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Spirits of America

By F. Paul Pacult

A mere generation ago, when consumers in bars and lounges breezily gabbed about the world's greatest distilled spirits, the names most often cited hailed from outside the United States. The finer spirits sipped as after-work drinks typically included French Cognacs (Remy Martin, Hennessy, Courvoisier, Martell) and liqueurs (Cointreau, B & B); Scottish whiskeys (Johnnie Walker, Glenfiddich, J & B, Cutty Sark) and liqueurs (Drambuie); whiskies from Canada (Canadian Club, Crown Royal, Windsor Canadian); Irish liqueurs (Baileys) and whiskeys (Bushmills); gins from England (Tanqueray, Beefeater, Bombay); vodkas from Russia (Stolichnaya) and Sweden (Absolut); Italian liqueurs (Amaretto di Saronno, Frangelico); and tequilas (Jose Cuervo, Sauza) and liqueurs (Kahlua) from Mexico.

Only a few spirits produced in the U.S.—sturdy premium brands like Jack Daniel's Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey, Seagram's Extra Dry Gin, Jim Beam Kentucky Straight Bourbon and Smirnoff Vodka—transcended this popular view. The majority of America's high-volume brands, produced by mass-production distillers, came up short.

But a change was in the air, and it came to fruition in the 1980s. Though the art of distilling has been practiced in North America since colonial days, Europe's spirits tradition is far older, spanning to the Middle Ages. A respected trade that was practiced by artisans, European distilling was steeped in local customs. In 12th-century Poland, for example, part of the potato harvest was set aside each year for the wintertime production of crude vodka. Around the same time, in Italy's remote villages,

winemakers began distilling the juicy remnants of grape pressings and grappa was born. In 14th-century France, the people of Gascony began distilling their wines in order to make medicines and elixirs; Armagnac, France's oldest distillate, was born. By the 15th century, distilling had become as much a part of Europe's social and cultural fabric as brewing and winemaking.

In the United States prior to 1980, distilling was considered a method of supplying a large, thirsty marketplace with affordable, rudimentary brandies, whiskeys, liqueurs and gins. These spirits were made in industrial-looking plants where the emphasis was on sheer volume rather than quality.

The Tide Changes

"During the rapid industry growth of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, U.S. manufacturers focused on mass production techniques, much the same as Ford and GM did," says Mark Brown, CEO and president of Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky. "In the process, bourbon makers forgot the handcrafted nature of whiskey making and, in essence, stripped the category of its magic. Bourbon makers are today refocused on telling the correct story."

By the mid-80s, interest in American wines and microbrews was surging. Yet native distilled spirits were perceived as faceless, inexpensive vehicles with which to create buzz or provide the edge in a mixed drink. The conventional thinking went something like this: Could our domestic, bang-'em-out brandies compete with even the lowest level French Cognac, VS? Could America's bland native gins run with the sophisticated likes of those distilled in Great Britain? Were America's sweet-as-honey blended whiskeys in the same league as Scotland's svelte, dry, blended whiskies? The answer, in each case, was a resounding "no."

A "New" Method of Distilling

It was out of this cynical environment that America's west coast distilling visionaries emerged in the 80s. They included Jorg Rupf of St. George Spirits; Ansley Coale, Jr. and Hubert Germain-Robin of Alambic, Inc.; Bernard La Borie of Carneros Alambic; Steve McCarthy of Clear Creek Distillery; Randall Gram of Bonny Doon Vineyards; and Miles Karakasevic of Domaine Charbay Spirits. Undeterred by the inferior reputation of domestic spirits, they preached the gospel of handcrafted, limited quantity and high quality.

America's new generation of distillers were initially viewed as quirky by mainstream distillers of over-processed, big-volume quantity brands. While these establishment distillers routinely used continuously running, stainless-steel column stills that pumped out thousands of gallons of neutral spirits in a single day, the west coast innovators used small, copper pot stills called alembics.

Alembic distilling was the original method of creating spirits in small batches (from 50 to 125 gallons per individual distillation). The roots of this system date back a millennium. Distilling in pot stills is significantly more labor-intensive and costly than distilling in column stills, but the results are more distinctive, aromatic and flavorful.

This hands-on approach to production was reflected in the price; artisan distillers were forced to charge a lot for their spirits. By doing so, they were betting that growing numbers of quality-conscious, affluent consumers would be lured by the higher price tags for super-premium American distilled spirits. Not surprisingly, four of the seven visionaries of this epoch were born in Europe.

Distiller Jorg Rupf of St. George Spirits in Oakland, CA agrees that the change in consumer attitudes during the 1980s had a lot to do with the gradual acceptance of

America's boutique spirits. "Increased awareness of the existence of quality spirits [helped] a category that was largely regarded as the 'booze business' before 1980," he says. "During most of the 1980s, spirits were still considered socially questionable, mainly because of health reasons, and because wine was promoted on a very large scale."

Concerning the long climb for the artisan distillers, Rupf adds, "This has been a slow process because the quality element has been carried by small producers with limited financial means who rely on word-of-mouth and press rather than advertising."

Tito Beveridge, president of the Austin, Texas distillery that produces Tito's Handmade Vodka, believes that consumer demand and the education of the collective American palate have contributed to the renaissance. "The success of products like Tito's is a testimony to the developing palate of the American consumer," says Beveridge. "There is a segment of the population that seeks out better, richer and more satisfying libations. They are willing to try new products and support the small producers."

A New Age Dawns

By the early 1990s, the Age of the American Artisan Distiller was rapidly gaining momentum. America's big-volume distillers, led by E & J Gallo, Christian Brothers, Korbel and Paul Masson, finally took note of the marketplace shift towards quality and re-examined their portfolios, finding room for exotic and quality-driven spirits.

But, with all the talk of a renaissance, are America's handcrafted spirits of the Third Millennium really as good as their European counterparts? Ansley Coale, Jr., president of Alambic, Inc. (Germain-Robin brandies) and Craft Distillers (Hangar One vodkas), believes that they are even better. "Domestic craft distillers are making products that are consistently superior to their European counterparts," he says matter-of-factly.

Coale cites several contests and face-off tastings in which American spirits topped European spirits. "Jorg Rupf (St. George Spirits) took best of show at Destillata," he points out. "In 1992 we poured our Germain-Robin XO blind against Hine Antique for a group of twenty-eight experts. Twenty-five voted for XO."

Miles Karakasevic, owner and master distiller of Domaine Charbay Spirits, believes that American distillers have an advantage over their European competitors. "European distillers are not exactly known as innovators," he says, adding that European distillers have been at their craft for so long that they are trapped by the very traditions that, from a marketing perspective, give them an edge. Since America's small-volume distillers aren't as hemmed in by custom, they are freer to experiment.

Mark Brown of Buffalo Trace Distillery is one of the medium-sized, high-quality distillers who believes that America's artisan distillers are on par with the Europeans. "A focus on quality will only lead us to explore new ways to further improve quality," he says. "This has the effect of limiting the arrival of new players who might want to produce with lower standards." Cherish the moment, spirited fellow travelers.

Some recent triumphs from America's better distillers

Classic (96-100)/Highest Recommendation

- Charbay Vodka, 40% AbV, \$27. Domaine Charbay Distillers, Napa, CA
- Clear Creek Distillery Eau-de-Vie de Pomme Apple Brandy, 40% AbV, \$32. Clear Creek Distillery, Portland, OR
- Evan Williams Vintage 1993 Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 43.3% AbV, \$25. Heaven Hill Distillery, Bardstown, KY
- Germain-Robin Anno Domini 2002 Alambic Brandy, 40% AbV, \$350. Alambic, Inc,

Ukiah, CA

- Hangar One Kaffir Lime Flavored Vodka, 40% AbV, \$36. St. George Spirits, Oakland, CA
- Shaker's Vodka, 40% AbV, \$33. Infinite Spirits, Napa, CA
- Wild Turkey "Kentucky Spirit" Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 50.5% AbV, \$45. Wild Turkey Distillery, Lawrenceburg, KY

Superb (90-95)/Highly Recommended

- George T. Stagg 15 Year Old Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 70.7% AbV, \$45. Buffalo Trace

Distillery, Frankfort, KY

- Booker's Bourbon Small Batch Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 63% AbV, \$50. Jim Beam Distillery, Clermont, KY
- Jepson Old Stock Mendocino Alambic Brandy, 40% AbV, \$50. Jepson Vineyards, Ukiah, CA
- Junipero Gin, 49.3% AbV, \$33. Anchor Distilling, San Francisco, CA
- Peter Jakes Private Keep 10 Year Old Kentucky Straight Bourbon, 45% AbV, \$33. Bardstown Creek Distilling, Bardstown, KY
- Prichards' Fine Rum, 40% AbV, \$30. Prichards' Distillery, Kelso, TN
- Skyy Berry Vodka, 35% AbV, \$16. Skyy Spirits, New York, NY
- St George Spirits Kirsch Eau-de-Vie, 40% AbV, \$38 (375 ml). St. George Spirits, Oakland, CA
- Tito's Handmade Vodka, 40% AbV, \$20. Tito's Distilling, Austin, TX
- White Fang Peppermint Schnapps Liqueur, 45% AbV, \$16. Northwestern Distillers, Inc., Hood River, OR
- ZYGO Peach Flavored Vodka, 35% AbV, \$30. Zygo Distillers, Rigby, ID

Very Good (85-89)/Recommended

- Christian Brothers Rare Reserve XO Brandy, 40% AbV, \$16. Christian Brothers, Miraloma, CA and Bardstown, KY
- E & J XO Vintage Reserve 10 Year Old Brandy, 40% AbV, \$35. E & J Gallo Distillers, Modesto, CA
- Paul Masson Chocolate Hazelnut Cream Liqueur, 17% AbV, \$13.
- Players Extreme Bumpy Gin, 40% AbV, \$14. Extreme Beverage Company, Franklin, TN
- Seagram's Extra Smooth Vodka, 40% AbV, \$13. Joseph E. Seagram, Lawrenceburg, IN
- Sting Sour Raspberry Schnapps Liqueur, 40% AbV, \$20. White Rock Distilleries, Lewiston, ME
- Whaler's Pineapple Paradise Rum, 24% AbV, \$12. Heaven Hill Distillers, Bardstown, KY



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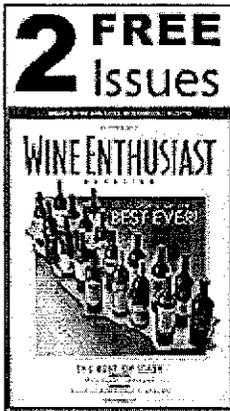


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