

# *Dale DeGroff's* DISTILLATIONS OF DISTINCTION

*Premium spirits are at the heart of many of the greatest cocktails. Dale DeGroff, King of Cocktails, gives an overview of some of his personal favourites.*

In 1985 when I went to work for restaurateur Joseph Baum, first at Aurora Restaurant and later at the Rainbow Room in New York City, he was looking for a classic bar programme featuring authentic recipes made with fresh, quality ingredients. The menu I developed at the Rainbow Room Promenade Bar included drinks that had not appeared on a menu since the 1930s, as well as a changing seasonal component.

The menu caught the attention of the press and then the public, igniting a spark around the city and eventually around the country. We were on the way to the return of the essential cocktail with real ingredients and classic recipes, but this time there was a twist. Ingredients usually found only in the kitchen began to find their way into the cocktail. First, a basil leaf and a strawberry, mashed together with a bit of lemon, honey, and gin. Then more exotic ingredients like hot chillies and yuzu-lemon juice, until at some restaurants it became hard to tell the garde manger station from the bar.

A great many of the cocktails that have made a come-back, along with many innovative new cocktails, they have as their underlying ingredient a great premium spirit—whisky, gin, vodka, cognac, rum, and tequila.



## WHISKY IN THE JAR

The many different types of whisky offer the serious sipper a great variety of taste experiences, as well as many great moments for those who love cocktails. The world of whisky is unique and enticing. It's unique due to its many blends and varieties, whether it's Scotland's great aged malt whiskies from Highland or Lowland distilleries, or the finely crafted blends, or the equally famous American rye whiskies, while not forgetting the smooth liqueur whiskies, such as Drambuie. Cocktails, too, such as the Whiskey Sour and the Rusty Nail, are legendary. Irish whiskies are also right up there with the very best. If your palate is awake, you'll notice the many subtle differences these whiskies promise, as you uncork the bottle and pour a good measure of the amber golden liquid into your best cut-glass tumbler. It is exactly this great range of varieties that makes whisky (as spelt in the UK) or whiskey (as spelt in the USA) such an enticing tasting adventure.

The single malts are Scotland's pride and the majority have been established for generations. How many single malt whiskies are there? No one seems to have the exact answer. But the number of distilleries operating in Scotland around 2009 was said to be 94, and a professional whisky buyer has listed some 700 single malts.

That said, the economic downturn from which we've recently emerged, saw the closure of a significant number of distilleries (around 26) and these, such as Banff, Glenlochy, Littlemill, North Bank, and Rose Ellen, to name just five, have a growing rarity value.

Remember, too, that single malts are by no means produced exclusively in Scotland. There are single malt distilleries in India, Ireland, England, France, Japan, and Wales. The singles are extremely popular in Japan, which has at least three operating distilleries.

The flavours of these whiskies, single malts in particular, are remarkable in their contrasting qualities. To take contrasting examples from Scotland, for instance,



*A copper still at a whisky distillery in Ireland.*

the Highland malts from Islay have a peaty saltiness that is very distinct from the roundness of a Lowland malt such as Bladnoch, founded in 1825 and using water from Loch Ma Berry.

The contrasts are equally remarkable when comparing the whiskies of Ireland. America, too, has its long traditions of whisky distilling, with Kentucky bourbon (such as Jim Beam) and Tennessee whiskey being the most famous (especially Jack Daniels). As many know, there are significant differences between rye whiskey and bourbon. The latter will be fuller and sweeter than rye and this is one reason why bourbon is now the popular choice in American cocktails such as the Whiskey Sour, the Manhattan, and the Old Fashioned.

### TASTING NOTES

#### HICKS & HEALEY CORNISH SINGLE MALT WHISKEY

Notes of spice, honey and barley combine with delicate fruits and hints of cocoa and caramel before a late vanilla finish, to make this whiskey 'faultless and almost beautiful beyond words'.

## PREMIUM SPIRITS

The scotch category is so much in demand that distilleries are expanding production facilities. Malts once enjoyed by a few aficionados are now more mainstream in their appeal. The smoky, peaty maritime styles like Lagavulin or Laphroaig are offered with more age. The Glenlivet, floral Speyside style malt with honey and heather notes now easy to find in 18- and 21-year bottlings.

The Macallan—this is the go to scotch for the fruit notes imparted by the sherry casks—now offers a double wood bottling; sherry cask aged and finished in American bourbon barrels. In some cases the consumer can choose from the same product aged in multiple types of new and used oak barrels!

Older malts in the 15 to 30 year range are so popular that demand is out pacing supply—good for the distillers but difficult for the consumer since producers can command top dollar for the older malts.

Now we move on to revisit some of our old friends in the blended scotch aisle; rich and full-bodied blends abound, some with unique wood finishes in all categories but especially in scotch.



*The scotch category of spirits is growing in its appeal. The Glenlivet is now easy to locate in 18- and 21-year bottlings.*



Ardbeg distillery on Islay.

Images: 123RF, Pernod Ricard

**Here's something different ...**

For those on the lookout for something different, check out a recent newcomer to the world of single malts. This is a spirit from Cornwall—Hicks & Healey Cornish Single Malt Whiskey—the county's first single malt whiskey in over 300 years. This comes from St Austell Brewery, who tell us, 'Following the amazing reception for the first batch in September 2011, the second batch, consisting of casks 31 and 32, has been bottled and is ready to be dispatched. Only 381 bottles are available in this batch, each individually boxed and numbered and supplied with two tasting glasses.



Innovation is rare in the traditional world of malt scotch but John Glaser an American expat living in London is quietly changing that. In 2000 John registered a new whisky company in Great King Street, Edinburgh Scotland called Compass Box; John began a journey that push the boundaries of blended single malt Scotches and blended Scotch.

Since 2000, Glaser has released a series of Limited Edition Scotch whiskies and a Signature Range. John simply refused to follow the pack and it has ruffled some feathers; he released a whisky in 2005 called Spice Tree that employed a very non-traditional aging technique. A blend of malts from the highland villages of Brora, Carron and Alness were aged in American whiskey barrels with toasted new French oak staves mounted inside the barrel. The resulting whisky showed clove and ginger notes as well as the traditional dill, ash and coconut notes that are signatures of American oak aging. The Scotch Whisky Association pounced



claiming that the words Blended Scotch Malt Whisky should not appear on the label. John capitulated, no need to create animosity, but the whisky was worth fighting for and he found another way around the SWA. John used the American whisky barrels but removed the barrelheads and replaced them with new French roasted oak heads. Spice Tree is back and available as one of the Compass Box Signature range whiskies; it is a special bottle that brings a new twist to an old category. John's talent as blender and his mastery of maturation are opening new doors for the whisky aficionado.

John blends single malt scotch whiskeys and bottled malt and grain whiskies have captured the attention of whisky lovers and cocktailians around the world. Asyla is a blend of 50 percent of the finest malts in Scotland and high quality grain whiskey aged in American Bourbon Barrels. The lighter style of Asyla is ideal for serving as a cocktail whisky straight but craft bartenders are using Asyla as a base for a range of cocktails.

**Perfect for collectors**

We noted earlier that there are many whiskies that, through age or scarcity, have become collectors' items. Stephen McGinty, whisky expert at the Scottish auction house McTear's, thinks whisky is definitely a collector's dream, 'The whisky market in general is looking good at the moment. If you have an unusual item, you cannot really go wrong. In the past few years we have bought items from New York and from Japan, but recently we are becoming more aware of an emerging Indian market, as the Indian middle classes are drinking more whisky, which is boosting the collecting market.'

As well as being a good time to sell, it is also a good time to be holding on to your whisky rarities. For several reasons, whisky is a safer bet than wine. With whisky, a single bottle can be of great value, often because only a hundred bottles have ever been produced. McGinty says, 'The smaller the quantity, the higher the likelihood of the bottles increasing in value in the medium term. Also, the spirit in wine decreases and the wine vintages can become declassified. But whisky will stay more or less the same in 20-30 years' time.' Furthermore, unlike wine, the storage for whisky is easy and uncomplicated.



*Through age and scarcity, some whiskies are becoming covetable collectors' items.*

## BRANDY FOR HEROES

'Claret is the liquor for boys; port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy.' So said Dr Samuel Johnson in the 18th century, thus ennobling brandy with this very special accolade. In the 21st century, brandy or cognac retains this special place on the shelf, as the following article reveals. Brandy is also an important ingredient in haute cuisine and this famous distillation may also be considered to have purposeful medicinal benefits. There are numerous types of brandy, as the following article will show, with the finest cognacs sipped from large balloon glasses after a notable dinner, to the vital ingredient of, for example, the charming Champagne Cocktail.

Is it right to use this noble distillation in the cooking pot? Connoisseurs of the finest cognac no doubt raised their hands in horror when they read that a chef for The Savoy hotel in London had soaked Christmas pudding in a 200-year-old cognac. The puddings were made to serve 12 people, and the cognac? Of the year 1810, one bottle is valued at £10,900. And the pudding, will all the trimmings, including a solid gold coin, cost the consumer £23,500 each. A pudding for heroes, indeed!

### A luxury commodity

The very best cognacs available to the discerning connoisseur have a distinctly aromatic flavour that combines floral, fruit and spice notes. And for this, we might look forward eagerly to a decent measure of Rémy Martin's most prestigious Cognac, XO Excellence.

Rémy Martin, one of the world's most respected cognac brands, transforms grapes from the Grande and Fine Champagne zones into delicate spirits that are prized by aficionados around the world, particularly in China.

We can also note that Le Voyage de Napoleon Courvoisier XO is consistently recognized as one of the finest XO's in the world. This premium brand is a very old blend of fine and well-matured cognacs. Cognac is deeply rooted to the French soil from which it comes, adding to the uniqueness of this fine spirit. Distilled from the thin, acidic white wines of the



*Courvoisier Cognac is often used in cocktails like the Courvoisier Champagne Cocktail (L), the Courvoisier Cooler (M) and the Courvoisier Rendez-vous (R).*

cognac region and aged to maturity in French oak barrels, this special brandy is a strictly controlled appellation. The many rules and regulations that surround cognac production help to maintain the quality—and exclusivity—that make this spirit a coveted luxury commodity.

### The world's oldest

Cognac is also famous for its development during what can be a very prolonged aging process. What is thought to be the world's oldest cognac is dated 1767. According to The Wellesley Hotel, the 70cl bottle of Coutanseaux 1767, worth approximately £100,000, was discovered in an ancient cellar in France by a cognac collector. Guests at The Wellesley, based in Knightsbridge, London, could, until recently, buy a measure of the cognac for £7,000. All have now been sold. 'Cognac is one of the passions of The Wellesley, we are constantly in search of the finest and most unique vintages in the world to offer to our discerning guests,' said Giuseppe Ruo, director of food and beverage at The Wellesley, adding, 'We have been very excited to welcome cognac enthusiasts to experience an outstanding addition to our distinguished collection.' The Coutanseaux 1767 was added to The Wellesley's rare cognac collection which includes expressions from 1789, 1783, and a Boutelleau 1800.

### WHAT IS IT?

Cognac is, technically speaking, a type of brandy. That means it's made by distilling wine, and then aging the resulting spirit (known in France as eau de vie) in wood barrels.

The main difference between cognac and brandy is that the cognac label can only be applied to the spirit produced in a specific geographic region (an Appellation d'origine contrôlée)—which is the region called Cognac, in western France, a couple hundred miles southwest of Paris, and just a bit north of Bordeaux.

The Cognac region itself is divided into numerous smaller regions, which have different soil characteristics capable of producing different-tasting wines and eaux de vie. While an argument can be made for the virtues of grapes that come from each of the regions, the most sought after tend to be grown in the Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, and Borderies regions. In fact, many cognac houses will brag about pulling their supply from these specific sought-after zones.

## EXOTIC RUM

Variety is the spice of life, and rum has much variety while some varieties also contain some spice—which is fitting, considering that rum was an early product of the Spice Islands, such as Grenada and other Caribbean islands, where first distillation of rum took place on the sugarcane plantations in the 17th century. Rum offers a huge variety from Newfoundland’s Screech Rum, to the Canary Islands’ honey rum known as ‘ron miel de Canarias’,



with everything in between, this distillation of sugar cane forms the basis of a vast number of cocktails, including the life-saving hot milk, rum, sugar and nutmeg that may be had on Left Bank boulevards on freezing winter days. There is no doubt that for many of us, rum is an evocative and even romantic spirit. The thought of rum may transport us to Treasure Island, but the smell and the taste of rum will certainly transport us to the Caribbean Islands.



*According to Dale DeGroff, 'There is no doubt that for many of us, rum is an evocative and even romantic spirit.'*



125 Navy Rum retails at around £40 per 70cl bottle.

### Pretty special

As you may guess, there are literally hundreds of brands, and there are some pretty special ones, too, for instance, Banks The Endeavour – Limited Edition No.1 – 16 Year Old 1996 Rum, retails at £335 for a 70cl bottle.

If you’re looking for a seriously strong but very palatable rum, try Walter Hicks 125, described as ‘a very popular over proof rum’ from Walter Hicks Brewery (St Austell Brewery, Cornwall) made in Guyana. The 125 Navy Rum, which at 125 proof (71.40% vol) is the strongest UK bottled rum available. Arriving directly from Guyana in 45-gallon barrels, it is left to mature for seven years in the brewery’s cellar. 125 Navy Rum retails at around £40 per 70cl bottle.

## TIME FOR GIN

Gin is back and the last 10 years have brought innovative new products as well as the revival of a couple classic styles. London Dry gin still has a lock on the iconic Dry Martini but with the help of the craft cocktail community demand for classics like Old Tom gin and Plymouth is back. New styles have also found a place in craft cocktails.

Plymouth Gin dates to 1793 the Black Friars distillery in Plymouth and has a storied history. Lore has it the William of Orange brought gin to England, landing in Plymouth and establishing a distillery. There is little actual support for this bit of lore but I never ruin a good story with the truth.

### **Plymouth inspired a classic**

Plymouth Gin appeared in the first American Dry Martini recipe at the Knickerbocker Hotel in New York City; and that was not the only American classic that Plymouth inspired—the Sloe Gin Fizz was a bar staple in post-

prohibition bars. The first Sloe Gin was produced at Black Friars from sloe berries that grew wild around Plymouth. Another classic The French 75, is finding its way back on cocktail menus with regularity. The French 75, is simply a Tom Collins substituting champagne for soda. The drink has gained popularity in the latter half of the 20th century as a brandy (cognac brandy) drink but I prefer the original gin version.

The drink is named after a French Artillery piece that heaved a 75 millimeter shell a great distance, far superior to what available at the time in the United States, the doughboys borrowed these field pieces from the French in the early going during WW1. President Truman as a young gunnery officer commanded a French 75 gun team in the conflict and in the heat of battle reportedly uttered the line: 'I'd rather be here than be president of the United States!'

Christopher Hayman the Operation Director for the production of Beefeater Gin in the 1970s purchased the James Burrough Fine Alcohol Division from Whitbread PLC in 1988. The new millennium's craft cocktail explosion opened the door for many niche market products. The opportunity was not lost on Christopher Hayman, in 2004 with his son James and daughter Miranda he began producing under the Hayman name gin products from historical family recipes. Hayman's Old Tom Gin released in 2007, is one of the most successful products and of particular interest to mixologists.



*Thanks to the craft cocktail community, the demand for classic spirits, like Plymouth Gin, is high.*



*Aside from a particle filtration, no other processing is needed for Absolut vodka.*

## VERSATILE VODKA

This spirit is the nation drink of Russia and of Poland, with both countries producing distinguished varieties, some of which have existed since the Middle Ages. The spirit, for imbibers, can have surprising powers of intoxication, which, depending on strength can be considerable. Although vodkas form the base of many modern cocktails, today there are also a great many flavoured vodkas that have found favour as sipping drinks, including blackcurrant, cherry, apple, lemon, vanilla. For those on a true voyage of discovery, there is even a bacon-flavoured vodka which makes an appearance in particular at the Double Down Saloon in Las Vegas and New York, which has been famous for the 'Bacon Martini' for over a decade.

### **Super premium**

Vodka is a phenomenal success story

unprecedented in the spirits industry; in the United States it accounts for 28 percent of all distilled spirits consumed. How does a spirit relatively unknown for the first half of the 20th century rocket to such a heights? More importantly, how does one navigate this sea of brands to discern the real, the best, and the ones to serve. We rely on spirits and wines from trusted sources, Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée to use the French terminology. There are vodkas that represent 'place' just as brandies like Cognac and Calvados representative of their appellations. Elyx the super premium bottling from Absolut is produced from winter wheat from one estate in Sweden, and all Absolut vodka draws water from one source that is so pure that, aside from a particle filtration, no other processing is needed. The two distilleries in Sweden produce all the Absolut sold worldwide.



*Vodkas comprise the base of many modern cocktails.*





Agave fields, Mexico.

## TEQUILA'S NATIVE FLAVOURS

Tequila Ocho is produced in the Los Altos region of Jalisco, the Mexican state where most of the tequila production is centered. Tequila Ocho is a collaboration between Tomas Estes and Tequilero Carlos Camareñas. Tomas has single handedly been responsible for introducing the bounty of Mexican cuisine and the agave spirits of Mexico to Europe and Australia over the last 40 years with his restaurant brands La Perla and Café Pacifico. I have shared many dinners in Café Pacifico, London, with Tomas and our dinner wine was always a 500ml bottle of Tapatio tequila made by Carlos.

### Climate and terroir

Carlos Camareñas and his brother Felipe have deep roots in the Los Altos region and own or lease some of the best Rancho grown agave in the region. The agave is the beginning of the story, grown at the highest altitude of any

agave fields in Mexico with hot days but very cool nights. The climate and terroir slows the growth and the agave ripens slowly with harvest often delayed beyond nine years, the resulting tequila has lively acidity and complex aroma and flavour components. The rest of the story is the Camareñas artisanal production methods to process the agave; from the roasting to the crush to the still.

Ocho is a unique experiment in 'single estate' and in many cases single vintage Tequila. From 2008 through 2013 part or all the harvest from 11 different Ranchos located in a triangle defined by the towns of Arañadas, Atotonilco and Jesus Maria was used to produce the Rancho Single estate Ocho Tequila.

Ocho is tequila at it's best from one of the leading families in the production of tequila 'puro', tequila made and bottled in Mexico from 100 percent Weber Blue agave plants. Frederic Albert Constantin Weber was the botanist



Images: 123RF, Ocho

who first classified Agave Tequilana, the variety used to produce tequila and was rewarded with the appellation Weber Blue Agave.

Hunt down these hard-to-find one-of-a-kind collectibles but don't collect them, drink them! Find them at [www.caskliquidmarketing.com](http://www.caskliquidmarketing.com)

**Old favourites**

Carlos Camarenas produces other easier to find artisanal Tequila brands that are also among my favorites—Tequila Tapatio, Excellia, and El Tesoro. Most of the Tequila brands I have discussed are produced in three and sometimes four different bottlings that are classified by age, time in barrel. Silver or blanco (silver), is unaged or aged under 60 days in oak barrels, reposado (rested), is aged 60 day up to one year, Añejo (aged) is aged one year up to three years and a recently added category extra añejo (ultra-aged) is aged over three years. The resulting tequilas are changed in many of the same ways other traditionally-aged spirits like cognac or whisky are changed. The barrel imparts colour, and of course multiple aromas and flavours that result from the chemical reaction to compounds in the wood, leached out and combined with the strong native flavours of the spirit.



*'Tequila has lively acidity and complex aroma and flavour components'*



*The barrel gives the tequila colour, aroma and flavour.*