

# Preservation opens with links to the past

By Peter W. Zubaty, Sports Editor  
Thursday, May 3, 2018 at 2:08 pm (Updated: May 4, 9:24 am)



*PETER W. ZUBATY/The Kentucky Standard*

Preservation Distillery owner Marci Palatella and Kentucky Secretary of Tourism Don Parkinson cut the ribbon for the grand opening of the craft distillery Tuesday. They are joined in the photo by Bardstown mayor Dick Heaton, left, and Preservation owner Lou Palatella, right.

Marci Palatella has been making regular trips to Kentucky from her native northern California for about three decades to purchase barrels of bourbon for her and husband Lou's Preservation Distillery.

"It wasn't cool to be making bourbon then," she said. "Everything was chardonnay and vodka."

But make no mistake — bourbon is definitely cool now. So cool, in fact, smaller operations such as Preservation are finding it difficult to get the source supply they need from larger distillers.

"They cut me off," she joked, a common refrain heard around the industry, which has led to a boom of new distilleries starting up in Nelson County in recent years, the first new production facilities built in the county in decades.

With the supply lines dwindling, the Palatellas — much like Willett, LuxCo, Bardstown Bourbon Company and others — set out to begin making their own whiskeys. Marci Palatella decided she didn't want her time in the bourbon industry to come to an end, and she said she and her husband had considered building a new production facility in the San Francisco area, near their home.

That idea changed, however, when they visited the site of the former Bluegrass Exposition and Entertainment Center south of Bardstown, once known as Hillbilly Heaven, after hearing it was up for sale.

"It was so charming, I fell in love with it," Palatella said, and purchased it for the future home of Preservation Distillery.

The property near the Beech Fork River has a deep history as the former Ritchie family homeplace, and its pastoral grounds were the site of some of the earliest bourbon distilling in Nelson County more than two centuries ago.

Now, the property has come full-circle, and the Palatellas threw open their doors to invited guests Tuesday morning to show off the latest of Nelson County's whiskey distilling facilities, and the major renovations they've done to the ancient tobacco barns on the site.

"They're going to make a positive impact in Kentucky and Bardstown," said Don Parkinson, Kentucky's Secretary of the Tourism, Arts and Heritage cabinet, and a longtime friend of the Palatellas. "Bardstown is a boomtown right now."

The central barn on the site houses the distilling equipment, with two copper pot stills, 16 fermenters, six columns and two mash tons shoehorned into the building, producing 1-3 barrels per day. The stills each have a capacity of 1,000 gallons. It's a far different look than some of the other new operations starting up, such as Lux Row and Bardstown Bourbon Company.

"I think you knew this was the best place in the world to make outstanding bourbon and rye," Bardstown Mayor Dick Heaton said Tuesday to the Palatellas in remarks before the ribbon-cutting. "It's a true craft distillery."

Marci Palatella said that even though Preservation is making its own whiskey now, things won't change from the way she's always operated. She prefers her labels to be bottled with the smallest of "small batch," using between one and three barrels for each expression. She said having the new distillery gives her a chance to get experimental with barrel chars, aging and mash bills, which will lead to a number of special releases.

The extremeness of the small batches will also continue to ensure Preservation's labels are among the hardest to find in the whiskey market, and a hot item for collectors and enthusiasts. Preservation's best-known labels include Very Olde St. Nick and Wattie Boone, who was a relative of Daniel Boone and was one of Kentucky's first master distillers, making whiskey at the Ritchie homeplace as well as others in the Nelson County area.

Production began at the facility last fall, and Preservation now has more than 300 barrels aging at its warehouse in the former Kentucky Wine and Spirits Co. building on Boston Road, which will also be the site of the distillery's bottling operations. Everything is handmade. Preservation even mills its own grain at the main distillery.

Marci Palatella said that not only did she love the old Ritchie farm, she and her husband were bowled over by the welcoming nature of the Bardstown community and its business-friendly environment. She joked about how there was a small delay of a few months to get the zoning change needed to repurpose the farm for whiskey production, and she was shocked that county officials apologized for the delay. In California, bureaucratic red tape might have held up such a zoning change for years, had they chosen to locate there.

The north barn on the campus will continue on in its life as an events center, hosting gatherings and weddings. Palatella regretted that they had to put a moratorium on hosting events for several months while extensive construction and retrofitting was done to the existing buildings.

The south building will eventually feature a gift shop, restaurant and tasting room. Tours will be open to the public in late spring to early summer.

Marci Palatella also thanked her longtime friends in the Kulsveen family, operators of Willett Distillery. Evan Kulsveen and his son, Drew, were a big help in getting Preservation set up to produce whiskey, with Drew providing extensive design and technical advice.



*PETER W. ZUBATY/The Kentucky Standard*

Preservation Distillery owner Marci Palatella welcomes a crowd to Tuesday's grand opening. Preservation Distillery is on the site once known as the Bluegrass Exposition and Entertainment Center, also known as Hillbilly Heaven.

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Preservation Distillery rolled out some of its most recent barrels for Tuesday's grand opening event. More than 300 barrels are aging off-site at the building that housed the former Kentucky Wine and Spirits Co. on Boston Road, which is also where Preservation will do its bottling.



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Preservation Distillery repurposed the central tobacco barn on the old Bluegrass Exposition and Entertainment Center just south of Bardstown to house its two copper pot stills, each with a capacity of 1,000 gallons, as well as six columns, 16 fermenters and two mash tons.

