



Main picture: Peggy presenting at the World Whiskies Conference in 2007
Inset, left to right: Peggy at the WWC 2007; Peggy and Kentucky's First Lady Jane Beshears; KDA president Eric Gregory presents a congratulatory token to Peggy



Spreading the Gospel

Liza Weisstuch meets
one of Kentucky
Bourbon's first ladies

In April 2011, at a lively gathering at the Governor's mansion in Frankfort, Kentucky, tables were set up along the periphery of one of the stately, gilded rooms. At each table, a notable Kentucky chef dished out his or her signature bites. Men and women, but mostly women, mingled casually. Some wore suits, some wore cocktail dresses.

Peggy Noe Stevens seemed to know everyone, and greeted each person exuberantly. She was just as animated when, later in the afternoon, she walked up to a microphone following an introduction from Jane Beshears, First Lady of Kentucky. Framed by posh velvet drapes, she said to the assembly: "I can't believe we did this!"

That event was the formal launch of Bourbon Women. Stevens is founder and president. The organization, which has members in many major American cities, was established to provide a forum for women to learn and interact about whiskey. As Noe can contend, women are often left out of the dialogue.

"I spent some time living in Chicago. My friends and I would go out as group, and all the women would order wine spritzers. I'd order Bourbon on the rocks, and they'd all turn their head, including the bartender," she says. "Bourbon on the rocks, it's just a matter of fact. I'm from Kentucky; it's how I grew up. Sometimes there's an element of surprise because men don't equate whiskey to women. There's an element of surprise."

And for some reason, that element of

surprise seems to stick around. Noe is a cousin of Booker Noe of the Jim Beam lineage. Her father was an executive for the Louisville water company, but nevertheless, she says she grew up "differently", with more exposure to the spirit than if she'd grown up in New York or Atlanta.

Her first job out of college was with Hyatt Hotels, which she credits for grounding her in all aspects of food, wine, spirits, event planning and hospitality. That background landed her in her first Bourbon industry job with Brown-Forman, where she received on-

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the-job training in production and sensory analysis. After that, she became a Master Taster, the first woman to hold that title in fact, and spent years leading tastings all over the world, or as she puts it: "spreading the gospel of my home state's spirit."

"I've been in the industry for 20 years. I watched women quietly enjoy whiskey," she says. "They'd come up after the presentation and ask: what's this or that product? Nobody was talking about this market of women. We need to do something, find a way to get the conversation going."

In 2008, she launched Peggy Noe Stevens and Associates, an image branding company. And as the old truism goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"When you start a business, you need to work in all your passions. Bourbon remains," she insists. "My clients still ask me

to conduct tastings. Or I'd go out and casually have drinks with friends who ended up tasting—and sharing—my Manhattan. I think it's just a matter of women not being introduced to it. Or remembering it as their father's drink.

So as PNSA thrived and she developed an increasingly diverse client base, she consistently noticed a gaping hole in the whiskey industry that wasn't shrinking any time soon. So took it on herself to narrow that gap. She developed the concept of a group that would reach out to women in easygoing settings and hold social and education events; a combination she terms "edutainment." She conducted focus groups and found women of all ages and fields of work were excited and curious

to learn more.

The launch could not have come at a better moment really.

"Premium quality of Bourbon has evolved so much. By introducing women to it, you can change the connotations. That's why if we introduce them to it, we'll take them deeper into understanding why they might like it," Noe says, comparing Bourbon education to wine education in terms of detecting nuances of aromas and paring flavours with food.

"Women are not looking for a lighter, fluffier, lower proof Bourbon. That's a myth," says Noe.

"They like it as it stands today. It's a big mistake for any distillery to create a Bourbon for women, and try to make it lighter because women I know like it for the same reasons that men do." **W**