



*A Soul of*  
**Smoke  
& Spirits**

Carey Bringle is **THE FIRST PITMASTER WITH A BARBECUE AND BOURBON BRAND**, both award-winning. But acclaim isn't what excites him.

BY EVE HILL-AGNUS



Peg Leg Porker's full rack dry-rubbed pork ribs.

Photo of Bringle by Robert Jacob Lerma; Photo of ribs by Alyssa Jiosa Cox

**C**AREY BRINGLE remembers the times when he shoveled hot hickory charcoal into buckets of cold water. The hiss rose for hours as he patiently harvested the coals from his then-nascent barbecue restaurant, Peg Leg Porker, to finish his now award-winning bourbon. Bringle's barbecue and bourbon have since earned some of the highest distinctions nationally and internationally.

Nashville is where Bringle was born and where he has opened his businesses. But Memphis, tucked into the southwestern corner of Tennessee, is where his barbecue roots formed.

"They always valued barbecue and instilled that in me from a very young age," he says

of his longtime Memphis-based family. He began tending the pit with his paternal uncle and maternal grandfather when he was young. "I was always enamored with the ability to cook for people and make them happy."

Those interludes were precious, uninterrupted and undistracted time, when they slow-smoked meats in the West Tennessee style. "That was the barbecue we knew, and that's the barbecue that we cherished," Bringle says. "So when I opened up Peg Leg Porker [in 2013], it was really my tribute to my West Tennessee barbecue roots. And we decided to take a hard line with that."

A hard line meant sticking to pork and chicken, with dry pork ribs and a towering pulled pork sandwich slathered in slaw taking equal share among orders. Regulars,



*Bringle tosses hickory-smoked chicken with classic West Tennessee-style brown sugar dry seasoning.*

though, order the yardbird, a half chicken hit with garlic salt and smoked over hickory until the skin is burnished a beautiful, golden brown. It's then dusted with classic West Tennessee-style brown sugar dry seasoning and served with a side of white sauce.

And while most of the barbecue restaurants in Nashville are predominately barn wood, tin, and country music, Bringle's cinder block building with concrete floors and a windowless ground floor is a beacon of rhythm and blues. Far more Memphis than Nashville.

"I sort of painted myself into a corner at Peg Leg for a reason," Bringle says. It was a heritage move. A question of roots and soul.

Opening a second restaurant, Bringle's Smoking Oasis, which landed across town from The Gulch in The Nations neighborhood in 2021, gave him more latitude. Here, in an ode to Texas icehouses, he serves brisket. After all, "cooking a brisket is not that much different from cooking a butt," Bringle says. "It wasn't like I hadn't cooked brisket before," he says. "I had; we just didn't serve it on the menu at Peg Leg."

Photo by Robert Jacob Lerma

## Turning Barbecue Into Bourbon

**ESTABLISHING A BOURBON** business — Peg Leg Porker Tennessee Straight Bourbon Whiskey — and becoming the world’s first pitmaster with a bourbon brand was a chance to commune with smoke in a different way. But it was a risk too, and it required the grit of the hard-bitten.

“It’s been great having the bourbon company, because barbecue and bourbon have always gone hand in hand. Being able to marry them under one brand was a lifetime dream for me,” Bringle says. The name, shared with his first restaurant, makes whimsical light of the leg amputation that resulted from bone cancer Bringle survived when he was 17.

When he was presented with an opportunity to purchase a bulk batch of bourbon, the die was cast. “It was six months after we opened the restaurant,” he says. “I didn’t have any money. We were struggling just to make sure we made the restaurant work. But it was an opportunity, and you either take those or you pass on them. And I took it.”

From there, he developed his hickory charcoal, small-batch filtration finishing process, which gives the liquor its signature smokiness. Twenty-five barrels increased to runs of nearly 45 barrels, sourced from a contract distiller, then aged in small batches before being filtered through the hickory charcoal hunks.

The early days of shoveling embers from the pit to achieve their resurrection in a second smoke-imbuing glory segued to granular hickory charcoal as production



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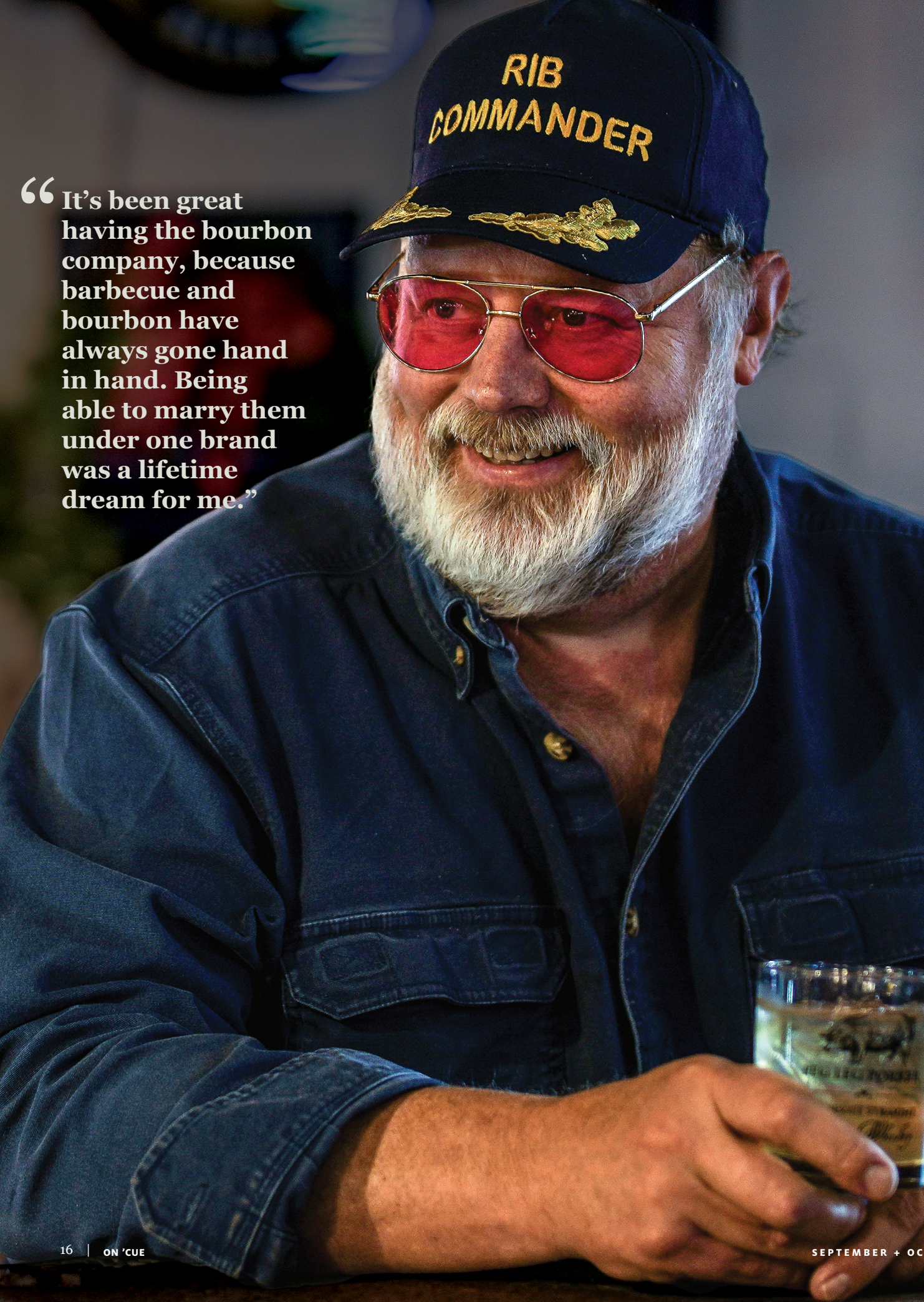


Photo of sliders by Alyssa Jiosa Cox



When Bringle opened Peg Leg Porker in 2013, it was a tribute to his West Tennessee barbecue roots. Eventually it would earn the title of best barbecue in the state.

ramped up. “I didn’t want something bitter or acrid, but I wanted a hint of that barbecue flavor with my bourbon,” Bringle says of the nuances he was chasing.

The awards poured in — from recognition of the white label 4- to 6-year-old bourbon in the first year of its release to its crowning last year with a handful of Double Gold awards at the World Spirits Competitions and others (in San Francisco, New York, and Singapore). Platinums, golds, silvers, and bronzes adorn his entire line. Now, a brand-new 5,000-square-foot blending and bottling plant in Nashville adjoins a tasting room.

“We’ve kind of grown it slow, not taking anybody’s money,” Bringle says. He chose not to involve investors but rather to remain an independent, family-owned business and to build something long-lasting and meaningful.

## Creating Community Over ‘Cue and Spirits

**THE COMPETITION CIRCUIT** is not for him, though he’s done it, placing frequently at the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest and appearing on competition cooking shows. He’s cooked at the James Beard House, riffing on Italian fare with his dry ribs and a smoked porchetta.

He’d rather be on the floor at Peg Leg any given afternoon, sipping a Pork & Stormy, the house spin on a Moscow Mule. The highlight of his career, he says, is “having people out the door and around the corner and doing 1,500 covers in a day. That’s exciting, and the atmosphere is just electric.”

He acknowledges that there are a lot of barbecue lists and rankings out there, but they are “not the be-all and end-all,” he says. Barbecue is about something more intrinsic. He admits, though, that winning best barbecue in the state from Southern Living did move him. “I never thought that a Nashville barbecue restaurant would ever be named the best barbecue restaurant in the state of Tennessee — let alone that it would be mine.”

Rapport with the smoke and the wood is the highest calling and the harshest master, as anyone in the business of smoke-wrangling knows. “It can be heartbreaking. You don’t just fix barbecue. If you screw it up, you’ve screwed up an 18-hour process. You may not be able to feed anybody,” he says.

With bourbon, a botched batch erases four years at a minimum. Both industries are exacting forgers of character. “I learned that it was all about patience and taking the time to do it right,” Bringle says. “It’s okay to make mistakes, and it’s okay to fail. And I’ve certainly burned a lot of barbecue and screwed up a lot of meat.” What counts, he says, is a willingness to keep at it and “try and make sure that you don’t do that again.”

Above all, Bringle believes there is a lot of great barbecue out there and a place for all of it. “It’s not a requirement for you to hate somebody else’s barbecue in order to love mine,” he says. “Everybody just kind of does it differently. So it doesn’t impress me for you to dog somebody else while you’re trying to build me up.”

That’s the wrong spirit. “To us, it’s not about a competition; it’s about a family and a community.” 🔥