



A Leg Up On the Competition

HOW CAREY BRINGLE OF NASHVILLE'S PEG LEG PORKER
CRAFTED THE "WORLD'S BEST BOURBON"

Story by Chris Parton

When you get down to it, barbecue and bourbon have a lot in common. They both require patience and thrive on a generational tradition of craftsmanship. They've both been commodified in Nashville into complementing corporate revenue streams, driven by a steady flow of tourists who rarely look behind the curtain. But a guy named Carey Bringle with a fake leg and a big, boisterous laugh does things differently.

The proud purveyor of Peg Leg Porker—a family-run barbecue restaurant with a reach far exceeding its humble Music City footprint—Bringle took a big leap back in 2014, boldly launching a bourbon brand while his core business was still in its infancy. And just like his barbecue, Peg Leg Porker Bourbon's no-nonsense approach has won over casual customers and connoisseurs alike.



A Tennessee bourbon with delicate, never-overpowering smokiness, the brand's 4-6 year white label was even named World's Best Bourbon by the Tasting Alliance in 2023—a huge vote of appreciation for a brand with a personality, not a marketing strategy—and though you can feel that in the product and presentation, it mostly comes from the man himself.

After opening a brand new bottling facility and tasting room in South Nashville this summer, Bringle invited *Bourbon+* over to see what makes Peg Leg Porker Bourbon tick—and why it seems to stand out. Clearly, his spirits are not an afterthought to the barbecue at all.

“People are like, ‘Oh, you got a bourbon, you sell it at your restaurant?’ And I’m like, ‘Actually, we’re in 11 states and we just won Best Bourbon in the World,’” Bringle tells *Bourbon+* with a good-natured chuckle. “They’re usually like, ‘What!?’ But yeah, we’re serious about it.”

Perched on a stool at the tasting room’s rustic, no-frills bar, with his scuffed-up prosthetic leg disappearing into cargo shorts, a work shirt, and a PLP ball cap, Bringle explains that his brand is just like him—and a much different animal from its peers. It was before opening on a sunny morning in July, and though customers would start trickling in a little after lunch hour, the true purpose of the building is the state-of-the-art

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bottling line behind the bar, which gives Bringle more of what his brand thrives on: hands-on control. While other start-up spirit makers focus on getting people into the tasting room and often start with “investors and a big pile of cash,” Bringle was thinking bigger but starting smaller.

“For us, it was never about that,” he says. “It was about building a national brand, international even.”

To that end, the award-winning pit master makes no bones about focusing on what he does well. That’s creating a vision of something people will enjoy and feel good about, then tending to its quality and execution with unrivaled tenacity. He lets other people do the actual whiskey making. The true innovation comes from a distinctively tweaked mellowing process Bringle himself dreamed up (one that ties the barbecue and bourbon brands together). And if folks feel that is not authentic, well, he has a message that has worked for him over the years.

“In bourbon, just like in barbecue, you get a lot of snobs,” he explains with disarming frankness. “I understand the crowd because I’m already dealing with one that has very similar tendencies, and ... I think one of the things that appeals to some of our fans is that I’m not afraid to push back. And so, when I get the barbecue snobs that are, ‘Oh, this is the way, blah, blah, blah.’ I’m like, ‘Hey man, go f*** yourself. I’m the pitmaster. I do this for a living. Don’t tell me how to cook my s***. Judge me by what hits your plate, not by how I get there.”

“For bourbon, it’s the same way,” he adds. “We didn’t build out a distillery. We contract distill. We’ve never been shy about telling people that. But we’re 100 percent self-funded with the bank, and I’ve got no partners, no investors, nobody. It’s all money that I’ve put in and that we’ve scrapped and scraped for. Instead of building a nice facility on the front end and going, ‘Alright, here

Peg Leg Porker owner, Carey Bringle, expanded his brand to create *Peg Leg Porker Bourbon*, a Tennessee bourbon with delicate smokiness and a tasting room in South Nashville to sample the spirit firsthand.



OPENING SPREAD: ROBERT JACOB LERMA; NASHVILLE GURU
RIGHT: NASHVILLE GURU; DAYMON GARDNER; SARAH WILLIAMS

“I let it sit in those mason jars for about a week or two, and then I tasted them, and I was like, ‘This has changed it just enough,’” he says. “It’s given me the flavor, just enough, that I want without being smoky.”



NICK BUMGARDNER

we are. Now we’re a tourist destination or whatever,’ I focused on building the brand as a whole.”

In truth, doing things “whole” style is nothing new for this pitmaster. A Nashville native who battled bone cancer as a teen (that’s how he lost his leg and got the Peg Leg name), Bringle has always been drawn to the Southern traditions surrounding food, drink, and community. He took his cancer experience as a lesson to take chances and live boldly and followed in his granddad’s footsteps to learn the art of West Tennessee whole-hog barbecue. A string of success at elite competitions led to charismatic TV appearances and a much-loved catering business before Bringle leveled up.

Peg Leg Porker opened in 2013—smack in the middle of Nashville’s “it city” explosion—when Bringle found an old industrial building in a disused but central part of the city known as The Gulch. That neighborhood has grown into one of Nashville’s most vibrant and desirable neighborhoods, giving Bringle and his small staff the perfect place to build his brand. At the time, barbecue in Nashville was still “down home”—some pitmasters even sold sandwiches to rush-hour drivers from their front yards. But Peg Leg captured the essence of that casual Southern hospitality and slow-cooked perfection in an upscale but dressed-down presentation.

Bringle says a bourbon brand was always a “maybe someday” kind of dream—but the dream came true much faster than expected. Peg Leg Porker had only been open for about a year when a longtime friend who was plugged into one of the big manufacturers called him up, saying he knew of some “juice” Bringle could get his hands on relatively cheaply.

It would be enough to start his own bourbon brand if he wanted, but he’d have to move fast. Although the timing wasn’t ideal, Bringle knew from experience that there was no time like the present.

“I was like, ‘I just opened the restaurant. This is the worst time in the world for me, and I don’t have the money,’” Bringle recalls. “He was like, ‘Well, you’re never going to find a better time or a better price. I would say, if you want to do this, find a way to make it happen.’ And I did. I went out and found \$50,000 and bought it and never looked back.”

Not satisfied with just putting a label on the bottle and selling it as his own, Bringle then set out to create something special for his nascent bourbon brand, something that would unite his growing barbecue empire with the spirit side. But believe it or not, this pitmaster is not a fan of smoke-infused drinks.

“Everybody expected me to do a smoked bourbon,” Bringle admits. “When I first opened the restaurant, I tried to do a smoked margarita and it was nasty. It was just disgusting. I hated it. I’m around smoke all day, every day, and one thing I understand as a pitmaster is the subtlety of smoke and how bitter and acrid it can be if you get it wrong.”

Bringle goes on to explain that he could have just lit some hickory chips on fire and blown smoke straight into the bourbon. That would have given it a smoky flavor, but it would also infuse creosote, oil, and “all that bitter acrid garbage that you don’t want” into the spirit.

“And I thought, ‘Well when we don’t want to over smoke a hog, we’ll burn down coals.’ We burn off all the pollutants, and then we shovel the coals under the hog, and then you get a golden mahogany flavor on that hog, rather than it getting black and burnt up from the creosote and everything sticking to the skin.”

Repurposing that time-tested barbecue knowledge, Bringle experimented. He burned some hickory, harvested the charcoal, cooled it off, plopped some in a mason jar, and then filled it with his raw bourbon.

“I let it sit in those mason jars for about a week or two, and then I tasted them, and I was like, ‘This has changed it just enough,’” he says. “It’s given me the flavor, just enough, that I want without being smoky.”

These days, the de-barreled bourbon gets pushed under pressure through a cylinder packed with fine-crushed hickory charcoal, and the mellow hint of smoke from that familiar but fine-tuned process has been a hit. Peg Leg Bourbon now offers a range of labels, including a 4-6-year-old white label “daily drinker,” which retails for about \$40, plus an 8-year rye, a 12-year, and a 15-year Pitmaster Reserve. They also offer limited quantities of small batch and full-proof bottles and have secured distribution in 11 states and the U.K. Even so, the operation has remained small.

“We grew to 11 states with two employees, no sales force, no reps out in the field,” Bringle notes. “I never thought I would own a bourbon company, period, let alone one that’s distributed in 11 states.”

The new bottling facility ups the tempo. Occupying a laboratory-clean facility, the line fills about 900 cases per day when running and, as word spreads about the brand, that may come in handy.

Peg Leg Porker Bourbon has won more than a dozen awards, but recently it hit a new high with The Tasting Alliance, one of the industry’s premiere awards bodies. Hosting contests in San Francisco, Singapore, and New York, the Alliance gave Peg Leg’s white-label bourbon a double-gold distinction in all three locations in 2023, leading to a new, first-time honor they call the Triple Still Award. It was also named Best in Class by the Singapore panel, but that wasn’t all.

Peg Leg Porker Bourbon was then invited to a new finalist competition, with the Best in Class winners from each location competing for the title of World’s Best Bourbon, and Bringle’s humble brand came out on top.

“Hey, guess what? The first time the Tasting Alliance has ever awarded a bourbon a World Championship; it’s not even



from Kentucky. It's Tennessee Bourbon," Bringle says with a laugh. "I think that's a big headline."

They followed up with more success in the 2024 competition, but despite the big-time recognition, Bringle knows his customers don't really care. They like the straight-talking, down-home personality the brand embodies, the "World's Best" distinction only confirming what they already knew. You can feel it in the restaurant, packed with personal touches and boasting a welcoming, small-town demeanor.

Folks often find Bringle sitting at the corner of the bar around 4:30 p.m. (he calls it "bullshit corner"). Whether he's giving an impromptu bourbon tasting or just chatting with customers who quickly become friends, they appreciate a guy who walks the walk. He eats his own food and drinks his own bourbon. He is the Peg Leg Porker. And that's a big part of why it all works.

"This generation sees through things that aren't authentic," he says. "You got a lot of brands out there that are trying to come up with a story, and this generation doesn't buy it."

"I'm passionate about this stuff. I live it. I drink Peg Leg

Porker Bourbon every day, and I love being around barbecue every day. It's a lifestyle," he says. "I feel lucky that I get to do what a lot of people wish they did for a living. And I've been able to make it into the business because I've got a great team around me that also believes in that vision."

Wrapping up the conversation, Bringle makes two more important points. First, awards are a fickle thing. You can be on top of one list and dead last in another, so for all the well-deserved pride, Peg Leg Porker won't take themselves too seriously. Second, the greatest honor they can get is for people to enjoy the food and spirit. "There's no better feeling in the world," he says.

Looking ahead, Bringle hopes to keep that feeling going and continue building. He's already opened a second Nashville barbecue—the West-Texas-themed Bringle's Smoking Oasis—and plans to send his signature sauces and rubs nationwide. Likewise, Peg Leg Porker Bourbon aims to expand on the coasts, and there are always ideas spinning in Bringle's mind.

His main focus is to do it all without losing what makes Peg Leg Porker special, and there's only one path to that reality: slow, steady, and with rock-solid resolve, just like the barbecue and bourbon tradition.

"Go ahead and critique me all you want," Bringle says. "We just won World's Best Bourbon." ✦

Bringle's bourbon is now in 11 states and was awarded the first-ever Best Bourbon in the World honor by The Tasting Alliance in 2023.

NASHVILLE GURU; ROBERT JACOB LERMA