

Effort to Change Tenn. Whiskey Law Fails for Now

ERIK SCHELZIG, Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — State lawmakers on Tuesday decided not to rewrite the legal definition of Tennessee whiskey this session, meaning the rules supported by [Jack Daniel's](#) [1] will govern other distillers in the state for at least another year.

The proposal that could have led to the outright repeal of the labeling law was moved to summer study panels that will convene after the legislative session ends.

Jack Daniel's master distiller Jeff Arnett, who has heavily lobbied lawmakers to uphold the current law, welcomed the decision to put off suggested changes like removing a requirement to age whiskey in unused oak barrels.

"We stand behind last year's law, we truly believe it's best for Tennessee whiskey all over the world," Arnett said. "And for the players who've located in the state of Tennessee, we need to uphold these quality standards."

[The debate has pitched two global liquor giants against each other](#) [2]. Jack Daniel's which is owned by Louisville, Ky.-based Brown-Forman Corp., first proposed the establishment of a Tennessee whiskey law last year. George Dickel is owned British conglomerate [Diageo PLC](#) [3], which led this year's attempts to dismantle that law.

Guy L. Smith IV, executive vice president of Diageo, said he hopes the study committee gives serious consideration to changing the law.

"Rather than having one company dictate for everyone, we can do this the right way and come together in an open forum to discuss how to create the best standards for Tennessee whiskey," Smith said in a release.

While some smaller distillers like Full Throttle in northwestern Tennessee had spoken out against the restrictions, others like Nelson's Green Brier Distillery in Nashville argued that strict rules akin to those governing bourbon whiskey would ensure a baseline of quality.

"It's a relief that we're upholding the standards of Tennessee whiskey for now," said Nelson's Green Brier CEO Charles Nelson.

Nelson said the state law conforms with the way his ancestor first made Tennessee whiskey, and that his company had planned to distill its own version following that recipe regardless of whether the legal definition had been changed.

Jack Daniel's is by far the largest producer of Tennessee whiskey, shipping 11.5 million cases of its Black Label last year, a 5 percent increase from 2012. Dickel was the second-largest Tennessee whiskey producer in 2013, with 130,000 cases sold.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

Whiskey is clear when it goes into the barrel. It's during the aging process that the whiskey acquires color and flavors. Arnett, the Jack Daniel's master distiller, argued that employing reused barrels could lead some distillers to be tempted to use artificial colors and flavoring agents.

Arnett said he's ready to put the arguments over the definition of Tennessee whiskey to rest.

"I would love to stop debating it and get back to making it," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/20/2014 - 9:56pm):

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Links:

[1] https://twitter.com/JackDaniels_US

[2] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/blogs/2014/03/strict-control-tennessee-whiskey>

[3] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/03/diageo-fires-back-jack-daniel%E2%80%99s-over-tenn-whiskey-law>