

A Blend Above

From Ocean Springs to award-winning acclaim, Jonathan Maisano's K.LUKE Bourbon blends art, science, and soul into every bottle.

Jonathan Maisano made his first trip to Kentucky to sample single-barrel bourbon in the summer of 2014. By that point in his career, Maisano was a first-level certified Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers and owned Maisano's Fine Wine and Spirits in Ocean Springs.

However, Maisano points to that trip as the moment when his passion shifted from wine to whiskey. And ultimately, it led him and his wife, Jennifer, to start K.LUKE Whiskey Company in 2021. And in early 2024, he sold his wine and spirits store to focus full-time on K.LUKE.

Since that trip, he has tasted over 1,600 barrels and selected more than 400 to be deemed as Maisano Hand Select Single Barrels for retail. "Even though we're a relatively new company, I have dedicated my entire career to studying wine and whiskey," he says.

K.LUKE is not a distillery that creates whiskey from scratch. Instead, they blend different whiskey barrels together to create unique flavor profiles. "We do small-batch blends to create a new multi-layered whiskey," Maisano explains.

To create their unique blends, Maisano evaluates each whiskey separately and then combines them to create a new taste experience. His focus is



not on the individual components, but rather on building new layers of flavor and figuring out how the pieces fit together in the best way. In this way, he compares himself to a chef who sources the best ingredients and blends them together to create a dish with complementary and deep flavors.

K.LUKE sources whiskey from eight different distilleries in Kentucky and Indiana, receiving new barrel samples almost quarterly. Each barrel introduces numerous variables that can alter the flavor profile, including mash bill, proof, and barrel aging. "Each barrel has so much personality, it's unbelievable," he explains. "I taste and take notes constantly; always evaluating new blends."

MAISANO HAS AN ELABORATE PROCESS FOR SELECTING AND BLENDING WHISKEY. He goes through several rounds of blind tastings with blends being adjusted by a single barrel at a time. Maisano tastes each barrel "blind," meaning he doesn't know the age, warehouse location, proof, or any other details that may influence the outcome of the selection.

His wife, Jennifer, also helps with blind tastings, and the two compare notes until a combination is settled on for bottling. It can be a long and painstaking process, but it's a labor of love for the Maisanos, who have a passion for the work.



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MAISANO USES HIS ELEVATED PALATE TO DISCERN NOTES OF AROMATICS, FRUITS, RICHNESS, AND SPICE IN EACH BARREL. In his blends, he aims to create a flavor profile that is balanced from the nose to the mid-palate, all the way through the finish. “What draws a drinker back in is the layered taste experience we create. And that’s the difference between good and great whiskey,” he says.

In the four years since beginning their journey, the Maisanos have grown the K.LUKE brand at a rapid pace. The company initially offered only four blends, but after ramping up production, Maisano now blends up to ten barrels in each small-batch blend. Distribution has grown beyond Mississippi, and K.LUKE products are now available in eight states and can be ordered through specialty retailers online.

K.LUKE’s flagship offering, the Small Batch Barrel Strength Bourbon, is a blend. Maisano describes it as a full-flavored bourbon with a long finish on the palate. Another popular blend is the Toasted Barrel Bourbon, which has a more fruit-forward flavor with notes of spiced vanilla. The toasted blend recently received a Double Gold medal, scoring 99 points from the judges at the 2024 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. It was awarded Special Barrel Finished Bourbon of the Year at the same competition.

Maisano’s favorite is hard to pin down. It all depends on the day of the week or what he’s eating. “The small-batch bourbon is my go-to. But that’s the fun of the products; they all have unique personalities, and we offer different blends for infinite moods,” he says.

K.LUKE is a true family whiskey project. The name is a tribute to the couple’s two children, Kaitlyn and Lucas. And Jennifer not only helps with tasting and blending but also manages finances, inventory, and accounting.

For now, Maisano will focus on crafting new blends and slowly expanding distribution. “We don’t want to be in every market,” he says. I want it to stay small and manageable. Keep making quality whiskey. My goal is to slowly grow the company and keep whiskey at the forefront.” **FG**



== K.LUKE is available at spirits shop retailers in Mississippi. ==
Visit klukewhiskeycompany.com.

TOP AND BOTTOM: Maisano goes through several rounds of blind tastings to select each blend for bottling. Jennifer and Jonathan Maisano accepted the Best Special Barrel-Finished Bourbon of the Year award at the 2024 San Francisco World Spirits Competition for their Toasted Barrel, Barrel Strength Bourbon.