

## KENTUCKY AND BACK AGAIN: A Cooper's Tale by Barrel Builders

"Honey, there's still food on your plate. Did you not like it?" I had very much enjoyed my breakfast of biscuits and gravy, grits with toast, smothered hash browns and eaten till I was more than a little full. The waitress looked at my half empty plates with confusion on her face. I reassured her that everything was wonderful but that I had just gotten too full. She took the plates away and eyed me with skepticism. This was small town Kentucky where you finish the food that's put in front of you. We were having breakfast at the BP Truck Stop in Laurel County KY while visiting East Bernstadt Cooperage where Barrel Builders gets our American oak barrels. It was an amazing trip filled with lots of awesome fried food, great people, and plenty of 'firsts'.

The day we arrived we got to spend some time with Ronnie Robinson, whose family has



owned the company since 1958. Ronnie is the President and knows everything that goes on in the cooperage. He involves himself in every aspect of the company. He gave us the grand tour and showed us the new equipment and changes that had been made since Phil had been there last. The day got especially interesting when he asked if I had a fear of planes to which I replied no (but the kind of no where it suggests that I was a little scared of what he was going to say next). Turns out Ronnie's newest venture had been to learn to fly and had a beautiful small plane and offered to take us for a ride. Me, never having been in a small plane before had

no idea if I had a fear of them or not but figured I'd never know unless I tried. I started questioning this decision as we taxied (I think that's the right avian lingo) out onto the run way. Phil, on the other hand, looked like a little kid on Christmas morning. All my fears disappear once we got into the air and were flying over beautiful deciduous forests as far as the eye could see. It was right at the beginning of the season when the leaves start to change so it looked like a lush carpet of green, red, yellow, and orange. We flew over the cooperage and it was then that I realized how big it actually was with the facilities, lumber yard, and stave drying areas.



We got an early start the next day (and keep in mind, they're 3 hours later so 7 am there felt like 4 am to us Californians) to spend more time at the cooperage; Phil talking with the guys about the barrel making process and me taking tons of pictures and videos. It was fascinating to watch these men (yes, it was all men) work; very salt-of-the-earth small town Kentucky guys creating these



stunning pieces of art. Every barrel was hand crafted and I know that word gets thrown around a lot but it absolutely applies here. The air dried staves were planed down and hand sorted, the heads are assembled by hand, the hoops are made by hand, the roses are assembled by hand, toasted by hand, you get the idea. And these guys are artisans. The whole process almost looks like a choreographed dance; barrels are assembled with a fluidity and ease at each stage before the final EBC plaque is gently hammered onto the head.

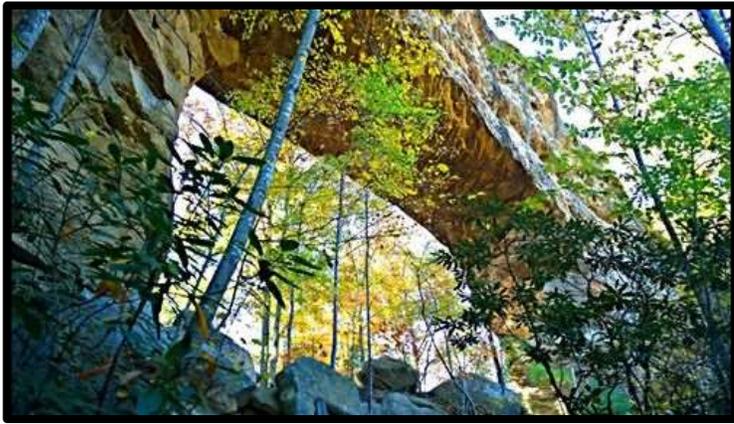
I was so excited to put the video together once I had all the footage of the barrels being created. Now I just needed some testimonials from the coopers themselves. This is where it got hard. Those guys are a humble group and not a one of them wanted to do an interview. I kept telling them that they were creating these beautiful barrels and they should brag about it a little bit but alas, I ended up with very little actual interviews so the videos are going to have to speak for them.

One of the most amazing things about where we were was the forests. We have forests in California but nothing quite like what they have there. The colors were just spectacular. Rob, the Wine Barrel Cooperage Manager, took us out to where the trees were being harvested. The drive to get the location where the cutting took place was an adventure on its own. We turned off a rural country road onto an even smaller dirt road and took that deeper into the deciduous forest. We eventually came out into a clearing of sorts where they were loading trucks up with huge logs. From there it was a short hike down another small dirt road where they were cutting down the large white oaks they use for barrels.

Talking to the logger he said that they were using selective harvesting methods, where they only cut down the larger white oaks and leave the smaller trees and non-target species, that way the forest can be harvested every 50 years. The only time clear-cutting is used is if it's private land that they want to use for agriculture and the trees are going to be cut down anyway. You don't always think of Kentucky as they poster child of environmental stewardship but these loggers were thinking of future generations and wanted to ensure that there'd be lumber for their children and children's children.

One thing you can't accuse a Kentuckian of is being wasteful and that applies to the cooperage as well, nothing is wasted. There are not a lot of Californian companies that can't say they're a zero-waste facility. The left over bark and much of the saw dust is sold to a company that makes it into briquettes, the rest of the sawdust is used to heat the broiler which runs the entire facility, and the wood that is not good enough for staves is cut up and toasted to make chips.





The last day we ditched the whole work thing and went for a hike in the Natural Bridge State Park where there really is a giant natural bridge and visited the Kentucky Horse Park. Just outside of the State Park I had to stop at a gift shop for a magnet, it's my thing. The gift shop had all of the stereotypical tourist items, toys, t-shirts, those smooth gem rocks, and a glass habitat containing live cotton mouths and other local venomous snakes. Ok, so maybe that last one isn't something you see in your average gift shop.

By the time the trip came to an end I could say that I tried fried alligator, fried apples, fried cauliflower, ridden in a small plane, walked across the top of the natural bridge, rode in cart pulled by draft horses, and saw a copperhead. I wasn't sure what to expect from Kentucky but after the fact I can say EBC is an amazing cooperage made up of amazing (I know that's not a word but I feel it works here) people. Also their biscuits and gravy are spot-on, high five Kentucky.

