



Glenfiddich Ambassador Tracie Franklin (center), founder of Whersky, samples whiskies alongside Samara Rivers, founder of the Black Bourbon Society, and Frank Mills, bartender at Jack Rose Dining Saloon in Washington, D.C.

# Cask STRENGTH

**GLENFIDDICH, BLACK BOURBON SOCIETY, AND JACK ROSE DINING SALOON TEAM UP TO FOSTER A MORE INCLUSIVE WHISK(E)Y COMMUNITY**

*by Kelly Magyarics, DWS / photos by Nick Klein*

**D**irt, bandages, and rubber: Those are the objects behind the indelible memories Tracie Franklin says solidified her interest in the world of whisky. She first garnered a taste for the spirit as a traveling dancer, singer, and actress who sought a drink she could slowly sip on at night after performances, and still recalls the wafting scent of Ardbeg 10 drifting across the room one evening at a bar in Canada.

“I look for experiences, and that whisky gave me a visceral reaction to all of that flavor,” Franklin says.

Franklin became obsessed with peated whisky and worked her way through other styles, honing her knowledge through bartending gigs, classes, and tastings. But as an African-American woman, it didn’t take her long to realize she frequently stood out amongst the crowd. “I was often dismissed as if I didn’t belong, and while it wasn’t

a completely foreign feeling, it wasn’t something that I wanted to last,” Franklin says.

Inspired to act, she co-founded Whersky, a company and blog that aims to make the world of whisky more diverse and inclusive, especially for women. Two years ago, she began serving as an Ambassador for Glenfiddich, one of the first Scotch brands whose advertisements portrayed people of color: Franklin says seeing one ad

depicting a woman with natural hair who was teaching her dad how to enjoy a dram rang so true to her own life that it made her cry. Now Franklin draws on her stage experience to engage closely with consumers and professionals as she dispels the notion that Scotch is something only a select few can experience.

When Franklin first met Samara Rivers, Rivers had a similar story. “She didn’t see anyone speaking to our community and she decided to fix that problem,” Franklin says. Before Rivers launched the Black Bourbon Society (BBS) in 2016, she says brands were largely unaware how popular America’s native spirit had become among Black consumers and, as a result, had missed opportunities to market to them directly. The BBS, whose membership numbers roughly 3,600 enthusiasts around the world, now aims to position whisk(e)y as a category accessible to everyone through the organization’s efforts in outreach, education, and advocacy.

Rivers says anyone who attends an event or joins the conversation via the BBS’ private Facebook group is welcome to participate in the organization’s activities regardless of their race, gender orientation, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status. “Our members have these opportunities to learn with the brands and brands get to interface with a consumer they’ve never met before,” she explains.

The strategies employed in market-

ing spirits to the African-American community have often been clichéd or lacking in nuance, Rivers adds, as brands often cater to what they see as a young, urban demographic that frequents clubs for late-night partying. While that messaging might work for less cerebral brands geared toward shots and mixers, it doesn’t pass muster for most whisk(e)y and can often come across as offensive. “You don’t have to put a hip-hop jingle with it or align it with a celebrity rapper,” Rivers says. “Just be genuine: ‘Hey, we hear you like whisk(e)y, try some’ goes a long way.”

As they travel and promote their respective endeavors, Franklin and Rivers interact and collaborate with some of the country’s top bar talent. At a recent stop in Washington, D.C., for the fourth Tastemaker Series installment of BBS and Glenfiddich’s Cocktail Conversations collaboration, bartender Frank Mills of Jack Rose Dining Saloon created Glenfiddich-based libations for attendees at The Backroom at Capo. (Offering a selection of 2,800 expressions, Jack Rose Dining Saloon touts the largest whisk[e]y collection of any bar in the Western Hemisphere and the second-largest collection in the world, according to *Forbes*.) With a focus on the challenges of “Dating in the Digital World,” the Cocktail Conversations event featured a panel discussion, open forum, and a tasting of Glenfiddich’s premium whiskies, including Fire & Cane, the new

Experimental Series release finished in rum casks.

A D.C. native, Mills says he’s seen the city’s food and beverage scene evolve and flourish firsthand, especially following the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. It’s unsurprising, then, that he doesn’t see just one type of whisk(e)y drinker at Jack Rose: The usual male-dominant crowd of politicians and lobbyists is increasingly joined by women with a penchant for cask-strength peated Scotch and a wide demographic of connoisseurs eager to check out options for their home bar. As for those who sidle up to order and adamantly state that they aren’t whisk(e)y drinkers? “It just hasn’t been presented to you in the right way,” Mills tells them.

As a longtime bartender, Mills says he sees his role as one built for educating guests as they seek out that elusive, palate-pleasing bottle. He also believes that the continued discovery of stories like that of Nathan “Nearest” Green, the first known Black master distiller in the U.S. who taught distillation techniques to Jack Daniel beginning in the 1850s, will also help foster an inclusive environment within the industry. “People acknowledging multiple spirits has allowed us to have a general renaissance in the cocktail world,” he adds. “The more voices, palates, and passion we have from new people, the better it’s going to get. There is a place for everyone.” ■■

## Desert Island Drams

We asked this trio of industry power players which whisk(e)y and cocktail they’d sip while passing the time on a desert island.



**Tracie Franklin:** Glenfiddich 1974 Rare Collection Cask 7585 Scotch and an Old Fashioned made with Glenfiddich Project XX.



**Samara Rivers:** George T. Stagg Bourbon—her “unicorn whisky”—and a Paper Plane made with Glenfiddich 14 Year.



**Frank Mills:** Willett Pot O’ Gold Bourbon and a Boulevardier—the recipe for which is tattooed on his left forearm.