

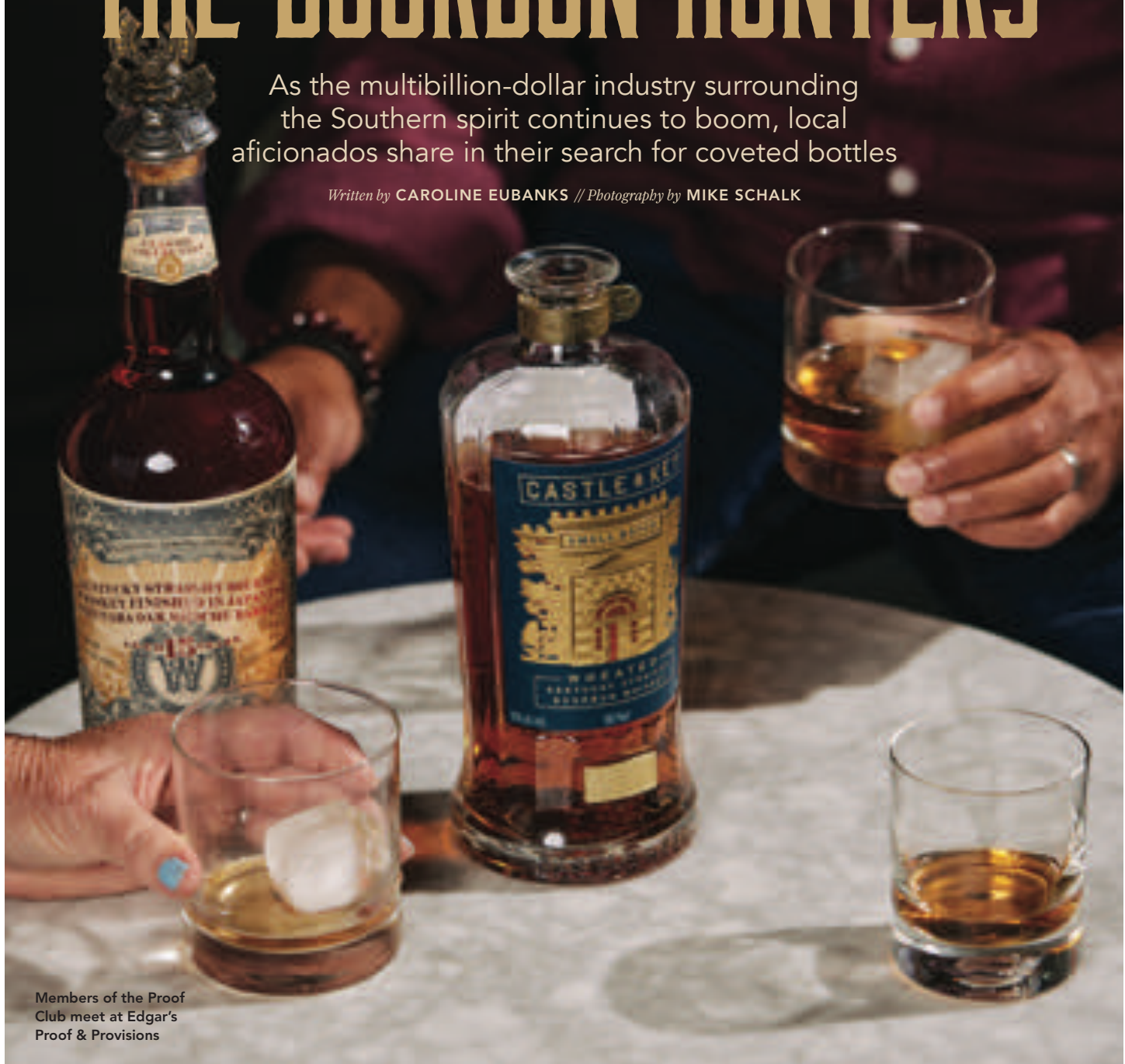
SAVANNAH

TASTE

THE BOURBON HUNTERS

As the multibillion-dollar industry surrounding the Southern spirit continues to boom, local aficionados share in their search for coveted bottles

Written by CAROLINE EUBANKS // *Photography by* MIKE SCHALK



Members of the Proof Club meet at Edgar's Proof & Provisions



TASTE

A selection of bottles from
Habersham Beverage

YOU DON'T HAVE TO HEAD TO THE BLUEGRASS STATE
TO FIND SOME OF THE BEST BOURBON.

SAVANNAH IS HOME TO SEVERAL GATHERING PLACES
FOR BROWN WATER LOVERS, WHETHER YOU'RE LOOKING
TO TRY A NEW COCKTAIL, MINGLE WITH FELLOW FANS
OR PICK UP A RARE BOTTLE FOR YOUR COLLECTION.



BONDED BY BOURBON

In addition to the several online groups where bourbon fans swap recommendations and even bottles, there's an in-person community that meets in the heart of historic Savannah. Edgar's Proof & Provisions bar inside The DeSoto Savannah is home to the Proof Club, also known as "the bourbon club," a group of around 80 (and counting) local bourbon aficionados that meet on the first Wednesday of every month.

The group's name refers to the alcohol content of a spirit, including bourbon. By law, bourbon must be at least 80 proof (or 40% alcohol), but some sought-after bottles like George T Stagg, E.H. Taylor and Blanton's may be as high as 130 proof.

However, a preference for heavy pours isn't a requirement for joining the club. Lifelong bourbon drinkers and newcomers alike are welcome to just learn about the spirit, says Lauren Teague, The DeSoto Savannah's director of food and beverage and executive chef.

"It's always a mix of people," Teague says of the club's roster. "We have some younger, older men, women, all different professions. Some come all the time; some come every once in a while."

During each monthly meeting, Edgar's staff offers a welcome cocktail and light bites, then showcases three whiskeys, including rye and bourbon, telling the stories behind them as well as dissecting aspects like sight, color, smell and flavor. Sometimes, representatives for the distilleries drop by, and the group often gets to sample bottles that are hard to find or run upwards of \$300 — a good deal considering the club's annual dues are only \$150 per person.

"[These whiskies] tell a story. Some of these have just phenomenal stories about how they were originated by someone's grandfather or they were named after somebody," says Teague. "A lot of these bottles are things that you will probably not purchase yourself." »



Kirstin Cook (center)
with fellow members
of The Proof Club

“[THESE WHISKIES] TELL A STORY. SOME OF THESE HAVE JUST PHENOMENAL STORIES ABOUT HOW THEY WERE ORIGINATED BY SOMEONE’S GRANDFATHER OR THEY WERE NAMED AFTER SOMEBODY. A LOT OF THESE BOTTLES ARE THINGS THAT YOU WILL PROBABLY NOT PURCHASE YOURSELF.”

Lauren Teague, executive chef and director of food and beverage at The DeSoto Savannah



The club provides an unparalleled education for those interested in bourbon but also forges friendships. Between meetings, members chat online and even have a bottle exchange to swap favorite finds. Member Kirstin Cook leads the Facebook group and has been a member for more than six years.

“I was pretty well-versed in bourbon and whiskey when I joined,” she says. Still, the club has allowed her to gain more knowledge and try some unicorns, such as Pappy Van Winkle — one of the industry’s biggest success stories with a cult-like following.

“I found out I’m not a fan, which is great because it’s so expensive and now I know I don’t need to bother,” Cook says. Instead, she’s found that she prefers bottles from brands like Penelope and Old Carter.

PICKY DRINKERS

Plenty of Savannah’s bars and restaurants offer robust bourbon selections, but perhaps none more than Husk, an offshoot of the restaurant founded by chef Sean Brock in Charleston, South Carolina, and now owned by The Neighborhood Dining Group. The Savannah iteration has been open since 2018, and from the beginning, has put an emphasis on Southern spirits. Throughout the past few years, the team at Husk has forged relationships with distillers to carry only the best bottles on the bar menu thanks to the restaurant’s reputation. »

TASTE

A Manhattan at
Husk Savannah

ANDREW THOMAS LEE // COURTESY HUSK SAVANNAH

**“OFTENTIMES THERE ARE CERTAIN
BOTTLES THAT ARE YEARLY OR TWICE
YEARLY RELEASES, AND WHEN THEY’RE
GONE, THEY’RE GONE.”**

Kenny Lyons, vice president of operations
for The Neighborhood Dining Group

“We’re kind of synonymous with having excellent bourbon and an excellent bourbon program, and it’s a focus for us,” says Kenny Lyons, vice president of operations for The Neighborhood Dining Group and an avid bourbon collector, with 30 “dusty,” or vintage, bottles at home. “We build our spirits program and cocktail program around whiskey, and we do a lot of training with our staff to make sure that they know how to speak to it.”

Patrons of Husk can enjoy an extensive menu of different types of whiskeys from America and beyond, with one- to two-ounce pours between \$17 and \$200 for a taste. At any given time, the selection may be up to 200 whiskeys. In addition to many of the heavy hitters on the menu, including E.H. Taylor, Buffalo Trace, Eagle Rare and Stitzel-Weller, Husk also specializes in single barrel selections, where distillers choose one barrel for its flavor profile to bottle and for rare pours.

“We’ve had probably roughly 20 different single barrels over the last 10 years. We typically get one or two a year, but we’ve got all of our current Willett single barrels on offer as well as our Bardstown single barrel, which I think is pretty special,” notes Lyons.

For the uninitiated, the bar staff at Husk are there, ready to make suggestions based on your preferences and palates. You never know what you’ll find, as the bottles are often limited.

“Oftentimes there are certain bottles that are yearly or twice yearly releases, and when they’re gone, they’re gone. And there’s also new products that could be a new up-and-coming producer that we will add and see how it goes and see how we sell it,” says Lyons.

BARRELING AHEAD

Husk’s arrival on Savannah’s restaurant scene in 2018 dovetails with global trends in consumer preferences, with bourbon rising in popularity since the turn of the century. According to the Kentucky Distillers Association, the state produced a record 2.7 million barrels of Bourbon in 2022, marking the fifth year in a row topping 2 million, and generated \$9 billion for its economy.

Savvy liquor stores are leaning into their customer preferences. “Bourbon is the next Pokémon for drinking age people,” says Vince Becker, a manager at Habersham Beverage Warehouse 🍷. In the past 10 years, he has seen more people chasing the “unobtainables,” or products that are distributed with limited allocations.

“The ones that people — or cherry pickers, as we refer to them — are really hunting for, we don’t even put them on the shelf,” he says. Rather, the uncommon goods are tucked away in the back and reserved for the store’s most loyal customers. “We try to take care of the folks who are our regulars that are buying our store picks and some of the less-chased-after stuff year-round ... It’s a tough juggle, because you’re trying to help everyone out, but there is not enough to go around.”

For those who are new to the bourbon game, Becker recommends starting with Habersham Beverage’s barrel picks. These are unique variations of popular brands, like Old Forester, Rittenhouse Rye, Yellowstone and High West. Reps from the brand or its distributor bring in samples straight from rickhouses where barrels are aged, and the experts at Habersham Beverage handpick their favorites, which are bottled with a custom label. One of Becker’s personal favorites is their private selection of Maker’s Mark, which is named Savannah Praline because of its customized tasting notes.

“We’ve tasted and we put our name on, and that’s our pick,” Becker says. In today’s era of Instagram influencers, YouTube channels with thousands of subscribers and Facebook groups like The Proof Club, the right — or wrong — pick can go a long way in establishing a liquor’s store reputation among hunters.

“We are doing pretty good at it,” Becker says proudly. “We get some picks that come in and fly. Thirty or 40 bottles will be gone in three days.” 🍷

