

# Lux Row open for business

## Distillery celebrates grand opening with grand party

By Peter W. Zubaty  
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Luxco, the parent company of Bardstown's newest distillery, Lux Row, knows how to put on a first-class party with all the trimmings.



Michele Lux, who designed Lux Row Distillery's visitor experience, talks during a group tour inside the distillery's first rickhouse during its public unveiling Wednesday.



Donn Lux, Chairman and CEO of Luxco, speaks at the ribbon cutting for Lux Row Distillery Wednesday.



A barrel of Luxco bourbon sits in a rickhouse at Lux Row Distillery, which had its public unveiling Wednesday.



Luxco COO and President David Bratcher, right, greets guests as they stream into Lux Row Distillery's Visitors Center following Wednesday's ribbon-cutting on Bardstown's newest distillery's visitor experience.



Michele Lux shows a group a fermenting batch of mash while leading a tour through Lux Row distillery. The guests were welcomed to dip their fingers into the soupy mix, and those types of close looks at authenticity in the distilling process have been one of the keys to bourbon tourism's popularity.



The Lux family and Luxco leadership cut the ribbon on the visitors experience at Lux Row Distillery Wednesday.



Michele Lux talks with Max Shapira, president of Heaven Hill, at Wednesday's grand opening of the Lux Row Distillery. Luxco had long sourced its bourbon from Heaven Hill, but with the company opening its first distillery, it now controls its own destiny as bourbon's rising popularity has restricted the availability of contract bourbon. Donn Lux credited Shapira with contributing to Luxco's success and guiding them to the decision to open their own distillery.

At a massive celebration Wednesday at the historic John and Nancy Ballard farm where Luxco has set up shop for its new Kentucky base of operations, the company pulled out all the stops for the grand opening of Lux Row.

“We only do things one way,” said Michele Lux, wife of owner Donn Lux and the creative vision behind the look and feel of the new facility.

Luxco’s employees can attest to that. More than 400 of them were bused to Bardstown Wednesday from the company’s plants in St. Louis and Cleveland to share in the festivities, one of the few times Luxco’s workforce has gathered together all in one place.

David Hess, a controls engineer at the St. Louis plant, said he’s not surprised his bosses went all out for the grand opening.

“Luxco’s always been very good to the employees. ... I would have expected it from Donn Lux,” Hess said. “He’s a great guy to work for. He puts on a monthly luncheon in St. Louis, and we all get together.”

And a grand party it was, with a full buffet of food and samples of all of Lux Row’s bourbons — Rebel Yell, Ezra Brooks, David Nicholson and the super-premium Blood Oath — welcoming more than 700 guests. Before the ribbon was cut on the new facility, the Kentucky United Pipes and Drums bagpipe band marched through the grounds, settling at the flagpoles while the Lux Row banner was raised, then retreating back with a rendition of “My Old Kentucky Home,” symbolic of the company’s newest location.

“This is really a great and memorable day today for Luxco,” Donn Lux said.

In remarks before the ribbon-cutting, Michele Lux noted that Donn’s favorite music was bagpipes, and he asked if he could have that first at their wedding, then for their 20th anniversary. Both times she turned him down. But for the opening of Bardstown’s newest bourbon distillery, she relented.

“Third time’s a charm,” she said.

Driving along the winding, tree-lined lane up the hill to the Ballard farm, the initial view of the distillery evokes the rustic, ancient feeling of the old property. Two of the original barns remain on the site, off to the left of the main distillery, which features barnwood from former structures on the property and old brick to match the feel of the Ballard farmhouse, which is on the National Historic Register and will be used for distillery offices. Outdoor patios flank both sides of the main entrance, inviting guests to stop and sit a spell.

Visitors are welcomed into the gift shop and staging area for tours, and off to the left is the airy, spacious tasting room. Lining the walls of the facility are photos evoking imagery of farming, bourbon- and barrel-making, and a general feel of the Bluegrass State itself in an embrace of Luxco’s “new” Kentucky home.

“We choose to tell our story through art,” Michele Lux said while guiding a personal tour of the distillery, which began production in January and is filling about 45-46 barrels per day.

At the beginning of the tour, visitors will see a video discussing Luxco’s history, stressing its roots in Arkansas and Missouri, beginning as the David Sherman Co. Following that, the tour winds through the distillery, where guests can view the mash cookers, fermenters, grain millers and the custom-made Vendome tower still.

A short jaunt up a small incline to the left of the distillery takes you to Lux Row’s first rickhouse, where there are currently just less than 3,000 barrels aging, including several with nameplates on them honoring investors, vendors, distributors and other VIPs. A second rickhouse is expected in June, and there will eventually be six on the property, each holding 20,000 barrels.

Eric Gregory, president of the Kentucky Distillers’ Association, called the campus “fantastic,” and said it will make for a good home for Luxco’s “iconic” bourbon brands.

“We couldn’t be happier to have them locate in Kentucky,” Gregory said, “and invest in such a facility like this. They didn’t cut any corners, obviously. This is a tremendous facility, using partners such as Buzick Construction here locally in Bardstown. It’s always a great day in Kentucky when we open a new distillery, but this is a shining star.”

Justin Nansel, a utility technician at Luxco’s St. Louis plant, was impressed with the show the company put on for the grand opening, and was especially fond of the bagpipe band.

“It’s kind of cool they brought us all out here, and we got to see the plant unfold,” he said.

A common theme that Nansel, Hess and other workers touched on was that their future Bardstown colleagues should appreciate the job security they feel, given Luxco’s long-term investment.

“It seems like it’s definitely going in the right direction,” Nansel said. “This is definitely a good place to work for.”

For more than 40 years, Luxco has sourced its bourbon from other producers, primarily Heaven Hill. Donn Lux said his friend and longtime business associate, Max Shapira, president of Heaven Hill, suggested that Luxco get into the market of producing its own bourbon, and was an important adviser in helping the family see its vision through to this point. In his remarks, Donn said he asked Shapira in advance if he would be attending Wednesday’s grand opening, and Shapira told him he wouldn’t miss it for the world — and that he quipped that he wanted to “see how your wife spent all your money.”

It’s a big investment, but one Hess likes because it speaks to the long-term strength of the company he works for.

“It’s nice to have our own distillery making our products, rather than depending on other distilleries,” he said. “It’ll take a few years before we’re actually bottling product from here. It makes us prouder that we’re bottling our own products.”

Luxco’s sourcing contracts with Heaven Hill expire in 2020, and the first products made at the new Lux Row Distillery will hit the market in 2022.