

Bottles and Bonds

A group of bourbon collectors is banding together to help a member recover from the Eaton Fire, all while facing a wave of new obstacles.

By Hannah Drake Litman



The remnants of Tony Marino's house in Altadena, California.

When Tony Marino returned to Altadena after the Eaton fire ravaged his community, he wasn't sure what to expect. His house had been right in the eye of the firestorm, which was fueled by 70-80 mph winds. He was soon met with complete devastation—the house's brick chimney was the only structure to survive. "At our house, the fire was so bad that it burned below the foundation line," Marino said.

Surveying the damage, something caught his eye. A glass cylinder peeking out of a pile of grey shards—tiles, stone, drywall and wood. He reached down to pull it from the wreckage. The top was missing, the contents evaporated, the label had nearly burned off, but any bourbon lover could recognize the distinctive curved shape of this bottle. Elijah Craig—an American whiskey whose namesake is often referred to as the Father of Bourbon. Marino turned around, lining the bottle on the charred footing of the

house's foundation alongside others that he previously unearthed. These were the remnants of the home he shared with his wife and son, and where he'd kept his prized bourbon collection before the Eaton fire reduced it all to ash. "Out of my 500-bottle collection, I think I'd probably say about 480 of them were open. The few bottles I was holding onto, waiting for that special moment to open them and enjoy that drink with someone—I think in the future, I probably won't hold onto that moment again because you never know when that's going to go away."



Tony Marino's 500-bottle bourbon collection before it was destroyed by the Eaton fire in Altadena, California.

Clothing drives, food drives and furniture drives have been common throughout Los Angeles since the January wildfires. However, Marino's community is supporting him in a unique way—by helping him rebuild his lost collection. Marino is part of the Bourbon Musketeers, a group of a dozen or so friends who have little in common aside from their passion for bourbon. For them, bourbon is more than just a drink; it's about

the experience of discovering rare or unknown bottles and then connecting with fellow members, whether in person or virtually. The Musketeers are scattered all over the United States and primarily communicate through a group text thread. The distance between group members only strengthens their bond.

Bourbon culture in America has faced its share of challenges, beginning with Prohibition. The so-called “noble experiment” may have ultimately failed, but it made one thing very clear: while the government can influence the accessibility and cost of booze, those who desire it, will find a way to get it. As bourbon faces modern-day hurdles, most recently the impact of tariffs on alcohol exports and the potential for updated health warning labels, these challenges may prove to be the silver lining that helps Tony Marino rebuild his collection, with the support of a community that has grown even more essential in times of adversity.

On January 3, 2025, just four days before the L.A. wildfires sparked, the U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, released an official advisory, which recommended an update to the health warning label currently displayed on alcohol products in the U.S. to include a cancer risk warning. According to Dr. Murthy, alcohol is the leading preventable cause of cancer.

Dr. Marissa Hall, an assistant professor at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina emphasized the public’s right to know the risks of what they consume. “Under half of Americans know that there’s a link between alcohol and cancer,” Hall said. As the current alcohol warning label has not been updated since it was adopted in 1988, Hall argued that new language would help close this knowledge gap, similar to how tobacco warning labels have educated the public about health risks since the 1970s.

Dr. Christian Hendershot, a professor at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, agreed that while updated labels are a move in the right direction, additional efforts are necessary to create a similar decline in the alcohol industry. “The warning labels that came out with tobacco products were one part of a multi-pronged approach to tobacco risk reduction that included many other strategies.

We don't see tobacco advertisements on TV, but if you turn on a football game, you're watching 50 or so beer ads," said Hendershot.

Alcoholism is not uncommon in the U.S. and bourbon collectors like Marino often face skepticism, with some viewing bourbon collecting as a cover for the disease. However, the thoughtful curation of Marino's collection spoke to a deeper connection. "It's just more about the community and the appreciation of what the product is," he explained. The loss of his collection wasn't just financial—it represented years of dedication and connection to a community he values. "My bourbon was like my one true thing that I really cared about and loved and enjoyed."

Although ethanol (alcohol) consumption has been linked to tumor development in lab animals, no randomized control study with humans has conclusively proven a causal relationship between alcohol and cancer. However, Hall and Hendershot argued that such a study isn't needed. As Hendershot said, "You would be putting people at risk to learn something that we've already been able to ascertain from other types of data."

Some consumers don't feel the need for additional verbiage on warning labels. "I don't think anyone drinks bourbon and thinks that they're, like, drinking a smoothie," said L.A.-based Bourbon Musketeer Wesley Switzer. "I think they probably know there is some degree of risk. That's worth it to me. It's a really fun hobby and I don't drink excessively." When Switzer's son was born, a Musketeer in Virginia named Clayton helped him find two bottles of Blanton's Bourbon that featured his son's "born on date," meaning the bottle was filled on the exact day of his birth. Clayton and Switzer have never met.

Chris Sebastian, curator of the Blind Barrels Whiskey Tasting Experience, has partnered with 64 different distilleries since 2021. Through his work, he's experienced firsthand the deep passion and dedication within the bourbon community. As a cancer survivor, he is no stranger to the health risks of alcohol. While he believes the application of a new label will lead to a drop in alcohol sales, he also feels that most bourbon enthusiasts are "conscious drinkers" who prioritize quality over quantity—as he put it, they've "picked their poison." Like Marino and Switzer, Sebastian stated that

bourbon collectors seem to have a deeper appreciation for the liquor, “They’re not just collecting bottles to keep for themselves and hoard. They’re collecting stories that they can share with people around them, stories that can really help other people walk alongside the whiskey journey with them.”

This mindful approach to consumption aligns with the goals of the updated health warning label, which, according to Dr. Hall is designed to help the public to make more informed decisions about the products they consume. “The goal is not prohibition. It’s not zero alcohol,” said Dr. Hall. Sebastian, Switzer and Marino all stated that there is no version of a new label that would cause them to stop drinking bourbon altogether. Instead, they are curious about how it could affect the value of bottles with older labels, comparing it to pre-Prohibition bottles. “Every time there’s a [bottle] redesign, I always pick up a new copy. Just to have the new, pretty thing,” laughed Sebastian. “Does that mean I have a problem? Probably, definitely.”

Introducing a new label would likely require congressional action in an already busy political year, especially as President Trump’s second term is marked by the looming threat of a trade war. In 2018, the European Union imposed a 25 percent tariff on American whiskey in response to the President’s tariffs on steel and aluminum imports. Since American whiskey makes up about 63 percent of U.S. spirits exports, this trade dispute resulted in a significant loss, with exports declining by approximately 30 percent, leading to a \$200 million drop in export revenue.

A pause on E.U. tariffs was implemented in 2021, but they are set to resume at a 50% rate on March 31, 2025. On March 4, President Trump briefly enacted tariffs on Canada and Mexico, escalating trade tensions. In response, Canadian bars and liquor stores pulled American spirits from their shelves, and in Manitoba, Premier Wab Kinew shared a video on social media imitating President Trump signing an executive order, instructing the removal of American liquor. Though these tariffs have been delayed until April, they could create uncertainty for distillers and for consumers. Larger producers may absorb some of the added costs, but with supply outpacing demand, prices could drop. This could benefit collectors such as the Bourbon Musketeers, as highly

sought-after bottles could become more accessible and affordable. However, the influx of cheaper bottles could flood the U.S. market, potentially squeezing out smaller, craft distillers. Sebastian remains positive and believes that this shift in the market could be an opportunity for some distilleries to get creative stand out. “You have to be open minded about how you can best get liquid to lips. Having a good idea is not enough.”

As bourbon continues to navigate the impact of these tariffs and health warnings, collectors like the Bourbon Musketeers are determined to weather the storm by replenishing Marino’s collection. “It’s a pretty cool little community in that regard. You know, it’s a really interesting time in our country. There’s a lot of tension everywhere, and so the fact that guys can kind of put blinders on a little bit with all of that, and none of that is important. What’s important is your shared love for this thing, which is bourbon,” said Switzer.

Marino lost two Blanton’s “born on date” bottles—each representing the day his son was born—in the Eaton fire along with the rest of his collection and his home. Currently, bourbon lovers across the country are searching for replacements, even going as far as contacting Buffalo Trace Distillery directly. Marino has yet to find the exact bottles as his collection is gradually being rebuilt. Since the fire, he has not purchased a single bottle, but over 60 have been gifted to him by members of the bourbon community, many of whom he has never met. It seems as though modern-day hurdles for the liquor industry are furthering the motivation of the bourbon community, offering a sense of hope in a cloudy reality.

Marino is holding onto the Elijah Craig bottle that he pulled from the wreckage of his home. He plans to pass it down to his son.



What is left of Tony Marino's 500-bottle bourbon collection.