THE THELEN RESERVE

BOURBON NIGHT

Host Your Own Blind Tasting

THE HOSTING COLLECTION / VOLUME 01



You bring the bourbon.
We bring the experience.

3 BOTTLES / 2-8 ADULTS / 60-75 MINUTES

START HERE



Your evening, simplified.

Three bottles. A few friends. Your own taste.

The plan

Host 2-8 adults for a relaxed 60-75 minute blind tasting. Start with 1/4 oz (about 7.5 mL) per bottle per person. There is no requirement to finish a pour or taste every sample.

Open these files

Read this handbook first. Choose Letter or A4 printables for your paper size. Use the fillable scorecard on a phone or tablet if you prefer. Play the welcome MP4 before tasting; its transcript is also included.

The shortest route

Choose three bottles. Hide them and assign A, B and C. Put out water, glasses and scorecards. Smell, sip if you choose, and record preferences privately. Vote before revealing the bottles.

Your role

You are the host, not the answer key. Keep the pace comfortable and give everyone room to disagree.





Gather the basics.

For each guest

Three small glasses are ideal; matching glasses make comparison easier. One clean glass per person also works. Add drinking water, a pen and a scorecard or a device with the fillable PDF.

For the table

Three bourbons, opaque bags or sleeves, tape, a marker, the private reveal sheet, a small measuring cup or jigger with a 1/4 oz mark, a water dropper or teaspoon, plain crackers and a discard cup. Keep snacks and water nearby.

No printer? No special glassware?

Write A, B and C on masking tape or small cards. Keep bottle identities in a private phone note. Use ordinary small glasses. With one glass, serve A, record notes, discard leftovers, rinse, drain, then repeat for B and C.

Before you invite

Plan for adults of legal drinking age. Offer a no-alcohol way to participate and arrange transportation that does not depend on anyone judging their own sobriety.





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01 / QUICK-START HOST GUIDE

Prepare in 20 minutes.

A practical checklist, not a production schedule.

1. Choose and measure

Use the selection guide on pages 6-7. Check that each bottle has at least guest count x 7.5 mL remaining, plus a little handling allowance. Four guests need 30 mL from each bottle; eight need 60 mL.

2. Keep the identities private

Put each bottle in an opaque bag. Cover recognizable necks or caps where practical. Assign random A/B/C codes and immediately record the exact bottle, proof and optional price on the reveal sheet. Keep caps and packaging out of sight.

3. Pour away from the table

Pour A into every A glass, then B into every B glass, then C into every C glass. Use the same measured amount throughout. Keep the original bottles in their bags and the reveal sheet private.

4. Check your table

A is left, B is middle, C is right on every mat. Keep water outside the sample row. Check the labels once more before guests sit down. A helper can code and pour if the host wants to taste blind too.





A relaxed running order.

0-10 minutes | Settle in

Welcome everyone, offer water and snacks, explain that sipping is optional, and play the welcome video. Make sure each person has a scorecard.

10-35 minutes | Explore A, B, C

Give each sample roughly 7-8 minutes, including pauses. Start with quiet individual notes. The letters conceal identity; they do not imply strength or quality. Let guests add a few drops of water if they wish.

35-50 minutes | Compare and vote

Invite each guest to share a description. Record one favorite per person before revealing anything. Ties are welcome; split a tied guest vote equally between tied samples.

50-65 minutes | The reveal

Reveal the bottle names, then proof, then optional prices. Ask what surprised the group. The winner is simply this group's favorite tonight.

65-75 minutes | Wrap up

Let the conversation continue over food and water. Do not add automatic refills. Keep the scorecards as a memory of the evening.





02 / THREE-BOTTLE SELECTION

Pick a flight, not a trophy.

Host-only information. Keep this page away from guests until the reveal.

A straightforward first lineup

Maker's Mark Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 90 proof. Four Roses Small Batch, 90 proof. Wild Turkey 101 Bourbon, 101 proof. Choose the exact expressions shown; avoid similarly named cask-strength versions.

Why these three

Maker's Mark provides a wheated starting point. Four Roses Small Batch invites comparison of fruit and spice. Wild Turkey 101 adds a somewhat higher-proof reference. These are prompts to explore, not guaranteed tasting outcomes.

Make the labels random

The list above is a shopping suggestion, not the A/B/C answer key. Assign the codes after choosing bottles. With this range, proof can influence preferences; this is a fun comparison rather than a controlled experiment.

Keep the budget flexible

No rare bottles are needed. Availability and prices vary by market. Set your total budget before shopping, use bottles you already own, and substitute rather than chase a particular brand.



Use what you own.

The easy selection rule

Choose three distinct, unflavored bourbons from different producers, ideally 80-101 proof for this first beginner flight. Look for differences you can explain after the reveal: recipe, producer, age statement or proof. Similar proofs reduce one source of variation.

If a suggested bottle is unavailable

Use Four Roses Bourbon specifically labeled 80 proof as a lower-proof option. Benchmark Bonded, 100 proof, is another option for the higher-proof place. These are alternative flights, not identical flavor replacements. Check every label.

If you have only three bottles

Use them. Similar bottles can still make an interesting comparison. If one is barrel proof, strongly flavored or finished in another type of cask, save it for another night when possible. Otherwise disclose the stronger range and offer smaller tastes or a smell-only option.

If your bottles are very different

Do not force a fair contest. Tell guests they are comparing different styles. Keep each person's first impression private. Higher proof, more age and a higher price do not automatically earn a higher enjoyment score.



Notice. Name. Enjoy.

Nose = what you smell

Bring the glass toward your nose gently; do not bury your nose in it or inhale deeply. Move it farther away if the aroma feels sharp. Start with broad words: sweet, fruity, woody, spicy or toasted.

Palate = flavor and feel

Take a tiny sip if you choose. Notice flavors and texture. Does it feel light, rounded, dry or rich? There is no need to hold alcohol in your mouth or prove you can handle the heat.

Finish = what lingers

After the sip, notice what remains and whether it fades quickly or slowly. Short is not automatically bad; long is not automatically good.

Water is welcome

Add a few drops if you want and note what changes. You can also stop or skip a sample. Do not compare an altered sample as though it were unchanged; mark water added on your card.

Say it in your own words

Vanilla, caramel, apple, cherry, nuts, baking spice, toast and oak are useful starting points. These describe associations, not proof that an ingredient was added.

Score enjoyment.

One scale, no complicated math

1 = not for me. 2 = a little to like. 3 = I like it. 4 = I really like it. 5 = a favorite tonight. Use N/T if you did not taste. Scores describe preference, not objective whiskey quality.

For every sample

Write one or two words for aroma, flavor and finish. Add an enjoyment score and note water if used. Leave blank anything you cannot describe. Choose your favorite before anyone announces the bottles.

For the host

Count favorite votes on the reveal sheet. For a tie between two samples, award 0.5 vote to each. For a three-way tie, award 1/3 to each. Do not include abstentions in the vote total. Leave scores out of the tally unless you want a separate conversation.

A printer-free evening

Save a copy of the fillable scorecard per guest in a PDF app that supports forms. Test saving one entry before the event; some browser previews do not retain entries. A regular phone note headed A / B / C works too.





05 / HOST SCRIPT

The words are already here.

Read naturally. Pause whenever the group wants more time.

Welcome

"Tonight is about finding what you like. The labels and prices are hidden so we can start with our own impressions. Nobody has to be a whiskey expert, and nobody has to drink."

Before sample A

"Start with a gentle smell. If you choose to taste, take a tiny sip. Write down anything it reminds you of, then score how much you enjoy it from one to five. Keep your first impression private for a moment."

Moving to B and C

"Have some water and take a pause. Now try the next sample at your own pace. Compare it with your notes, not someone else's opinion. You can use a few drops of water or skip it."

Before the reveal

"Choose your favorite now. A tie is fine. Once the votes are in, we will uncover the bottles. No changing the blind vote after the labels appear."





Make room for surprises.

Open the conversation

"Which sample was easiest to describe?" "Did the aroma match the flavor?" "Which texture did you prefer?" "Did water change your impression?" Ask what guests noticed before offering flavor suggestions.

Reveal in three steps

First show the names and match each to its letter. Next read the proof from each bottle. Finally share actual purchase prices if you want a value discussion. Keep the original votes intact.

A little perspective

"Did the label change your expectations?" "Would your choice be different with food or ice?" "Which would you choose for a future gathering?" Avoid treating the group's result as a universal ranking.

When someone says, I just taste bourbon

"That is a perfectly good starting point. Which one do you enjoy most? Does one feel lighter, sweeter or drier? You do not need a tasting vocabulary to have a preference."

Close the night

"Your favorite is the one you enjoyed. Keep your card. It is a snapshot of your taste tonight, and it can change."



Keep the evening easy.

A label gets exposed

Keep going. Note that the sample was no longer fully blind. The conversation still works; just do not call the final result an unbiased comparison.

You only have one glass each

Finish notes on A, discard any remainder, rinse and drain, then serve B. Repeat for C. Compare from notes without pouring another round.

A guest wants no alcohol

Welcome them as a scorekeeper, discussion leader or reveal host. They can join aroma discussion if they choose. Never frame participation as requiring a taste.

A sample feels too strong

Pause. Water, a smaller taste, smelling only or skipping are all valid. The planned amount is a setup quantity, not a safe-drinking guarantee.

Digital or printing trouble

Use Letter files on US Letter paper or A4 files on A4. Print at actual size, single-sided. No printer: use tape labels and phone notes. No video playback: read the included transcript.





Sources & use.

Bottle facts checked October 17, 2026

Official producer pages support the named expressions and proofs. Always check the bottle in your hand; packaging and available expressions can change.

Producer sources

Maker's Mark: Kentucky Straight Bourbon
Four Roses: Small Batch
Four Roses: Bourbon
Wild Turkey: 101 Bourbon
Buffalo Trace Distillery: Benchmark Bonded

A few clear boundaries

This is a digital hosting kit. Bourbon, glassware and physical supplies are not included. For adults of legal drinking age. Do not drive after drinking. No participant needs to consume alcohol to take part.

Personal-use edition

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