

Despite being a relative newcomer to the industry, Uncle Nearest has made stratospheric growth, winning some of the highest achievements available in the spirits world. Created out of a desire to spotlight the first African American Master Distiller in America while also honoring his legacy, Uncle Nearest's Founder, Fawn Weaver, tapped Nearest's great-great-granddaughter, Victoria Eady, to join the Uncle Nearest team in 2019. In a twist of fate, Victoria blended the first batch of what would become Uncle Nearest's award-winning whiskey. We caught up with Victoria, who recently made history as the first person to ever win back-to-back Master Blender of the Year, to learn more about her unique entry into whiskey and how it ties back to her heritage.

YOUR STORY IS SO UNIQUE IN HOW YOU ENTERED INTO THE INDUSTRY. CAN YOU SHARE WHAT LED YOU DOWN THIS PATH?

My story is definitely unique in how I came about in the industry. I was just about to retire from my previous career of 31 years and had a conversation with Fawn (Weaver). The Uncle Nearest brand had already been in existence for about a year and a half. And she and I talked; she knew that I was nearing the time to retire, that my time was winding down, and so we just had a conversation about joining Uncle Nearest. That conversation led me to say yes, of course. I mean, who would not want to be a part of something greater than themselves? Especially when it comes to family, to have the opportunity to honor Nearest's legacy further and share his story with those who did not know it. So, naturally, I wanted to be a part of that.

In addition, saying no to Fawn Weaver is almost impossible. She is just that kind of gal, and I love her for it. So I joined the team in March of 2019. One of my top priorities was to oversee the Nearest Green Foundation as the Director of Administration, which was put into place to support college-aged descendants of Nearest. The foundation pays for tuition, books, and all things related to the student's classes. So I'm less than 60 days into that role, and Fawn asked me to blend the first batch of 1884. You can only imagine how nervous I was, right? I had worked in the law enforcement field for just shy of 31 years, then to be asked to blend whiskey... I was damn near petrified.



About 45 days prior to starting work at Uncle Nearest, I started learning all I could just so I could at least hold an intelligent conversation with others in the industry. I wanted to be familiar with the language and with the terms that were being used. While I was pretty well versed in industry linguistics, I had never blended whiskey before. I was quite nervous. But, thankfully, I did it.

Fawn says that while she watched me blend, she knew then there was something special. And I am grateful for her vision and her confidence in me. I was asked to blend the second batch because right out the gate with the first batch, we started winning awards with it. Thankfully the awards and accolades kept coming. In November, I was elevated to Master Blender. And I have blended every batch of 1884 since then. My path to becoming a Master Blender was a little bit unconventional, but our whole

approach to most things on our team has been rather unconventional. It has not only all worked in our favor but also worked out quite well.

WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE BECOMING A MASTER BLENDER FOR THIS INCREDIBLE BRAND THAT REPRESENTS YOUR FAMILY'S LEGACY?

You know, I get asked this question a lot. And it's still so surreal to me, especially because everything happened so quickly. I'm extremely honored, of course, to receive Master Blender of the Year for the second year running. I'm thrilled about that. I can't really describe what it means other than I'm honored, and I'm humbled to also be the first female to receive that distinction back in 2021. Being the first person to receive that distinction back-to-back has just left me in awe.

I came on the scene in 2019. And so many wonderful things have happened since then. While I'm very appreciative and humbled by all of the personal attention, the wins are still all about my great-great-grandfather, Nearest Green, and the Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey team. Fawn Weaver, our CEO and Founder, started this brand as a homage to Nearest Green to ensure that his legacy was known around the world, that it is cemented in history. And so those wins for me are all about him and what our team is doing. So I am most grateful and extremely honored that my individual work is being recognized. But I work as a part of this team, so it is important to me that I also recognize their contributions time and time again.

WHAT HAS IT MEANT FOR YOU TO PUT YOUR OWN STAMP ON THE NEAREST FAMILY LEGACY?



It means everything. Who would have guessed that my name would be on the bottle? I certainly didn't see that coming. It means everything to me, as Nearest Green's great-great-granddaughter and as a black female in the industry, to do something that had never been done before. And to do it all in the name of family. It is the most rewarding thing that I have ever done, outside of giving birth to my awesome son.

For those who don't know, Nearest Green was the once-enslaved man who taught Jack Daniel how to distill. He was Jack's mentor and friend. Nearest became the first known African American Master Distiller in history under the Jack Daniel brand after Jack purchased the distillery from the man Nearest made whiskey for, a preacher named Dan Call. Nearest and Jack both worked for Dan Call. Nearest was the man who made the whiskey for Call, and after Jack became older, he was mentored by Nearest and became the salesman for the whiskey. When Dan Call decided to get out of the whiskey

business, Jack purchased the distillery and named it after himself. He asked his friend and mentor, Nearest Green, to stay on with him.

By then, Nearest was a free man, and he became the first known African American Master Distiller. In addition to that, Nearest helped perfect the Lincoln County process, which is the process of filtering whiskey through sugar maple charcoal. That process now separates Tennessee whiskey from any other spirit. In 2013, the Governor of Tennessee signed into law that any whiskey designed to be Tennessee whiskey has to adhere to all of the qualifications necessary for bourbon plus the Lincoln County process. So that makes Nearest Green the undisputed godfather of Tennessee whiskey, as far as we are concerned. Without his perfection of the Lincoln County process, Tennessee whiskey would be just another spirit.

**1884 IS ADORNED WITH YOUR NAME ON THE BOTTLE,
SO WE IMAGINE IT MUST BE VERY SPECIAL TO YOU.
WHAT DID YOU WANT TO HAVE OUT OF THAT
EXPRESSION?**

I'm super proud of it all the more now because it is Uncle Nearest Whiskey from start to finish. The most important thing that went into my very first blend, which still holds true now, is my concentration on the finish. I have tasted so many whiskies that the finish ruined it: it was pungent or left a bad aftertaste. With 1884, I knew I had to perfect the finish. When you drink it, I hope that you find that the finish is about as smooth as you will get.

It is very flavorful. There is a lot of nuttiness as well as brown sugar and honey. I try not to influence people's minds about what they will taste because we're all different, right? Tasting whiskey is a unique thing to each person. But for me, those are some of the characteristics that I get from it. The finish is about as smooth as it comes, and for a 93-Proof whiskey, it is not pungent at all. It is light and absolutely decadent.



HOW ARE YOU CREATING NEW EXPERIENCES TO EXPAND THE IMPACT OF UNCLE NEAREST?

We recently opened our Welcome Center. We reopened our new space to welcome in our whiskey family on Juneteenth of last year. It is absolutely gorgeous. We have even expanded the landscape of the property altogether. We now have around 323 acres there in Shelbyville, Tennessee. We honor all things Tennessee — it is rich in history. But of course, Nearest Green is certainly the highlight of taking the tour.

We have the first non-alcoholic speakeasy at the Nearest Green Distillery — we are super proud of that. And we are madly working on finishing up the longest bar in the world. Things are rolling along with that bar, especially this week. In fact, I just walked over and saw it on Monday. The concrete is poured now and they are working like mad to bring that bar together. We're really, really excited about that.

We have sold out tours every weekend. They have been sold out every Saturday and Sunday since we reopened on Juneteenth. We have one heck of a retail team that will be glad to help you find anything in your size with T-shirts or jackets or sweaters. We

even have Converse in our retail store with Uncle Nearest on it. We have all kinds of swag. We have honey. We have got coffee, mugs, matches, masks, everything. It is phenomenal. So I'm excited about the direction that we are going in regards to the distillery. I get excited every time I'm there, and I get to talk with those visiting us. If you're visiting, take a tour or even just shop in our awesome retail store. It's an exciting time for us at the Nearest Green Distillery.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORK WITH SUCH AN AMAZING ALL-FEMALE LEADERSHIP TEAM?



It is fantastic. It really is. It wasn't done intentionally. Fawn put the best people in the best spot. And it just so happened that we are all female. I'm honored to be working alongside Fawn and our Chief Business Officer, Katharine Jerkens. We've all grown extremely close. Lucia Creed joined the team in 2020 and then of course there is

Sherrie Moore. There's nothing not to like about working along with such amazing women. I take full enjoyment of it. I'm extremely honored to work alongside such talented and dedicated women. We work hard; we run really fast every day. But we also enjoy what we do. It's a labor of love. And I get to do it with the team of women that I have come to love as well.

HOW DO YOU RECOMMEND ENJOYING UNCLE NEAREST IF SOMEBODY WAS JUST GETTING STARTED?

That is on an individual basis. I usually recommend a really good cocktail like the Queen Bee or the Uncle Nearest Sidecar, the latter of which is another one of my favorite cocktails. It's an old cocktail usually made with Cognac, but Uncle Nearest 1884 or 1856 are fantastic in a Sidecar. I love a good cocktail. But, I also love a good neat pour of Uncle Nearest, so it just depends on what a person feels like their comfort level is getting started. To get the full beauty of the whiskey, you don't need to put anything else with it. In my opinion, to really taste all the elements in the whiskey, it is best neat. But for some, they love a good cocktail, and to get them comfortable with drinking whiskey, I'd say start with a really good cocktail.

ARE THERE ANY ROUTINES OR RITUALS THAT YOU VALUE WITHIN YOUR WORK?



When it comes to tasting for my work in blending the whiskey, there are a few things that I do that I have done from day one. I do not eat or drink prior to blending whiskey. I do not drink water in between each sample, and I do not spit it out. As they're doing their tastings for samples, most blenders and distillers will have a process where after each one, they give it a good swash in the mouth to get a good mouthfeel for it, but they don't swallow.

As I said earlier, my concern has always been the finish right from the beginning. So if you spit it out, how do you know what the finish is going to be? So I don't spit it out, whether it's 10 samples or if it's 30; I take my time and I do it at barrel proof. I do not blend and I do not taste after it's been proofed down, so everything is barrel proof. No eating or drinking beforehand and no drinking in between.

I have always done that, and it has served me well. So that will be my practice moving forward. I take my time, whether it's all day long or just a few hours. I may take notes, walk away, and come back; I just take my time and do it. After all, that is my job. So if it's a day, then it takes a day, you know?

Perfection is a beautiful thing. Having an award-winning whiskey, we have set the bar. So now, we definitely are very particular, and really have always been very particular, about the whiskey that goes in our bottle. We are a premium brand. So we want to maintain that level of excellence in every bottle that we put out on the shelf.

ANY CLOSING THOUGHTS BEFORE WE GO?

One thing that I will leave you with is that we always like to be mindful of the fact that our story, our brand, is based on love, honor, and respect. What Nearest and Jack shared and nurtured more than 160 years ago is still very important to our team today. And so we govern ourselves in that same manner as we share the incredible legacy of Nearest Green. And walk with love, honor, and respect.