

Spirits Overview

There are hundreds of different liquors available, but primarily only the more common ones that you might find in most bars, as well as the ones that tend to be of lesser cost, are sold in small sampler bottles (an inverse I did not expect, as I had assumed samplers were for people who were less likely to purchase rare or expensive liquors blindly without tasting them first).

Not being a drinker, I was frustrated that I didn't know what to order from a bar when out with friends, and was fearful that what I did order would taste nasty and be a waste of money. To eliminate this problem, I recently consulted experts and then tested "Neat" dozens of these sampler bottles in side-by-side comparisons, in order to find delicious spirits that appealed to a palate which was not used to the taste of alcoholic beverages.

The winners from this small room temperature spirit sipping sampling are listed below. Bottom shelf liquors, while often the least expensive, tended to be harsh and full of impurities. It was as if their only purpose was to facilitate college kids getting drunk. Many of the top shelf liquors also didn't fare well. It was as if name recognition, advertising hype, and expectations of "better for more money", were the justification for their premium prices. Maybe not surprisingly, uncommon middle shelf liquors around \$20 for a 750ml bottle, tended to often be taste winners.

Note that these winners should only be considered a baseline for your own taste testing, and as a safe selection when ordering drinks at a bar. Those labeled "*family representative*" are high scoring beverages from the testing which to me seemed to represent the genres species best as people imagine the genre is supposed to taste like. Those marked with an asterisk (*) though are what I would suggest as the winners for best Neat (or with an ice cube) drinks. Mixed drink connoisseurs may find one of the other winners more suitable. Remember that some brands, and offerings within the brand, would probably have been better "winners" than the ones I selected, but for the fact that they were not available in small sampler bottles for me to test.

As for mixed drink enthusiasts, experts say a starter bar should first be stocked with one bottle and all the components necessary to make the bartenders favorite regular beverage. Next to cover the most common options for others preferences, it should be expanded to contain one good mixing version of a Brandy, Darker Rum (husky amber to dark), Dry Gin, Lighter Rum (white to mild amber), Rye Whiskey, Tequila, and a Vodka. Drink mixers should also include in their bar a Bitters, Dry Vermouth, Orange Liqueur, and a Sweet Vermouth, as a part of their assemblage of flavorizing supplements. When choosing remember that a winner listed here was for drinking "Neat", and thus may not always be the best choice for a particular mixed drink recipe. You may instead find a better match from a spirit with a different character, as described on the individual spirit "Family" pages, from which the winners for this Spirits list were drawn.

CAUTION: Spirits, unlike wines, do not age in the bottle. However, they can go bad once exposed to oxygen, so spirits should be smelt and tasted every so often to verify that they haven't lost their aroma or flavor. Never store unopened liquor bottles on their sides, because the caps/corks can be degraded by the alcohol and allow in air. Bottles with only a little liquid remaining should be finished-off first, because of the larger oxygen-filled space that was created through emptying.

Brandy Family =

Brandy is made from distilling grapes or fruit. Cognac is a grape brandy that is made using the same technique as brandy produced in the Cognac region of France. Brandy is aged in casks, and uses codes to indicate the amount of aging. From youngest to oldest they are: A.C. (or no marking), V.S. (or 3 star), V.S.O.P. (or 5 star), and X.O.. Brandy is used with and in deserts, as a flavoring for onion soup, and for making pan sauces. It is usually warmed slightly above room temperature in a snifter when drinking Neat. Brandy Neat is popular as a nightcap.

Family representative => Paul Masson Blended Grande Amber 3yo.

Brandy =

Hartley: \$11

A totally unexpected flavor for a brandy. Has an unusual sharp, non-sweet, light-caramel taste. Would make a good complement poured over a vanilla or custard desert. Mild, without an aftertaste, it is pleasant to drink Neat.

Paul Masson Blended Grande Amber 3yo.: \$10

Lighter medium body that doesn't shout, yet won't get lost. Longer aging for a very young brandy instills a light, fruity cask flavor. Taste is well balanced, and just a touch sweet. This is an extremely versatile brandy. It is mild enough that it can be drunk Neat. It is just strong enough that it works good as a mixer. In the kitchen, it makes a great deglazer when making red-meat sauces.

Cognac =

* Courvoisier Cognac v.s.: \$21

This was the favorite brand of Napoleon Bonaparte. Being a younger cognac, it has a vigorous aroma that is easy to smell. Smooth, it is a good cognac to drink Neat. Lighter medium body won't overpower mixed drinks. Finishes quick, with a warm afterglow.

Gin Family =

Gin must have the flavor of the Juniper berry to be called Gin. The two main types of gin are flavored agriculturals (usually grain), known as Gin or Distilled Gin; and grain that is re-distilled along with the botanicals, known as London Gin. The predecessor to London Gin was called Genever, and there are still a few examples being made. Because gins can taste awful if the botanicals are not balanced, and a lot of the gins people first try are unbalanced, many people have developed a prejudice against all gins. In response, a lot of gins are now being heavily flavored with citrus to make them more approachable.

Family representative => Bombay Dry

Gin =

Fleischmann's Extra Dry: \$10

A mild juniper berry tasting gin that is specially blended for use in mixed drinks. Perhaps a bit too mild flavored and a bit too much burn for drinking Neat.

London Gin =

Bombay Dry: \$17

A good balance of light juniper and moderate citrus flavor. Has a lower proof like that of a Plymouth gin. Could be drunk Neat due to mild burn and no bad aftertaste. Very light and simple flavor makes it a great choice for a Martini with a Chambery vermouth.

* Tanqueray London Dry: \$19

Distilled 4 times, this English gin is very gentle on the tongue, making it pleasurable to drink Neat. Its juniper aroma and flavors are very strong however, so it is mostly unsuitable for mixed drinks, unless you need to mask an undesirable flavoring, such as in a *Gin & Tonic*.

Genever =

Bols Genever: \$35

Genever is a rye, wheat, and corn malt, that is mildly infused with botanicals and juniper. Clean and warming, with a great aftertaste. Has a light malty taste with a well balanced botanical undertone. Nice scent. Burns Neat, but it's not harsh. Many classic Gin cocktails were originally intended for Genever. An ideal "gin" for making a pre-prohibition *Martini* (Try starting your experimenting with 50% Bols Genever + 50% Noilly Prat Original [international] Dry Vermouth).

Rum Family =

Rum is made from sugarcane molasses. Rum gets its color and rummy flavor from aging in a barrel, often one that once held whiskey. Rum absorbs a barrels flavoring quicker than occurs with most other spirits. There are three main types of rum. White rum is the youngest, and is primarily only used as a mixer. Because it is often not aged, and is often heavily filtered, it can taste similar to vodka, and may sometimes even be used as a substitute. Dark rum has a strong molasses taste. Amber rum mostly comes in one of four major taste styles. Barbadian [Bajan] style is the subtlest tasting. Cuban style has a lighter body, but with a peppery flavor. Jamaican style is aromatic and full bodied, with a slightly funky taste. Demerara style (often called British Navy style) has a heavy, sweet, and intense flavor.

Family representative => Appleton Estate V/X

White Rum =

The Naked Turtle White: \$15

This white rum comes from the same people who make *Captain Morgan White*. It is mild, without the alcoholly overtones of most young white rums, which is surprising due to its bottling immediately after distillation. Also unlike most white rums, it has a definitely noticeable, though mixably neutral, flavor. Taste suggests slightly sweet vanilla. A decent White Rum for use in most mixed rum drinks. It is also one of the few Whites you could drink Neat if you ever chose.

Amber Rum =

Appleton Estate V/X: \$17

A Jamaican style rum with minimal funk. Aged in used Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey barrels. A blend of five and ten year old rums (hence the V and X in the name). Aromatic, with a light "off-dry" oak barrel smell and flavor. Tingly aftertaste. Everything from the sugar cane growing to the distillation is done on one plantation. Decent as a Neat sipper. Very good as a mixer when you want to give a drink a strong flavor, but you want to avoid using a "Dark Rum".

Doorly's Fine Old Barbados 5yo.: \$11

A dry (the Four Square Distillery does not add any extra sugaring) Barbadian style rum. Aged 5 years in new American white oak casks. Decent body, with a slight vanilla flavor. Has a very slight alcohol burn, but is still sippable, with a long warm afterglow. Mixes well with most anything, so it makes a good choice in any drink calling for a lighter (possibly even White) rum.

* Kaniche Reserve: \$17

This Barbadian style rum is first aged in a bourbon cask, then transferred to a cognac cask for the final year of aging. The result is a semi-sweet rum that tastes more like a brandy, rather than a stereotypical rum. Great sipper for brandy fans, tasting somewhat like a more robust *Mount Gay Eclipse*. Smooth, with a pleasant taste that lingers for a long time. Although good Neat, it lacks much of the "kick" many mixed rum drinks call for.

Dark Rum =

Gosling's Black Seal: \$18

A deep amber-color rum from Burmuda. Full bodied, but not harsh. Slightly bitter molassas flavor dominates, but it is palatable enough that you could drink it Neat if you ever chose. A popular dark rum "floater" on "tiki" drinks. The *Dark 'n Stormy* mixed drink was specifically designed for this rum. A great choice in the bakery for all of your baked rum recipes (it would be foolish to use an expensive, although better tasting, dark rum in the bakery).

Tequila Family =

Tequila comes only from Mexico, and is a member of the Mezcal family of spirits, which are all made from succulents. Tequila is made from the Blue Agave cactus, and has an earthy taste which stays on your tongue for a long time. Tequila falls into 4 broad categories. Gold and Silver are both joven (young) tequilas. Gold [oro]; is always a mixto (mix) of at least 51% Blue Agave plus other sources of sugar. It is most commonly used for *Margaritas* and "shots". Silver or White [plata or blanco]; is bottled in less than two months after distillation. It has the strongest agave flavor, and is a good choice for mixed drinks. Reposado (rested); is tequila that has been barrel aged for at least two months, but not more than one year, in order to mellow the flavor for sipping Neat. Anejo (aged); is a tequila with a strong whiskey-like taste that has been barrel aged at least one year, but less than four years so that at least some of the agave flavor is preserved. Note that many experts consider anything older than a reposado to have been aged for too long a period.

Family representative => Sauza Hornitos Reposado

Gold Tequila =

Drego Azul Gold [Mixed]: \$10

Seems like it was designed with Margaritas in mind. Mild and decently balanced, with a suppressed agave taste and a hint of lime. Has pretensions of being an approachable reposado, making it suitable to drink Neat. A decent inexpensive choice for Margaritas.

Silver Tequila =

* 1800 Reserva Silver: \$26

Mild but dramatic taste experience to sip Neat. Has a very strong, but not bitter, earthy agave flavor, but without the smokiness of a reposado. Great Neat. Good for most mixed drinks, but may however be too intense for a few mixed drinks where a more subdued flavor is sought.

Reposado Tequila =

Sauza Hornitos Reposado: \$22

Hot on tip of tongue, peppery on rest of tongue, mild on throat. Unusual in that it is rested in very large barrels, which gives it less wood contact than a typical reposado. This better retains the agave flavor. The result is that it is more like a silver than a reposado, which makes it very suitable for mixed drinks. Also drinkable Neat. Thin taste, and a touch alcoholly. Has a slight briny, but mellow and pure agave flavor. Subtle aftertaste of barrel.

Anejo Tequila =

Gran Centenario Anejo [Blended]: \$30

Anejo tequila is usually aged in used whiskey barrels, and they tend to take on the flavor of whiskey, in some cases so much that the agave flavor almost disappears. Anejo tequilas are also rarely a blend. Gran Centenario is a rare blended tequila of several distillates, all of which were made from 100% Jalasco highland agave. The blend is then aged in "never before used" french limousin oak casks. The result is a premium tequila that is not-sweet, with a light taste of agave and oak cask. Color is that of maple syrup. Aroma is that of light citrus, fig, and spice. Very mild, with a lighter body and a slight mouth warming tingle. Flavor evolves slightly after resting in your glass due to it being a blend, so it is best if slowly sipped and savored like a quality blended scotch.

Vodka Family =

Most vodka is made from grain, but the classic vodka is made from potatoes. Vodkas neutrality makes it an extremely popular alcohol base for creating mixed drinks. Most people prefer their vodka chilled in a freezer before serving, as this suppresses the alcohol taste. For a while people were seeking vodkas that were almost flavorless, or tasted only of alcohol. Vodka should not be flavorless, otherwise you might as well just drink pure ethanol. A good vodka should have a mellow flavor, while being gentle on the tongue. Recently there has been a backlash from people wanting more flavor, so "flavored" vodkas are now all the rage.

Family representative => Johnathan Drake

Grain Vodka =

Johnathan Drake: \$13

Distilled 5 times, this minor burning vodka has a slight sugary, but clean alcohol taste, that makes it a good choice for use in the lighter cocktails, especially if you want to add a faint hint of sweetness. Can be drunk Neat, but a bit too thin in flavor to counteract the minor burn.

Potato Vodka =

* Luksusowa: \$14

Distilled 3 times, this great tasting Polish vodka is very gentle on the tongue, making it very pleasurable to drink Neat. Neutral flavor, with just the faintest aftertaste. It has the starchy texture associated with potato vodka, but it is unobtrusive enough to disappear when used in cocktails and mixed drinks of all types. Seems to like being exposed a moment before serving.

Whiskey Family =

There are several major styles of Whiskey, all which must be aged at least 3 years. Kentucky Bourbon is an American whiskey of at least 80 proof, which is made from corn. It tends to be quite a sweet whiskey. Tennessee Whiskey is a Kentucky Bourbon which has gone through the additional step of charcoal filtering to mellow the taste. Canadian Whiskey is a lighter bodied whiskey. It was once exclusively made from rye, but can now include, and often does include, other grains. It is almost always a blended whiskey, has a light and fruity flavor, and is intended primarily to be used in mixed drinks. The uncommon American Rye Whiskey (typically in the Pennsylvania style) is made with a high concentration of rye, which imparts a drier bold and spicy flavor, with a warming aftertaste. Irish Whiskey is triple distilled, making it lighter bodied than Scotch. It is also made to taste toasty rather than smokey. Scotch Whisky (spelled without the "e"), is a whiskey that is typically aged the longest of all. It has a smokey, barley-like flavor, and comes as either a Single Malt, or as a Blend of several malts.

Family representative => Canadian Mist Blended Canadian Whiskey

New World Whiskeys

Kentucky Style Bourbon Whiskey =

Buffalo Trace Kentucky Straight Bourbon: \$21

This is a 90 proof Bourbon, so it is near the required strength for a true *Manhattan*. It is smooth enough to be sipped Neat, yet it will not be overpowered by whiskey taming mixed drinks. Different in that it has a semi-sweet spice and leather taste, rather than the much sweeter taste normally associated with bourbon. The heavy flavor lingers long afterwards.

* Jim Beam Black 8yo Kentucky Straight Bourbon: \$19

An 86 proof Bourbon, but the extra aging makes it smooth. Starts with the expected bourbon sweetness, but then a drier barrel taste grows, and lingers a long time afterwards. An elegant Neat sipper, yet strong enough to be used in whiskey taming mixed drinks.

Tennessee Style Bourbon Whiskey =

Gentleman Jack Rare Tennessee Whiskey: \$25

Double charcoal filtering makes this a very smooth whiskey. Similar in flavor to the popular *Jack Daniels Old #7*, but considerably milder, and with an interesting affable background taste of charred-barrel. A light Neat sipping American Whiskey. It can however be overpowered by many mixed drink recipes.

Canadian Style Rye Whiskey =

Canadian Mist Blended Canadian Whiskey: \$11

Canadians work best when used as a mixer in lime sodas like 7-Up, because their flavoring matches well. Canadians are mild enough that what you are doing is flavoring the soda, rather than *vice versa*. Canadian whiskeys tend to taste yucky when drunk Neat, but this one is mild enough and palatable enough that you could drink it Neat if you ever chose. This Canadian has a light taste, suggesting vanilla with a mildly fruit-and-nut barrel flavor.

Crown Royal Northern Harvest Rye: \$30

Although by law Canadians must have some rye, the percentage is usually small. This Canadian is made from a whopping 90% rye. You can taste the rye, but you can also clearly taste the mixture of spices that are distinctive to Canadian whiskies. Smooth, with a good flavor balance. Can easily be drunk Neat, but like all Canadians, it shines best when mixed.

American Style Rye Whiskey =

Bulleit Straight Rye Whiskey : \$25

Mild, but you get a young alcoholic beverage heat in the front of your mouth. Made from 95% rye, so it is not sweet like corn based bourbons. Has only a moderate rye flavor though, with a very slight hint of maple and northern climate tree fruit. Satisfactory Neat, but flavors could get washed out in some mixed drinks.

Old World Whiskys

Irish Whiskey =

Bushmills Original Blended Irish Whiskey: \$23

This is only an average tasting irish whiskey, but has more body than many. A bit sweet, like honey coated pastry, and it makes your mouth go numb. Suitable enough for an *Irish Coffee*.

Scotch Whisky =

Chivas Regal 12yo Blended Scotch Whisky: \$25

Slight burn, with a campfire-smoke flavor. Has a very slightly sweet, but satiny, barley malt taste. Not an exciting scotch, but not awful either. Blend was specifically designed for use in a *Scotch & Soda*, but can also be drunk Neat. Mixes well, and is a good choice for a *Rob Roy*.

Cutty Sark Blended Scotch Whisky: \$18

This "airplane whiskey" is an odd duck for a Scotch. Somewhat mild like an Irish, but its not Irish. Also somewhat fruity like a Canadian, but again its not a Canadian. Although not offensive, aroma is not the best. Fruity in the mouth, but after swallowing you receive a nice long lasting moderate barrel taste. Made specifically for the post-prohibition American market. Smooth drinking Neat, but flavor is so light it will get lost if you use water. The Spanish use it in mixed drinks, but again it will disappear in a heavier mixed drink. You really don't want to like this whisky, and you really should pass, but you keep going back to take another sip.

The Black Grouse Blended Scotch Whisky: \$28

Mild, with a very slight sweetness. Made from peated malt, which gives it a dominant peat-smoke overtone. Good choice for a peaty whisky. Decent Neat, even better as a mixer.