

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO *Spirits*

With spirits becoming a major category in the beverage industry, there's a reason to know what defines each of them and have some producers/brands in your back pocket. I spent the month of December absorbed in learning the styles of spirits and top brands, beyond my knowledge of basic bartending. Knowing the various categories, styles, and producers/brands of liquor can certainly give you a leg up working in the beverage industry ...or just make you a more knowledgeable drinker!

Included in this guide are what defines each spirit (below), as well as some major brands of each on the pages following. While I know there are many more, there's plenty here to get you started!

VODKA

- a neutral spirit without a distinctive aroma, taste, or color
- can be made from ANY starch or sugar-based plant: wheat, rye, potato, corn, barley, beets, grapes...
- BUT mostly made of water!
- usually made in a continuous still and filtered with charcoal
- typically around 40% ABV

GIN

- a neutral spirit that has been flavored with botanicals and redistilled
- juniper berry is a common ingredient
- began in Holland as a spirit known as Genever (which was medicinal)
- a broad range of spirits that can be made in a pot still or continuous still
- typically around 40% ABV

RUM

- a spirit made from fermented and distilled sugarcane juice or molasses
- originated in the Caribbean in the 1700s
- can be made in any sugar-producing area
- light color can come from oak aging, while dark color indicates added caramel
- typically between 30-50% ABV

TEQUILA

- produced from the fermented pineapple of the agave plant (must be at least 51% blue agave, but the best are from 100% weber blue agave)
- must be from the state of Jalisco, Mexico
- can be pot still or continuous still:
 - Silver/Blanco is bottled right after distillation
 - Reposado is aged 60 days-1 year
 - Anejo is aged 3 years max
 - Extra Anejo is aged 3-5 years
- between 30-60% ABV (40% usually)

WHISKEY

- distilled from a grain base (typically barley) that may or may not be malted
- always aged in oak
- can be pot still or continuous still (production methods vary, see below)
- usually the highest ABV of most spirits 40%+

EAU DE VIE

- common in France where it translates to "water of life"
- includes anything distilled from a fruit
- typically distilled at 70% ABV and then mixed with pure spring water to become 40% ABV

CORDIALS

- any distilled spirit that is sweetened (or flavored)
- also known as liqueurs (NOT liquors)
- typically 40% ABV, but it can range



VODKA

I organized these by country, although styles can vary within each country...

- **RUSSIA:** *Vodka is the national drink here. It's made from the various grains that grow around the country and is almost always served neat and chilled (not mixed).*
 1. Smirnoff - made from corn - the largest vodka brand in the world - currently distilled in the US
 2. Stolichnaya - made from wheat and rye - the first brand to sell flavored and premium bottles in America
 3. Russian Standard - made from wheat - another premium brand that is smooth with a touch of sweetness
- **POLAND:** *Vodka is also the national drink here. They consume almost as much as in Russia. Traditionally it's made from grain, but also produced from potato and corn etc.*
 4. Chopin - made from potatoes (although they produce a rye and wheat as well) - the world's most awarded potato vodka - distilled 4 times
 5. Belvedere - made from rye - the world's first 'Super Premium' vodka
- **SWEDEN:** *There's a great reputation for vodka here. Most of it is made from winter wheat.*
 6. Absolut - made from potatoes (although they produce a rye and wheat as well) - the world's most awarded potato vodka - distilled 4 times
- **FINLAND:** *There's a national love for vodka here. Brands often have a very high alcohol content.*
 7. Finlandia - made from barley (as well as glacial spring water) - naturally pure with a bite
- **NETHERLANDS/HOLLAND:** *vodka is well-respected here. It is typically made with copper pot stills.*
 8. Ketel One - made from 100% wheat - filtered over loose charcoal - named for the original coal-fired copper still
- **FRANCE:** *Produces some of the most elegant vodkas that are subtle in flavor. They are usually made from wheat or grapes.*
 9. Grey Goose - made from soft winter wheat and natural spring water - considered the world's best-tasting vodka
 10. Ciroc - made from grapes (Mauzac Blanc and Ugni Blanc) - distilled 5 times - very clean and unique
- **USA:** *Vodka is newer to the American cocktail scene. They vary in style and are usually based on locally available resources.*
 11. Titos - made in Austin TX from corn - use old fashioned pot stills - known for body and rich character
 12. Skyy - made from wheat - filtered through California limestone - America's first quadruple distilled and three times distilled premium vodka



GIN

I organized these by "style", although there can be various representations...

- **LONDON DRY:** *The most popular style of gin. Most come from the UK and are very dry and juniper-forward with citrus notes. These are the bulk of gins you will see at stores, bars, and restaurants.*
 1. Beefeater - from the UK - very juniper and citrus-forward - affordable and easy to find
 2. Tanqueray - from the UK - a favorite of many - great for a gin and tonics - juniper-forward, clean, and distilled 4 times
 3. Citadelle - from France - juniper-forward, but uses 19 other botanicals - Charentais pot still distilled - slightly more full-bodied and flavorful
 4. Bombay Dry - from the UK - the precursor to the more popular Bombay Sapphire (which fits the below category) - very juniper-forward with lots of lemon peel
- **NEW WAVE:** *A more modern style of gin, with less of a focus on juniper and more of a focus on florals (and other fun botanicals).*
 5. Hendricks - from Scotland - a unique blend of botanicals - known for its rose and cucumber flavors
 6. Nolet's - from Holland (and the makers of Ketel One) - botanicals are individually distilled - known for a unique blend of rose, white peach, and raspberry
 7. The Botanist - from Scotland - use 31 botanicals that are local to the island - highly floral but subtle juniper
- **OLD TOM:** *A style of gin that got a bad reputation from being made in homes in the 18th century, but is making quite a comeback. Production styles vary but it's known for being sweeter than London Dry and dryer than Genever.*
 8. Haymans - from the UK - crisp and herbal - slight juniper, but with a balancing sweetness
 9. Ransom - out of Oregon in the US - malty and spicy - aged in oak which gives it a darker color and richer complexity
- **GENEVER:** *This was the precursor to Gin and original 'sweeter' traditional style of the Netherlands. It is made from grains and a juniper infused distillate. Typically Copper Pot still distilled and lower (35%) alcohol.*
 10. Bols - from The Netherlands - the largest player in the Genever market - malty with juniper and sweet herbs
- **PLYMOUTH:** *A style as well as a brand (there is only one!) that used to be a protected geographical indication for Plymouth, England.*
 11. Plymouth - from the UK - unique and upfront in flavor - equal in juniper and citrus, with some spice - only slightly less dry than London Dry - a bartender staple
- **NAVY STRENGTH:** *A high alcohol style with extreme citrus and juniper and at least 57% alcohol.*
 12. Four Pillars - from Australia - very unique - made with limes, turmeric, and ginger - 58% alcohol!



I organized these by Island groups. The English (British), Spanish and French all planted the Caribbean Islands with sugarcane, and each group produces a rum that can be vaguely organized by style...

• **ENGLISH (RUM):** (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, Virgin Islands, St. Lucia, Guyana, Bermuda, West Indies, St. Croix) *These are typically made from Molasses and heavier in body and flavor. In Jamaica and Barbados, Copper pot stills are generally used giving it a more powerful aroma.*

1. Mt. Gay - West Indies/Barbados - silver and aged rum - the world's oldest commercial rum distillery
2. Plantation - Jamaica/Barbados - produces various styles from many English and Spanish Islands, but most popular are Jamaican and Barbados - the producer is a famous distiller of Cognac
3. Appleton Estate - Jamaica - aged rum with rich butterscotch flavors - the oldest and most famous of Jamaica's sugarcane estates
4. Myers - Jamaica - one of the most widely respected dark rums on the market
5. El Dorado - Guyana - a Demerara style of rum - deep and heavy
6. Sailor Jerry - Virgin Islands - a well known spiced rum - heavy and powerful
7. Captain Morgan - Jamaica/Virgin Islands - one of the most well known spiced rums - more vanilla character - started by Seagrams

• **SPANISH (RON):** (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Columbia, Peru, Costa Rica, Ecuador) *Typically made from Molasses as well, but a shorter fermentation and column still distilled which leads to a lighter style.*

8. Bacardi - Cuba/Puerto Rico - silver and aged rum - one of the most well known - affordable - easily accessible
9. Flor de Cana - Nicaragua - Fair Trade and sustainably farmed - premium rum that is naturally aged
10. Ron Zacapa - Guatemala - a premium aged rum - master blended and aged using a Solera technique
11. Diplomatico - Venezuela - one of the most awarded dark rums - distilled in a copper pot still - rich

• **FRENCH (RHUM):** (Martinique AOC, Haiti, Guadeloupe) *Typically but not always made from fresh sugarcane juice and named "Rhum Agricole". These have a more floral, fruity, vegetal, and earthy quality.*

12. Clement - Martinique AOC - the leading producer of AOC Martinique Rhum Agricole - clean, earthy, and vegetal in flavor



I organized these by what I believe to be least to most 'premium' (although I'm sure there are various opinions on this)....

1. Jose Cuervo - the world's leading brand of tequila - great in a margarita!
2. Sauza - one of the brands that pioneered tequila - clean and straightforward
3. 1800 - made from 100% agave - a great value for each classification - another great margarita tequila
4. Herradura - 100% agave - known for depth of flavor
5. Espolon - getting into the Premium tequilas - known for its smooth but spicy nuances
6. Patron - 100% blue agave - one of the most well known silver tequilas
7. Tres Agaves - one of the purest expressions of agave (they also make a great organic margarita mix)
8. Milagro - 100% blue agave - roasted in clay ovens and distilled 3 times - extremely smooth
9. Don Julio - pioneered premium tequila - clean, smooth, and perfect for mixed drinks or for sipping
10. Casa Noble - USDA Certified Organic - one of the finest in the world
11. Casamigos - created and made popular by George Clooney - perfect served neat or on the rocks
12. Clase Azul - an ultra-premium tequila - each bottle is handmade and hand-painted by artists in Mexico

WHISKEY

I organized these by type which is typically based on location. It was hard narrowing to 12 when I could make a list of 100! ...

- **BOURBON:** *95% of this category is from Kentucky, but it doesn't have to be! Bourbon must be made from 51% corn and aged in charred new oak barrels.*
 1. Jim Beam - one of the most well known - founded in 1795 - aged twice as long as required - many styles and flavors
 2. Makers Mark - a historic distillery - known for making very smooth and approachable bourbon
 3. Elijah Craig - one of the first! - known for pioneering bourbon - smooth and spicy
 4. Woodford Reserve - a favorite of many - rich and rounded - perfect for sipping or in a cocktail
 5. Blantons - one of the first 'specialty' Bourbons - produced in very limited amounts
- **TENNESSEE WHISKEY:** *These have the same requirements as Bourbon, except it must be filtered through sugar maple charcoal.*
 6. Jack Daniels - one of the most well known - made with corn, rye, and barley - best in mixed drinks
 7. George Dickel - tastes great neat and in a cocktail (they also makes a fantastic Rye Whiskey)
- **CANADIAN WHISKY:** *This is often a blend of two or more grains. The requirements are loose, but it must be aged for at least 3 years*
 8. Crown Royal - one of the most well known - approachable and unpretentious
- **IRISH WHISKEY:** *This is almost always distilled 3x and made with unmalted barley. It's typically lighter and fruitier than other whiskeys.*
 9. Jameson - extremely well known - light, fruity, and subtle - pot still distilled 3 times
- **SCOTCH:** *Scotch Whisky must be distilled in Scotland (typically 2x) and aged for at least three years in used wood (as opposed to new oak). Many are peated and the best are known as 'single malts'.*
 10. Macallan - single malt from the Highlands - one of the less peated/more approachable bottles - smooth, fruity, and floral
 11. Lagavulin - the opposite end of the spectrum - this one is rich and smokey with big peaty flavor - a more expensive bottle from Islay
 12. Johnnie Walker - one of the most famous 'blended' scotch's (over 40) - smooth and robust

EAU DE VIE

The most common include the following and are sorted by the region/area they're from...

- **BRANDY:** *A spirit made by distilling wine that can be made anywhere in the world.*
 1. E + J - out of California - inexpensive and easy to find - dried fruit, spice, and vanilla flavors
- **COGNAC:** *A specific type of brandy and region in France. This is a grape-based spirit (from Ugni Blanc) that is distilled 2 times in copper pot stills and aged 2 years in French oak.*
 2. Hennessy - the most well known in the US - a blend from 4 premier growing regions in Cognac
 3. Remy Martin - one of the first VSOP's - aged for 14 years
 4. Courvoisier - a blend of several areas - skillfully crafted and exquisitely balanced
- **ARMAGNAC:** *Another brandy, similar to Cognac, but in a different area of France. This style uses 2 additional grape varieties along with Ugni blanc. It's typically distilled once and aged for 1 year in French Oak.*
 5. Delord - one of the finest - loved for its chocolate and caramel notes
- **CALVADOS:** *A brandy made from apples (and sometimes pears). This is from the Normandy region of France.*
 6. Dupont - a quality producer - flavors of apple, orange, vanilla, and spice

-BRANDS-



CORDIALS

• CITRUS:

1. Cointreau - the most well-known brand of triple sec - (actual brand)
2. Curacao - similar to triple sec - named for an Island and made with the peels of the Lahara orange - (various brands: Giffard, Pierre Ferrand etc.)
3. Gran Marnier - a premium citrus liquor that includes Cognac - aged in French oak - (actual brand)

• BERRY:

4. Chambord - a black raspberry liqueur from France - (actual brand)
5. Creme de Cassis - a dark liqueur made from black currants and used in the classic Kir cocktail - (various brands: Giffard, Briottet)
6. Luxardo - Maraschino cherry liqueur - (actual brand)

• OTHER:

7. Amaretto - an almond flavor liqueur - made from almonds or apricot pits - (various brands: Disaronno, Giffard, Bols)
8. Frangelico - a hazelnut liqueur - (actual brand)
9. Kahlua - a coffee liqueur - (actual brand)
10. St Germain - an elderflower liqueur - (actual brand)
11. Creme de Violette - a violet liqueur - key ingredient in the Aviation cocktail - (various brands: Giffard, Creme Yvette)
12. Chartreuse - an herbal liqueur with natural green color - created by monks - (actual brand)

