



CASK FORCE

Meet the guys putting maple syrup in bourbon barrels.

WORDS BY REBECCA TREON | PHOTO BY JENNIFER JOHNSON

MAPLE SYRUP ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE—and that's a good thing. Many Americans grew up with a plastic container of imitation syrup, only having the real deal on special occasions or not until adulthood (and outside of the Northeast, many people remain tragically unaware of the distinction). But maple syrup is moving further up still.

Nicholas O'Connell and his brother, Michael, are the duo behind Boston-based Cask Force, and they're aging maple syrup in a variety of wooden casks, infusing the syrup with flavor. Their backgrounds have more to do with fine wine and spirits than Saturday morning pancakes, though: The duo are the proprietors of four Boston-area liquor stores that have been in the family for three generations. Cask Force was born out of Nicholas' love for craft beer, a passion that made him a frequent traveler to Vermont. There, he would stop at small family farms and buy bottles of different grades of syrup, often labeled with nothing but a home phone number.

Of the dozen of bottles he brought home, Nicholas did a blind tasting, much like a sommelier does with wine, and chose the syrup with the best flavor. "We look at Vermont as the Napa of maple syrup," he says. "We appreciate syrup the way we appreciate wine and terroir." He found that trees growing on steep slopes produce syrups with the best flavor, and partnered with the Purinton family, who've been making syrup on the uneven terrain of their Huntington farm since 1803.

Using grades ranging from fancy to robust, the brothers create special blends to match the flavor profile of the cask it will go into. "Lots of wine producers are making blends with forty percent of one grape varietal and sixty percent of another," says Nicholas. "We took that idea from our wine background and applied it to syrup to get distinctive flavor profiles."

The syrup is then put into rye, bourbon, or whiskey casks, and aged anywhere from four weeks to six months in a walk-in cooler. There are seven totally distinctive styles, including Single Malt Barrel Aged, AWFS Porter Barrel Finished, and Kasai (aged and finished with ghost chile flakes). Even the bottles are special: their easy-wash metallic label was designed by artist Elaine Buckholtz, a close family friend. As for the barrels, they are used once for syrup, and then repurposed again, usually by a brewery who will use them to age beer.

Beyond breakfast, Cask Force's syrups are great on roasted vegetables, in overnight oatmeal, or drizzled on popcorn (the Kasai is especially good for this). The O'Connells have even created a syrup-topped bone marrow dish finished with pulverized pecans and rosemary. cask-force.com.