



At Last His First

Managing editor **Josh Moss** has lived in Louisville long enough to know what he's been missing. So he set out to immerse himself in local traditions — one Hot Brown, Ali fight and shot of bourbon at a time.

On my 1,687th day in Louisville, I am swallowing my first taste of bourbon — Woodford Reserve at my friend Mitch's house. Mitch's buddy, Pat, tells me Woodford soaks up "notes of vanilla and wood" inside the aging barrel, and I nod yes and lie that my immature palate can detect these flavors. In reality, I'd argue that bourbon mostly tastes like fire. It takes me more than an hour to finish my first tumbler of the brown stuff, on the rocks. For a second round, Mitch, who has bourbon for blood, refills my glass with a few ice cubes and 12-year-old Pappy Van Winkle, which apparently enjoys a view from the top shelf. The flames coat my mouth before roaring down my throat, plunging into the depths of my belly. This I find oddly pleasurable.

Louisville's been my home for four years and eight months, and I don't know why it has taken me so long to give bourbon a try. Could be because I hate the smell. But it gets me thinking: What other Louisville things do I need to do? Yeah, I have attended Derby and Oaks (maybe next year at the track I'll down my first mint julep) and eaten at Lynn's Paradise Cafe and Jack Fry's. But I haven't ridden the *Belle of Louisville* or seen a Muhammad Ali boxing match or read anything by Hunter S. Thompson. I've had Kentucky Fried Chicken but never at Col. Sanders' grave.

As I approach my five-year mark in town, I realize there are certain things I must do to become bona fide. Or risk being shipped back to Ohio.

Eat Benedictine

At the turn of the 20th century, a Louisville chef and caterer named Jennie Carter Benedict created Benedictine,

the spread made from cream cheese and cucumbers. I order mine at the Cheddar Box in St. Matthews on white bread with lettuce and bacon, which overpowers the cucumber flavor. My Benedictine, more white in color than green, glues the bacon to the bread. Benedictine has the consistency of Spackle.

Watch *The Big Lebowski*

In last year's *Western True Grit*, Jeff Bridges, one of my favorite actors, played a one-eyed U.S. marshal named Rooster Cogburn. I like Bridges so much that I'd buy a recording of Rooster talking in his boozy twang. For some reason, I've never seen *The Big Lebowski* — the movie that inspired some Louisvillians in 2002 to create Lebowski Fest, which now takes place in several other cities, too — even though I know the stoner-slacker nicknamed "the Dude" is one of Bridges' most famous roles.

Several co-workers offered to let me borrow the film, and now, as I watch the Dude write a 69-cent check for a carton of milk, I know I'm going to like it. Even more so when he refers to a White Russian as a "Caucasian."

Later, when I tell people that I've finally seen *The Big Lebowski*, I notice that they ask for my favorite line. It comes early on, when the Dude returns to his apartment with that carton of milk. Some henchmen have confused him with a different Lebowski, and they repeatedly dunk his head in the toilet bowl. Finally, the Dude sits on the toilet, sunglasses on, water dripping from the hair on his head and face. One of the intruders pulls the Dude's bowling ball out of its bag and asks what it is.

"Obviously you're not a golfer," the Dude replies.

Read every page of the *Courier-Journal*

On Aug. 8, 2011, Page B-2 contains a detailed weather forecast (it was recently 91 degrees in Taipei!), and B-3 has a short piece about local temperatures dropping to less-sweltering levels. Do people still go to the newspaper to find out if it's going to rain?

The local bylines are reliable, especially those attached to front-page stories about struggling Indiana casinos and a Danville, Ky., summer camp that teaches children Tea Party values, complete with a picture of a man dressed up like Patrick Henry. The national news stories — the Associated Press bylines — are dated by the time I read them in the paper, and I wish a wealthy Louisvillian would buy the *C-J* from Gannett and hire more quality reporters to give the paper deeper local coverage.

The *Garfield* comic strip makes me laugh.

Watch Ali box

At downtown's Muhammad Ali Center, I watch seven of Ali's matches — including the three against Joe Frazier and 1974's "Rumble in the Jungle," when Ali fights to regain the title in Zaire against George Foreman, who is young and muscular and isn't yet known for his electric grill. Ali, who's from Louisville, knocks Foreman out in the eighth after leaning against the ropes during early rounds, absorbing Foreman's jabs and sapping him of his power. With less than 30 seconds left in the eighth, Ali unleashes a flurry of blows, a right-left-right-left-right combination that transforms Foreman into a staggering drunk who topples onto the mat. The crowd's roar crescendos as if somebody is slowly turning a volume knob.

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At Last His First

Whenever he's in the ring, Ali glides across the canvas, like it has become an ice rink and blades have appeared on the bottoms of his boxing shoes. At his most confident, an impulse that's the opposite of a nervous tic has him shuffling his legs — those sequoias growing from his shiny trunks — so fast that everything below the waist becomes a glorious blur that ignites the masses to chant, "Ali! Ali! Ali!"

During one bout, Frazier crouches, then explodes, missiles screaming toward Ali's jaw. Ali presses against the ropes, throws his head back so far that Frazier's gloved fists catch nothing but air. When Frazier does make contact and the cheers rise around the ring, Ali turns his maniacal eyes toward the spectators, shakes his head that, no, he's not hurt. He convinces you that maybe Frazier never even landed a punch.

Eat a Hot Brown

I head to the lobby bar at the Brown Hotel, and the menu says that the Hot Brown has been a Louisville tradition that began at the hotel in 1926. Here's what's in it: four chunks of roasted turkey breast, each one the size of my wallet; barely crispy toast points; bacon; tomatoes; and Mornay sauce, white and thick like gravy. The kitchen leaves out the part about heart palpitations. I use the toast points like the little sponges they were meant to be and sop up every last drop of the Mornay sauce.

Ride TARC

According to my car's clock, it typically takes me nine minutes to get to work downtown on Muhammad Ali Boulevard. Riding the bus takes 16 minutes, which includes the time needed to walk to the Frankfort Avenue bus stop at the end of my street and wait for the No. 19 to arrive.

I take a seat after inserting my \$1.50 into the machine near the driver. The bus is clean and relaxing and quiet enough for me to read a magazine story without distraction. Of course, there are a few oddities. For instance: the woman who I know has a tongue ring because she is sleeping — I'm talking REM cycle — with her mouth agape.

I enjoy not driving so much that I plan to ride TARC to work at least once a week.

Go to the Slugger Museum

The tour guide says we can't take pictures inside the Louisville Slugger factory. "I don't know if you're a Rawlings spy," he says. "Just kidding, I know you're all tourists." (Side note: This might be why I never wanted to try some of these things. I hate feeling like a tourist.)

Inside the factory, it smells like sawdust and

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lacquer. One guy shows us how they used to carve the 37-inch-long billets — that's what the ash and maple cylinders are called before they're baseball bats — in the late 1800s. He ends up with wood chips in his mustache, which he doesn't seem to notice. Today, the big machines that churn out thousands of bats daily are so loud that our guide needs to use a microphone. You can smell it when a worker burns the Louisville Slugger emblem into a bat's barrel.

The museum displays several historic Sluggers, including Babe Ruth's from 1927, when he smacked 60 homers. Even cooler than the history is the fact that some of the billets, given life as Louisville Sluggers, will soon be in the hands of major leaguers.

Eat Derby Pie

The crust is soft and buttery, which surprises me because I bought the Derby Pie — first served at the Melrose Inn in Prospect — from a Paul's Fruit Market freezer. According to the box, Kern's Kitchen has been making the chocolate-and-walnut dessert for more than 50 years and, I learn, has been protecting its trademark for nearly as long.

I heat my slice in the microwave for a few seconds like the box instructs me to do. It melts the chocolate a bit, makes it ooze from the crust. I may not have noticed Woodford Reserve's vanilla and bark flavors, but I do recognize that the pie should taste more like chocolate and less like walnuts.

Read Hunter S. Thompson

I read *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved* (wish Thompson would have provided more specifics from the infield) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* one Sunday afternoon. What I take away, especially from the latter, is this: Hunter S. Thompson, who grew up in Louisville and founded a style of reporting called Gonzo journalism, ingested more drugs than I ever realized. From *Fear and Loathing*: "We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine...." I have no clue how the guy survived until 2005, when he shot himself in the head at age 67. (After a little research, I learn that a cannon blasted Thompson's cremated ashes into a fireworks-filled sky, which seems like an OK way to leave this Earth.)

Much of *Fear and Loathing* became repetitive. But some of the scenes made me laugh out loud, like when he's hallucinating in a bar and the floor has become a "blood-soaked sponge" — cushiony like the Hot Brown's toast points. "Order some golf shoes," Thompson says to his friend. "Otherwise, we'll never get out of



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this place alive. You notice these lizards don't have any trouble moving around in this muck — that's because they have *claws* on their feet."

Ride the Belle of Louisville

Three blocks away, I can hear the *Belle of Louisville's* calliope, those high-pitched steam whistles powered by a keyboard. "We're Off to See the Wizard" is ending and "When the Saints Go Marching In" is beginning as I board the vessel, the oldest river steamboat of its kind still in use today. The calliope sends me back to another era, but, unfortunately, it can't play during the two-hour lunch cruise because it interferes with the captain's radio.

And that's too bad. Not because I have a weird calliope obsession or anything. It's because instead of the calliope, a DJ tries his best to ruin the view of Louisville's skyline from the river by playing a song from *Barney and Friends*; "Cotton-Eyed Joe"; something by Justin Bieber; that song about being a Barbie girl in a Barbie world; and even some dreadful number about being a gummy bear.

I get it. There are kids on the boat. But does there need to be any music at all? Why can't the cruise be as quiet and relaxing as an early-morning TARC ride? My advice is to go in breezy T-shirt-and-jeans weather. Immediately head to the stern. Over the railing, you'll see the painted-red wooden paddlewheel, each blade disappearing into the Ohio with a rhythmic smack. Just stare and listen, slip into a trance. You won't even be able to hear the "Macarena."

Eat KFC at Col. Sanders' grave

The uniformed worker manning the guard shack points me toward Col. Harland Sanders' resting place in Cave Hill Cemetery. "Easiest directions I could give you," he says. "Just follow the yellow line and when it ends, look to your right." I park my car, get out, and moments later a tour bus pulls up and the folks inside snap pictures of the gravesite, which features a stone slab on the ground and some columns and a bust of his head. He was born near Henryville, Ind., and died in Louisville on Dec. 16, 1980. His wife is buried here too.

After the tour bus drives away, I grab the original-recipe drumstick I just purchased at KFC — the Colonel's "empire," according to his monument — and eat it, looking the bust in its bespectacled eyes a few times. When I finish, I place the bone in the grass near the stone slab. Back in my car, I get the occasional whiff of fried chicken. It's the Colonel's way of telling me that I'm finally a Louisvillian.

Reach managing editor Josh Moss at jmoss@loumag.com.

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