bars in the world come to our distillery to better understand the handmade process that influences our whisky and, based on the flavor and characteristics, define their perfect expression.

How is Maker's 46 differentiated from Maker's Mark?

As more and more customers get interested in whisky, we see an increased number looking for a bigger, bolder bourbon. If one is in a bar and they strip away the marketing hype, the price tag and the exclusivity, people can be challenged to learn to like some big, bold bourbons.

We wanted to create a big, bolder expression of what Maker's could be. My dad wanted to amp up the vanilla and the baking spices, and have a bit of a stronger finish while still retaining the foundation of what Maker's is, so Maker's 46 is a big, bold bourbon that is easy to drink.

How difficult is it to cut through the noise in such a crowded market to tell the Maker's story?

In many ways, it's a lot easier because when Maker's was first released in May of 1958, there were essentially no customers asking for elevated bourbon. Friends at Keeneland Racecourse purchased the first case from my grandparents and we were a Kentucky brand for the next 25 years.

Today, we have more consumers willing to explore products that are special and that have authenticity.

We have a team of people at the distillery who engage all of their senses through each and every step of the handmade process. While we will sell almost two million cases this year and while Maker's Mark is distributed across many bars and restaurants, it's still made through exactly the same purposefully inefficient process.

We're the only distillery I know of that rotates every single barrel through the maturation process. We print and hand tear every single label for every bottle. In our distillery, there is a team of 14 people managing every step of the process, whereas in the modern day of technology, wineries, breweries and distilleries often have just one person in a room pushing buttons on a computer.

The full sensory engagement helps us lead to our founders' taste vision.

Has distribution evolved or have you remained true to your original distribution channels?

We had no growth for 30 years, but for the past 30 years, we've sold every drop we've had available.

The brand today is celebrated and available in most every metro city in America, and there is meaningful consumer interest outside the U.S. In the leading cities outside the U.S., be it Paris, Sydney, or Cape Town, the values of what Maker's Mark represents resonates with customers in the same way it does in New York and Kentucky.

Whisky and bourbon are considered more male-oriented. Have you been focused on building the female market?

Today, we probably have a few more male customers than female, but we probably have more female customers than most whiskies.

In the beginning, Maker's was created for people who didn't like whisky because legacy American whiskies were aggressive. They were tests of manhood and were commodities.

Thankfully, my grandparents had the courage to break from that tradition of whisky. In many ways, they might have felt pressure to just do what everybody expected. If you had a family business in the family for a century and it was commercially viable and successful, and if you lived in a community where six or seven of your neighbors ran the other distilleries, you would never think of parting ways with the family whisky. They had the courage and they complemented each other in such a beautiful way and, thankfully, they stayed true to their vision.

They operated their distillery for six and a half years before they sold the first case. How many new bourbons have been created since 1933 and how many of them started from scratch? I don't know of any others.

In his P&L, my grandfather didn't have a P for 25 years. He talked to me about what he had created and how proud he was that he had never wavered from his vision, even with well-intended pressure from the industry to conform to where the market was going.

That is what still drives me and our team. We have 215 team members and all of them love Maker's Mark as much as I do. There is no more highly engaged group of people.

How important has it been to maintain a family feel?

It means everything. Expanding and growing in whisky today isn't all that interesting. There are a lot of bourbon and scotch whisky distilleries that are expanding. I don't know that any distillery in the world has ever done what we have done – keeping the high touch and sensory engagement in the distillery and in the warehouse with rotating and hand-cutting labels and hand-dipping bottles. We have done what a lot of people said could not be done. We have kept the sanctity of the place, which is the soul of the company and the product.

I can feel the growth starting to take over. We were starting to burst at the seams, but I am proud of how it has all come together. We haven't just remained at the same level – we have pushed it further, but still under the direction of our founders' guiding light.

All the decisions we make fall right out of the clarity of their vision.

Our vision for the place is to become one of the most culturally rich, endearing, and environmentally responsible distilleries in the world.

How important is the environmental focus?

It's very important, because being stewards of nature is paramount for the future because bourbon comes from nature.

Bourbon is nature. Maker's Mark is nature. In the beginning, our founders didn't stumble upon this location by accident. The reason they purchased the property was because of nature and the 14-acre spring-fed lake.

Today, we have two spring-fed lakes and our farm manager is an environmental biologist.

He, along with our team, are putting conservation at the center of everything we do, from creating the first water sanctuary and planting more than 1,500 American white oak trees so as water comes down into earth, it naturally comes in and is filtered.

We own our entire watershed, but we are also exploring ways and implementing principles across American oak and grain to push the boundaries of flavor and put conservation at the center, beyond even the product we make.

Did you always know you would be a part of Maker's Mark?

I worked in the distillery as a youngster. I loved those opportunities and I'm so grateful my dad gave me that chance. I would spend the summers with my grandparents, literally running the still – I worked every job.

That was very important to me, but it was also a great gift to be encouraged to get outside the shadows of Kentucky and the shadows of Maker's Mark.

I never wanted my father to feel he had to hire his son, so I worked for a different company in the same industry for 11 years.

What I proved is that I have an appreciation for Maker's Mark, but I also have a love for the industry and I wanted to make it my life's work.

My dad retired eight years ago, so I began to work with our team and continue the journey and keep the whisky quality and consistency and add layers of richness to the depth of the experience.

We are becoming a destination. We used to have a lot of local visitors who were looking for tours, but people are coming from all over the U.S. and even internationally today. We know that our visitor is more loyal to our brand than any visitor to any other distillery. They want to go deep into those layers that our founder put in place.

While your focus is on continuous improvement, are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins or are you always looking ahead?

It's both. We have a great group of people and we let them work at the highest possible level to make a difference and keep them engaged.

We don't try to do everything, but for everything we try to do, we try to do it better than before. It's a lot of work, but it's inspiring for people.

How special is it to be part of such a legacy brand and how have you maintained such a strong family relationship in the business?

No one is more proud of dad's legacy and his contributions than I am. Even though he retired, I call him almost every day. I decided from day one that I wasn't going to be insecure about who he is. He's a larger than life figure – I celebrate him and I could not be more proud of him.

It's not about me. It's about the brand and I get to play a unique role given the family legacy, but there is a big group, so I want to help all of us be great. We can do things with our brand that maybe no one else can do. ●