

SEASON'S *Bounty*

Holidays at Woodford Reserve a Special Treat



JEFF ROGERS

By Susan Miller

The kitchen David Larson cooks in as chef-in-residence at Woodford Reserve Distillery is perhaps the only one in Kentucky that has windows with a splendid country view of a creek and waterfall. "This is such a feel-good place," said Larson.



WOODFORD RESERVE PHOTO

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Feeling good might be an understatement because no bourbon is even needed to experience the near-intoxicating spirit that is part of a visit to Woodford Reserve, especially during the holidays when Larson heightens the festive feeling with his celebrated lunches. Woodford Reserve is a holiday destination, and it's pure Kentucky, starting with the turn onto Grassy Springs Road off U.S. Route 60 in Versailles, a quiet lane that winds through picturesque Bluegrass horse farms to the historic stone distillery.

Elijah Pepper built the handsome old structure in 1812, and it remains one of the oldest and smallest bourbon distilleries in Kentucky. The plant has had several owners through the years but was operated the longest by Leopold Labrot and James Graham, who purchased it in 1878 and kept it going until 1941 when



WOODFORD RESERVE PHOTOS

Woodford Reserve is bedecked in festive trim to welcome the scores of visitors who make a special trip for the holiday lunches.

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financial problems during World War II bankrupted them. Brown-Forman Corp., the Kentucky-based spirits manufacturer, stepped in to buy and operate the facility until 1968, then sold it in 1971.

Ironically, in 1994 Brown-Forman was shopping around for an old distillery with a lot of history and heritage and re-



WOODFORD RESERVE PHOTOS

Above, holiday lunches in the Dryer Room feature buffet offerings and all the condiments.

discovered its old facility that by then had been abandoned and run down. Millions of dollars later the old distillery came back to life, producing small batches of some of the finest bourbon in the world. In 2000 the distillery was designated a National Historic Landmark. In 2003, for simplicity, the Labrot and Graham name was dropped, and the distillery now carries the distinctive name of its famous bourbon, Woodford Reserve.

Woodford Reserve embodies all the elements of a romantic Kentucky setting: The visitor's center has sweeping porches (the quintessential Kentucky spot for sitting in rocking chairs and "sipping" bourbon) embraced by 100-year-old trees. Native limestone fences surround the property, through which flows a

scenic creek that surely has supplied all that good limestone-filtered water to make bourbon through the years. A sparkling lake adds to the pastoral quality. The distillery even owns two racehorses that you might catch glimpses of across their fences if they aren't off the premises doing their jobs — training or racing. (One, Angel Share, is named for the folklore term given to the small portion of bourbon that evaporates from the aging barrels. That portion is said to be the angels' share.)

This perfect landscape could not be complete without good Kentucky food, and that's where Larson comes in.

Larson grew up in Danville, Ky., but went to the Lewis International Hotel School in Washington, D.C., in his early 20s to

study hotel management. Afterward, he worked at the Watergate Hotel, where he met a doctor with an office adjacent to the hotel. The doctor's wife owned a catering business. "This woman was a wonderful cook, but she was pathologically late for her jobs," he explained. "So her husband asked me if I would be interested in coming to work as her business manager." In that role, Larson frequently had to bail

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a perfect location in Lexington's Chevy Chase, and for 20 years he dazzled diners at the popular Pampered Chef.

After reopening the distillery, Brown-Forman hired Larson

part time as an independent contractor to cater special events. "Eventually I was spending more time at the distillery than at the restaurant, and I had a chance to sell the restaurant." When lunches were added and catering jobs increased, Larson joined

pudding, sweet-potato casserole, and bourbon-baked apricots. There are always six salads, plus bread pudding with bourbon-caramel sauce, bourbon-chocolate cake with caramel icing, and fresh berry cobbler.

"I like to focus on simple ingredients here, like the way bourbon is made," said Larson. "They take simple ingredients (corn, malt, and rye) and with time and knowledge (the ingredients) become something wonderful and complex." Incidentally, no alcohol

"I like to focus on simple ingredients here, like the way bourbon is made."

— David Larson,
chef at Woodford Reserve

— bourbon or otherwise — is served during lunch, but like we said, the atmosphere is just naturally spirited!

Bourbon is only one of the local ingredients Larson uses in his cooking. "We are all about sustainability here, too," he said. He shops locally and at farmers markets. Before the end of the growing season, Larson fills freezers with fresh vegetables. "We have two freezers filled with just Kentucky Wonder beans," he said.

"We serve between 5,000 and 7,000 people during the holidays," said Larson. Lunches are served in the Dryer Room, a room where mash once was dried. The big, wood-paneled room with ceiling beams has French doors that overlook the scenic Glenn's Creek, the same one Larson views from his kitchen windows.

Larson explained that many of the same people come year after year to celebrate the holidays, and visitors have found out about the special lunches simply by word of mouth. "We have a loyal following and people also expect the same food, so if we change something like corn pudding to macaroni and cheese, we get phone calls asking why," he said with a laugh.

"We have people from Lexington and Louisville and Cincinnati, and groups from



Chef David Larson's bread pudding features bourbon-caramel sauce.

the distillery full time.

During the holidays Larson gets the chance to showcase traditional Kentucky fare with a Woodford Reserve twist.

A series of themed lunches is featured throughout the year, but starting Nov. 17, the popular "Holidays at Woodford Reserve" lunches begin, showcasing the inclusion of bourbon in many of the dishes. Served buffet-style, the lavish lunches might include Cornish hen with apricot-and-bourbon glaze, roasted salmon with pepper relish, and roasted loin of pork with sautéed cabbage and risotto, along with the ubiquitous green beans, corn

her out by helping prepare food when she was running late. "I can remember making hors d'oeuvres in the back of a station wagon on the way to a party," said Larson. "So I finally said 'just teach me how to cook, so I can help you,' and that's really how I learned."

Larson worked with that caterer for two years but wanted to get back to Kentucky and open his own restaurant. He found

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all over the world," Larson said. Throughout the year Woodford Reserve specializes in large gatherings for corporate and non-profit groups — between 30,000 and 40,000 people a year — but doesn't book weddings or private parties.

"There is always something going on here, but it's still laid back," said Larson. "Working in a place like this, with all this history around, just makes me wish that more of Kentucky could

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stay like this."

Lunch also includes an hour-long, up-close-and-personal tour of the distillery. A highlight is the small distilling room with its three copper pot stills imported from Scotland and unique in the United States.

If you desire to do a little holiday shopping, the attractive gift shop is stocked with all kinds of unique Kentucky items. And be assured, the distillery is decorated beautifully, using many natural materials indigenous to Kentucky. 🦋



WOODFORD RESERVE PHOTO

HOLIDAYS AT WOODFORD RESERVE

"Holidays at Woodford Reserve" are featured Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Nov. 17 through Dec. 30, but are closed Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. The cost for lunch and tour is \$24.95 plus tax and gratuity. The Ron Jones Jazz Band is featured on Tuesdays. Reservations are required by calling 859.879.1953 or by logging on to the Web site www.woodfordreserve.com.

WOODFORD RESERVE BOURBON ACADEMY

Looking for a unique gift for someone who would love learning the in-depth history, production, and appreciation of bourbon? Give them a gift certificate for Whiskey 101, a daylong educational event with Master Distiller Chris Morris. The event will be offered on Feb. 16 and March 22 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The cost is \$125 and includes a bourbon-inspired lunch. Contact Kelly Smith at 859.879.1963 for reservations.

WOODFORD RESERVE CULINARY COCKTAIL TOUR

If you love cooking and would like to explore what the Woodford Reserve Culinary Cocktail Tour Cookbook calls "pure epicurean discovery and bourbon bliss," you'll want to add this book to your collection. The beautiful photographs could qualify it as a coffee-table book, but the recipes from popular Kentucky chefs are so good, it might not make it out of the kitchen. It comes with a CD "flavor wheel," which offers suggestions for pairing bourbon with different categories of food. Look for the book in local bookstores and in the distillery's gift shop. The book retails for \$29.95.

Woodford Reserve's gift shop offers many options for holiday shoppers.