

# Cheers

Building Beverage Business at Full Service Restaurants & Bars

## A Whiskey Destination Worth the Trip: Sanford's Restaurant



Whiskey drinkers take note: [Sanford's Restaurant](#) in Astoria, Queens has transformed into a hotspot for brown spirits. The business has been family owned and operated for 80 years. But only in the past year has it added a [substantial whiskey menu](#). Sanford's now boasts 300-plus bottles.

These run the full gamut. Beginners can order an easy-drinking bourbon like Evan Williams, High West, or James E. Pepper. Connoisseurs will recognize Pappy, rare scotches, or a number of Nikki and Yamakazi expressions.

Markups are not astronomical. A pour of Pappy runs from \$17 for the 10-Year to \$45 for the 20-Year. Japanese drams are \$14-\$26. There also are cask-strengths, ryes, Irish spirits, non-Kentucky bourbons, and every style of scotch. There is quite a lot of everything for everyone.

"Nobody else in Queens has a full package like this," says co-owner Christ Karalekas (Sanford's is right off the Broadway Station on the N train). "We wanted to become a destination for whiskey."

## Growth and Collection

Sanford's evolved over time from a classic diner and coffee shop to today's "casual comfort" restaurant. A decade ago they ditched the grey décor and table wines for a contemporary theme and sizeable selection of fine wine and craft beer.

Then this past summer, Sanford's closed for three months for renovations that doubled its capacity to 150 seats. During this time, the business added its whiskey program. Karalekas had been collecting bottles in advance.

"It was quite a challenge sourcing some of these bottles," he says. "The last couple of years I spent trying to get my name on the right lists. It's a matter of working the phone calls to reps. You've got to be persistent. Sometimes it's all about timing."

Karalekas said he could have offered another 150 bottles at Sanford's. But in building the menu, he did not want too many bottles that reflected one another. Rather, each should be able to leave a distinct impression upon drinkers.

## Pouring to Palate

When a whiskey novice orders brown spirits at Sanford's, staff will help guide them to the right bottle. This means figuring out palate preferences. Does a drinker prefer something aged in sherry casks? Something peaty? Smokey?

Sanford's often starts these customers with bourbon. "It's easy to like," Karalekas explains. "It's mostly made of corn. It's very palatable."

The business also serves a great many customers who are whiskey-savvy. For these drinkers there is the restaurant's selection of cask-strength bottles. These whiskeys have only been filtered of barrel particulates; otherwise, they're presented as straight from the cask, at 100-plus proofs.

"You have to build your palate up to that," says Karalekas. He recommended the Elijah Craig Barrel Proof (\$16 a pour, at either 133.2 or 140.2 proof) or Willet's Family Estate Rye 4-Year (\$12, 115.6) or 10-Year (\$18, 127.5).

On the subject of rye, Karalekas reports that bourbon's spicier cousin — increasing in sales nationwide — still remains a hand-sell at Sanford's. Bourbons and single malts sell much better. "I don't think most people understand rye yet," Karalekas says. "They're still thinking of Canadian Club Rye from way back."

Nevertheless, Sanford's stocks an extensive rye selection. As favorite pours, Karalekas pointed to Utah's High West ryes (\$9-\$14) and Angel's Envy Rye (\$12). The latter was aged in Caribbean rum casks for a uniquely sweet/spicy flavor profile.

## Serving Sippers

Anyone who orders whiskey with ice at Sanford's might be surprised by what comes to the table. By rule, the restaurant serves all brown spirits neat. Ice or water comes on the side.

"To understand a whiskey properly, and to get that olfactory effect, you should sip them in their natural state," Karalekas says.

Although he agrees that water drops or an ice ball can open up a whiskey's flavor while lowering the proof, he is wary of the flavor-loss as water saturates the spirit. Sanford's wants customers to enjoy their whiskey as much as possible. Staff is cognizant about what bottle would overpower another. They would not recommend a rye before a bourbon — or an Arberg before The Macallan.

By the same token, the bar does not offer chips. As with wine, what you eat with a whiskey can negatively affect the spirit's taste. "Most of the whiskey we sell is as after-dinner drinks, or before the meal," says Karalekas.

## For the Future

As Sanford's continues expanding its whiskey program, Karalekas plans on adding theme nights. These would include flights, tastings, and appearances by brand ambassadors to present and explain their product.

Whatever programming comes about at Sanford's, you can bet the restaurant will maintain a robust whiskey menu thanks to the work Karalekas has put into the concept. "I've built up the right relationships to keep this thing flowing," he says.

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