

# Beverage Journal

A glass of whiskey is centered in the frame, set against the background of a wooden barrel. The glass is filled with a golden-brown liquid, and the light reflects off its surface. The barrel's staves are visible, creating a circular frame around the glass. The overall mood is warm and rustic.

OCTOBER 2024

## WHISKEY NEAT

THE FUTURE OF  
JAPANESE WHISKY

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THE IMPACT OF ABV AT  
BARREL ENTRY



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**DON'T MISS THESE GREAT ARTICLES IN THIS MONTH'S EDITION**

In this October edition, we have four notable stories. Two highlighting individuals who have either made, or are making, an impact on our local beverage alcohol industry. And two more that dive into the international and local whiskey scenes.

The first article honors **Thomas "Goose" Kaiser**, a revered figure in the local beverage community who passed away recently at age 87. Staff writer Teddy Durgin's tribute includes reflections from industry colleagues and friends, emphasizing Goose's deep commitment to both his business ventures and personal relationships. Kaiser, who owned iconic establishments like the Bay Café and the Wishing Well, was also a powerful advocate for the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA), serving as its Legislative Co-Chair for over 30 years. His leadership, savvy in both business and politics, and personal kindness left an indelible mark on those who knew him.

Our second notable article introduces readers to **Melanie's at Griffith's Tavern**, a neighborhood bar in Baltimore with an interesting twist. Co-owners Hannah Spangler and Allison Crowley revamped the historic Griffith's Tavern, naming it after actress Melanie Griffith ... with her approval. Spangler and Crowley have worked hard to maintain the bar's historical essence while making it inclusive and welcoming to all. The tavern's connection to Baltimore's John

Waters adds a unique Hollywood flair to its charm. Beyond its name and community spirit, the article highlights the tavern's offerings of local beverages and Spangler's insights on running a successful business in the beverage alcohol industry.

In April 2024, Japan introduced stricter guidelines for labeling whisky as "Japanese." While not legally enforced, the guidelines for labeling "**Japanese Whisky**" aim to clarify and elevate the category, which has grown rapidly since 2016. Some distillers are embracing these standards to promote authenticity, while others are merely adapting their labels. The standards address growing consumer confusion and misleading practices in the market, especially with non-Japanese whiskies being labeled as Japanese. This evolution is seen as crucial for Japanese whisky's global reputation and future growth.

Finally, **Sagamore Spirit** is reviving Maryland's historical rye whiskey tradition, bringing it back to global recognition. Maryland once thrived in rye production, especially in the 19th century, but this legacy faded over time. Kevin Plank and Bill McDermond, founders of Sagamore Spirit, sought to restore Maryland's whiskey heritage. Their distillery in Baltimore marks a significant return after a 40-year drought in whiskey-making in the state.

I hope you find these stories as intriguing as I do. ■

**STEPHEN PATTEN PUBLISHER**

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## 1. CONNIPTION GIN

North Carolina's Durham Distillery has released its annual limited-edition Conniption Barrel Aged Gin. Taking cues from the botanical blend in the distillery's own navy strength gin, the sought-after spirit, of which only 8,000 bottles are available, is aged for 10 months in six-year-old bourbon barrels from High West Distillery in Utah. At 94-proof, it's reminiscent of a bourbon too, standing up especially well in cocktails like the Old Fashioned and Martinez.

**\$** SRP: \$44.99 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [durhamdistillery.com](http://durhamdistillery.com)

## 2. QUINTALIZA TEQUILA

Quintaliza, the first coffee-aged tequila on the market, now has a limited-production high-proof option. Like the reposado, it's born from 100 percent Blue Weber agave and aged in oak barrels that previously held organic coffee produced from sustainable beans harvested in Chiapas, Mexico. This 90-proof, double-distilled version has layers of fruit and dark chocolate that make it ripe for cocktails.

**\$** SRP: \$79 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [quintalizatequila.com](http://quintalizatequila.com)

## 3. FAR NIENTE WINERY

1982 marked the first vintage of the celebrated Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley's Far Niente Winery, and the 2022 edition commemorates that 40-year winemaking legacy. Overseen by winemaker Nicole Marchesi, the new release stars fruit from Oakville as well as other premier sites for a complex, elegant blend that benefited from an ideal growing season.

**\$** SRP: \$130 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [farniente.com](http://farniente.com)

## 4. KNOB CREEK

Knob Creek's nine-year-old bourbon and seven-year-old rye whiskey come together in a 113-proof limited-edition blend. Made by eighth-generation master distiller Freddie Noe, the robust Bourbon x Rye opens with maple and vanilla aromas that lead to a mix of sweet, fruity, and peppery flavors on the palate.

**\$** SRP: \$44.99 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [knobcreek.com](http://knobcreek.com)

## 5. NOMADICA

Summer vibes carry on all year long with Nomadica's low-ABV (7%) Rosé Yuzu Spritz, a collaboration with British-American Olympian Gus Kenworthy. The slightly fizzy, canned apéritif pairs California rosé (64 percent Merlot, 28 percent Grenache, and eight percent Gamay) with a honeyed Muscat grape concentrate and a splash of fresh yuzu juice from Yuzuco.

**\$** SRP: \$48 per eight-pack of 250-ml cans

**🌐** [explorenomadica.com](http://explorenomadica.com)

## 6. MUYU LIQUEURS

They've been a hit in the U.K. since 2019, and now Muyu Liqueurs have arrived stateside. Conceived by bartenders Monica Berg and Alex Kratena of London's Tayer + Elementary and Simone Caporale of Sips in Barcelona in partnership with aroma experts, the cocktail-friendly liqueurs are inspired by perfume. Floral Jasmine Verte, earthy Vetiver Gris, and citrusy Chinotto Nero are accented with ingredients like neroli, patchouli, and oak moss.

**\$** SRP: \$39.95 per 700-ml bottle

**🌐** [muyu-liqueurs.com](http://muyu-liqueurs.com)

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### 7. TIP TOP PROPER COCKTAILS

Bartender Joaquín Simó created the Naked & Famous, a riff on the Last Word, while working at Death & Co. in New York City's East Village. Now, the libation has been reimagined in 25% ABV canned form as the most recent addition to the Tip Top Proper Cocktails portfolio. Alongside Simó, bartender Miles Macquarrie developed a four-ingredient recipe—mezcal, lime, alpine liqueur, and aperitivo bitters—that captures the drink's bitter, herbal, and citrusy profile.

**\$** SRP: \$39.99 per eight-pack of 100-ml cans  
**🌐** [tiptopcocktails.com](http://tiptopcocktails.com)

### 8. REDEMPTION WHISKEY

Redemption Whiskey expands its Specialty Series with Sur Lee, a 94-proof straight rye whiskey that nods to sur lie, the French method of aging wine on the lees. In this rendition, the backset that comes off the still during distillation was placed into barrels before the liquid was matured. Throughout the maturation process the barrels were rotated, ensuring the whiskey and “lees” were in contact to yield nutty, spicy results.

**\$** SRP: \$59.99 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** [redemptionwhiskey.com](http://redemptionwhiskey.com)

### 9. EL TEQUILEÑO

Following the 2023 debut of its first extra añejo expression, El Tequileño has rolled out Still Strength, a tequila made with 100 percent Blue Weber agave from Los Altos de Jalisco bottled straight from the still. Highlighting agave in its purest form, the spirit is rounded out with notes of lemon peel and white pepper.

**\$** SRP: \$64.99 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** [tequileño.com](http://tequileño.com)

### 10. SILVERBELLY WHISKEY

Named for the color of his famed cowboy hat, Silverbelly, Alan Jackson's signature straight bourbon whiskey has introduced its fifth offering. Aged and bottled in the hills of Tennessee, the 115-proof single-barrel expression, hand-picked by the country music artist, was matured for five and a half years.

**\$** SRP: \$68 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** [silverbellywhiskey.com](http://silverbellywhiskey.com)

### 11. STONECAP WINES

Crafted entirely from fruit grown at Goose Ridge Estate Vineyard in Washington's Columbia Valley, the bright, aromatic 2023 vintage of StoneCap Chardonnay balances notes of tangerine, lime, and stone fruit with minerality.

**\$** SRP: \$11.99 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** [stonecapwines.com](http://stonecapwines.com)

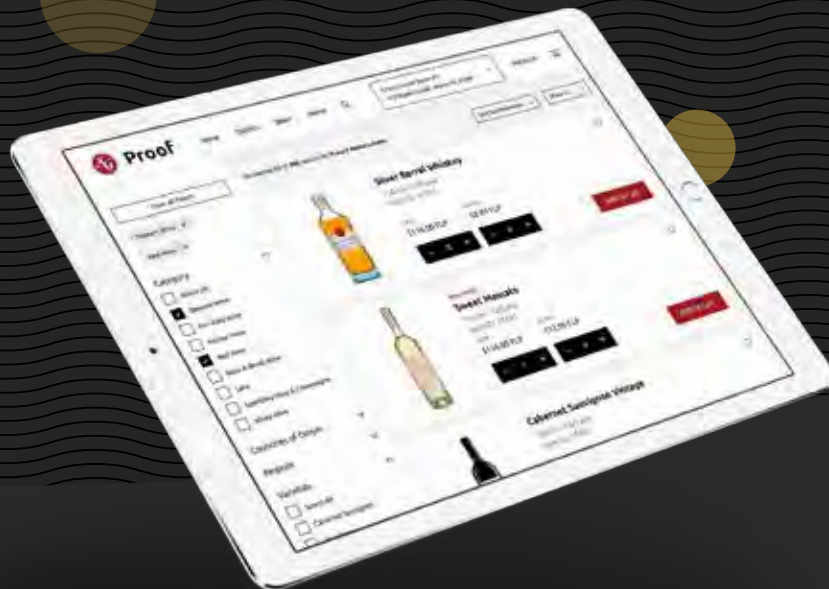
### 12. ASTRAEA SPIRITS

The gins from master distiller Danielle Leavell, the founder of Seattle-based Astraea Spirits, conjure the disparate landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. Consider the single malt Desert. It's the final installment in Leavell's terroir-driven collection comprising Meadow, Mist, Ocean, and Forest varieties that illuminate the region's wild botanicals.

**\$** SRP: \$99.95 per 700-ml bottle  
**🌐** [astraeaspirits.com](http://astraeaspirits.com)

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# THOMAS 'GOOSE' KAISER

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

**W**ords. At the end of life, at our funerals, words are all there is left. Kind words. Loving words. Words of fond remembrance. And when a beverage industry legend such as Tom "Goose" Kaiser dies and the assignment is given to write his tribute article, a word limit comes with it. So, rather than wow you with my usual compelling prose, I'll let the words of those who knew this extraordinary man best speak for his life.

People like Jane Springer, Executive Director of the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA). She noted that Goose "often presented a tough exterior, but those who didn't know him would probably be surprised to know what a compassionate and loyal friend he was. Goose took the time to be there for me at a very sad time and also to celebrate a very happy time. I was very grateful for his company."

Lobbyist Bruce Bereano added, "During all of the years I knew him – not only in Annapolis, but politically around the state – he 100% cared about other people regardless of color, religious, or political affiliation. That was his secret strength."

Jeri Zink, the Baltimore County Licensed Beverage Association's (BCLBA's) Executive Director, shared that Goose was many things to her over the years – advisor; mentor; father figure; but most importantly, a friend. She recalled, "He was genuinely interested in knowing about my life and of those important to me. He asked about my children, wanted to know where they were going to school, what career path they chose. Never a holiday went by that I didn't receive a text from him – 'Happy Mother's Day, Dear!' – with an emoji heart and flowers. Goose understood the value of relationships, both in business and personal."

Kaiser, who died of cancer on August 12 at age 87, knew the busi-



ness and the personal. In business, he opened the Wishing Well in 1969 in Baltimore County. In 1989, he opened the Bay Café on the Canton waterfront in Tindecó Wharf. He was a past President of the BCLBA and served as MSLBA's Legislative Co-Chair for more than 30 years.

MSLBA lobbyist and Legal Counsel Steve Wise, remarked, "Goose knew what he was doing in the bar and restaurant business, and everyone knew that. What they may not know is that he was very savvy at politics, too. Goose was streetwise and he knew how to get things done in Annapolis like few others."

Kevin Dunn, retired Regional President, East for Breakthru Beverage, marveled, "His commitment to our industry was incredible. Goose was at every association meeting, every legislative hearing, and at every vote concerning the beverage alcohol business."

Nick Manis, Executive Director of the Maryland Beer Wholesalers Association (MBWA), issued the following statement for the

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## IN MEMORIUM

Beverage Journal to run: “Goose was a mainstay in the legislative hallways with Jack Milani and was instrumental in forging the MBWA’s relationship with MSLBA when times weren’t as cordial. He taught and educated me on the industry and assisted MBWA with their legislative agenda throughout the years.”

Milani, MSLBA’s other long-time Legislative co-Chair, stated, “I knew who he was, but I really got to know him when we started doing legislative work together in the early ‘90s. His relationships in Annapolis were just phenomenal. He had a lot of respect among the legislators because he always told them the truth even if they didn’t want to hear it. He felt we were truly the last small, independent businesses, and he was going to make sure we were treated fairly.”

Past BCLBA President Marty Kutlik, owner of Ridgely Wines & Spirits, recalls having served two years as the association’s Vice President when Kaiser stepped down as President. It was my job to thank him for his service and present him with a parting gift. He recalled, “Jeri Zink and I came up with a new gift idea – a gold President’s ring. As he accepted, you could tell it had touched his heart, and a tear came to his eye. He stated, ‘I will wear it until I am six feet under.’”

Attorney Susan Green (pictured below) has long chaired the Baltimore County Liquor Board. “Mr. Kaiser served alongside me for the last five and a half years,” she said. “No one knew the food and



beverage industry better than Goose. He spent many years lobbying on behalf of the industry, which provided the Board with the legislative history behind many of the rules in existence today.”

Green and Chaunte Thomas, Administrator on the Board of Liquor License Commissioners for Baltimore County, both fondly remember the so-called “Old Goose Tales” he would tell about days gone by once meetings were concluded. But one particular day stood out for Thomas during COVID when Green was unavailable and Kaiser had to rely on technology: “I downloaded the Webex app on his smartphone and did a trial run, only for him to end up in the office and using my desktop computer to conduct the hearing. Though it seemed to have been a waste of time doing ‘Cellphone 101,’ it was never a waste of time being in his presence!”

As for the personal, Goose is survived by his daughter, Judy Ruth of Towson; his son, Andy Kaiser of Delaware; two grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. A daughter, Tracey Kaiser, died in 2002; and another son, Tommy Kaiser, passed away in 2004. In terms of his interests, he was a fervent supporter of Baltimore’s professional sports teams. Kaiser would charter buses to take fans to Orioles’ Opening Day, and he organized trips to Cooperstown, N.Y., for Baseball Hall of Fame inductions.

On that note, Matt Cairns, District Manager at Republic National Distributing Company, summed Goose Kaiser up best: “He loved all of the Baltimore sports teams, but his passion was offshore fishing. I picture him riding into Heaven in his Eldorado with the top down, Hawaiian shirt, Crown and water in his hand, looking for all his friends that have passed before him. ■

# FROM FRANCE WITH





# MELANIE'S AT GRIFFITH'S TAVERN

TWO WORKING GIRLS MAKE A GO OF IT

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

**D**uring this ongoing series of articles on bars, restaurants, and taverns in and around Maryland named after a person, we have chronicled establishments named after the current owner, after the current owner's grandfather, and one restaurant bearing the family name.

And then we have Melanie's at Griffith's Tavern in Baltimore's Hampden community. Yeah, you're reading that right. It's named after the Oscar-nominated actress of "Working Girl" and "Something Wild" fame.

**Allison Crowley  
and Hannah Spangler  
owners & operators of  
Melanie's at Griffith's Tavern**

---

Oh, it didn't always used to be that. This fiercely proud neighborhood bar was previously just Griffith's Tavern. Hannah Spangler and Allison Crowley bought that business in March 2022 from its previous owner, Rick Koehler, who had run it for 45 years. Spangler co-owned the Cans Filling Station beer bar at Cross Street Market where Crowley also worked. But that place closed at the end of January 2022. The opportunity soon arose for the two business partners to purchase the tavern and its adjoining house.

They wanted to keep Griffith's name and the history that comes with it, but add their own personal touch. Thus, Melanie's at



Griffith's Tavern was born, with the name being a nod to actress Melanie Griffith who starred in Baltimore filmmaker John Waters' movie "Cecil B. Demented" and who's father hails from Charm City.

"We definitely didn't want to eliminate

Griffith's from the name. It goes back so many years. Melanie Griffith's made sense. But then Allison said, 'Uh, how about Melanie's at Griffith's so she doesn't sue us!' And that's where we landed. As it turns out, when she found out about us, she was real-



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ly excited. She's very sweet. She follows us on social media."

And as it turns out, the new co-owners and Griffith had a mutual friend . . . John Waters himself. "I've known John Waters for a long time," Spangler said. "My dad knew him. He finally came in after we had been open for a little while and was very apologetic.

'I'm so sorry it took me this long to get here!' And I said, 'Don't worry about it. You're here now.' And he said, 'I was just in L.A. and I ran into Melanie, and we were talking about your bar! Hey, do you want to FaceTime her?'" And that was, of course, mind-blowing. I was like, 'No, I don't want to FaceTime Melanie Griffith! [laughing] I've just been sweating for four hours, but, uh, thank you very much!"

Beyond the Hollywood angle, Melanie's at Griffith's Tavern appeals to customers from both a historical and social perspective. The location dates back to the Prohibition era and was originally a men's-only stag bar. Meanwhile, Spangler and Crowley are members of the LGBTQ community and have reached out accordingly.

Says Spangler, "It's just a great gathering place. All bars are, I guess. But I think the neighborhood is what makes it particularly special. We have some old-timey folks . . . people who came regularly before we bought it. We also have an undercurrent, a reputation, for being a gay bar. But we welcome everybody. If anything, we're a dive bar!"

As for beverages, Melanie's at Griffith Tavern does a reasonably good job of rotating in local beers, wines, and spirits with the usual national brands. On one night, Trailblazer bourbon whiskey from Lost Ark Distilling in Columbia, Md., was pouring aplenty. Spangler remarked, "We all come from a service industry background. So, our whole beverage philosophy – if we have one – is try and give the customers what they want. We don't really have a menu. Our drinks are all written on mirrors."

Still, Spangler acknowledged the job's ups and downs, highs and lows, positives and negatives. "The favorite part of my job is the stories," she said, "the stories that I hear from our customers. I'm sure every bartender says that. But the stories are why I am not an accountant. On the other hand, the most challenging part of what I do are new employees who have never worked in our industry and come into a bar like mine not knowing how to 'do it,' how to treat people."

For those reading this and dreaming of one day opening their



own establishment – whether it be a neighborhood dive bar or part of a national chain – Spangler was quick to advise: "Set up a plan. Have a closing check-list. Have all of your ducks in a row. Even if you keep such things on a legal pad, just keep everything orderly. Most importantly, do every single job in a restaurant or a bar before you

open one! I have been really fortunate to have had good leaders, and all of them have said, 'If you want to be the manager, if you want to be the boss, you gotta bus, you gotta wait, you gotta bartend, you gotta do it all . . . and then you'll be ready.' ■



# HOW TO TOUCH A MAN'S HEART





## FALL COCKTAILS



### DELEÓN BATANGA COCKTAIL

1 ½ oz. DeLeón Reposado  
½ oz. fresh lime juice  
4 oz. cola

1 pinch fleur de sel  
¼ teaspoon vanilla extract

**Method:** Half fill a wine glass with crushed ice. Add all ingredients and gently stir to mix the ingredients together. Add more crushed ice to reach the top of the wine glass and garnish with skewered salted caramel popcorn or rock candy sugar.



### PAPER PLANE

¾ oz. Sagamore 93 Small Batch Rye  
¾ oz. Aperol  
¾ oz. lemon juice  
¾ oz. amaro

**Method:** Combine Sagamore 93 Small Batch Rye, Aperol, lemon juice, and amaro into a mixing jar. Add ice and stir. Strain into a coupe glass and garnish with a lemon twist.



### BLADE AND BOW NEW FASHIONED

1 oz. Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey  
½ oz. elderflower liqueur  
Splash soda  
2 orange slices

**Method:** Add Blade and Bow bourbon and elderflower liqueur to a rocks glass. Muddle one of the orange slices. Add ice, stir, and top with a splash of soda. Garnish with an orange slice and brandied cherry.



### MORNING SLOPES

1 ½ oz. Fox and Oden Straight Bourbon Whiskey  
½ oz. coffee liqueur  
½ oz. Braulio  
½ oz. dry curaçao

**Method:** Add all the ingredients into a stir tin. Stir for 20 seconds. Strain into a chilled glass over ice and garnish.



### DRAMBUIE COFFEE PALOMA

*Created by Drambuie ambassador Freddy May.*

1 oz. Drambuie  
1 oz. tequila  
1 oz. coffee  
1 oz. grapefruit juice

**Method:** Pour all the ingredients over ice in a rocks glass or slim highball and stir. Garnish with a grapefruit twist.



# THE FUTURE OF JAPANESE WHISKY

NEW, STRICTER STANDARDS AROUND THE ORIGIN OF JAPANESE WHISKY WENT INTO EFFECT IN APRIL. HOW WILL THEY IMPACT THE EVOLUTION OF THE CATEGORY?

BY BETSY ANDREWS

**K**anosuke Distillery was suffused with the scent of Scottish malt when a group of U.S. whiskey experts visited earlier this year. At this coastal facility on the Japanese island of Kyushu, fourth-generation master blender Yoshitsugu Komasa was brewing the wort for his single malt.

One of three of his whiskies to launch in the U.S. this past July, the single malt is also a component in Kanosuke Double Distillery Whisky, which includes peated malt and a grain whisky vacuum distilled at nearby Hioki Distillery, where his family has made shōchū for 140 years. Its separate parts are aged in an array of barrels—new American oak, ex-bourbon and

sherry barrels, and re-charred ex-shōchū casks. But for all the innovation behind the Double Distillery Whisky, under new guidelines implemented in April 2024, it can still be labeled Japanese whisky, while many other whiskies from Japan cannot.

“Komasa-san decided to make products that we think would not violate the guidelines,” says Roland Ng, Kanosuke’s general manager for the Americas. The distiller had been approached by would-be partners to bottle his whisky outside of Japan or age it at sea in international waters, but Komasa

---

ABOVE: While exports have declined, U.S. demand for Japanese whisky remains high; LEFT: Roland Ng, Kanosuke Distillery’s general manager for the Americas.



had declined. “He is on the committee that wrote the guidelines. If we want to lead by example, we can’t do those things.”

The guidelines were set by the Japan Spirits & Liqueurs Makers Association (JSLMA). In 2021, its members unanimously adopted voluntary standards: To be labeled Japanese whisky, a spirit must contain malted grain; be made with only grain and Japanese water; and be saccharified, fermented, distilled (to less than 95% ABV), and bottled (to more than 40% ABV) in Japan.

The standards represent the next stage in the evolution of a young yet volatile category. In 2016, there were 10 active whisky distilleries in Japan. This year, the Japanese Whisky Research Centre counted 127, as producers jumped on the soaring export market. For the 54 whisky distilleries in the JSLMA—some of whom, like those owned by Suntory and Nikka, have been making the spirit for decades—the standards help control what had become a chaotic category. The JSLMA seems to be onto something; from a high in 2022, Japanese whisky saw exports decline nine percent in volume and nearly 11 percent in value, with some believing consumer confusion was contributing to the downturn. “When



CENTER: Yamazaki 12 is Suntory’s flagship Japanese single malt. BELOW: Tommy Tardie, the owner of New York’s Flatiron Room.



ABOVE: The Suntory Yamazaki Distillery near Kyoto opened in 1923.

it’s less Wild West and consumers are more confident it’s a real product, that helps with mainstreaming Japanese whisky,” says James Bowker, the global advocacy manager for House of Suntory.

These are only agreed-upon rules not legal mandates, and many distilleries are not JSLMA members. Nonetheless, the standards provide essential clarification about what Japanese whisky should be, and several observers see them as a step toward a legal definition, such as that of Scotch or bourbon. But while they might be a boon to established producers, who can use them to market both their Japanese and world whiskies more effectively, for newer, craft distillers, the standards are more complicated. Some will be able to capitalize on the elevated status of the category—and there is already an influx of new Japanese whiskies—but others will fail to meet the expectations of the premium market and fall by the wayside.

*SevenFifty Daily* spoke to producers and Japanese whisky experts to dive into what these changes mean for the category.

### CONTROLLING THE EXPORT MARKET

For much of its first century, Japanese whisky was a sleeper. That is, until 2015,

when Jim Murray’s *Whisky Bible* named Suntory’s Yamazaki Sherry Cask 2013 the world’s best whisky. “All of a sudden, the category was moving,” says Tommy Tardie, the owner of New York’s Flatiron Room. “People wanted to try the Sherry Cask, but it was never released in the U.S. So they would say, ‘Let me try something else.’ Big, bold, or heavily peated whiskies were not approachable to everyone. Japanese whisky was light, elegant, and accessible. It was empowering for people.”

“Aficionados started buying up Japanese whisky,” recalls Jonathan Adler, the beverage director of the Manhattan-based Japanese whisky specialist Shinji’s Bar. “In a few years, the price skyrocketed.”

This boom and the opportunity it represented had consequences for the category, however. “Companies started importing Scotch or bourbon, aging it a little, and selling it as Japanese whisky,” explains Liam McNulty, aka Whiskey Richard, the editor of the Japanese whisky site *Nomunication*. “They relied on customers outside of Japan being unaware of what is legitimately Japanese whisky.” Cheaper, more plentiful, and sometimes suspiciously similar in look to prominent brands, these spirits threatened to

RIGHT: Kanosuke Distillery launched its core three whiskies in the U.S. this summer.

undercut the market for whisky actually distilled in Japan. “It ruins your first experience if you buy cheap Scotch and pay extra because you think it’s Japanese whisky,” says McNulty.

Repackaged whisky isn’t the only product worrying the JSLMA. “Distillers tell us their main issue is the sale of unlicensed products, mainly shōchū, as whisky in other countries,” says K&L Wine Merchants spirits buyer David Othenin-Girard. “In Japan, these can’t be called whisky.” Since the TTB doesn’t have the same rules, producers can legally pass off shōchū as Japanese whisky in the U.S.

Hence, the new labeling requirements. “The standards will help buyers make sure that, when they are creating their stock lists, they are selecting brands that are really Japanese whisky,” says Bowker.

Why did the JSLMA make the move now? “Part of it was the big guys were waiting for their inventories to mature so they could meet the moment,” says Eric Swanson, the founder and partner at Tokiwa Imports. But he also credits American buyers. “Great shops and wholesalers were inquisitive enough to ask the right questions and push for it.”

## ELEVATING BOTH JAPANESE AND WORLD WHISKY

As the head of an association representing all spirit and liqueur makers, Tomo-o Arai, the executive director of the JSLMA, is careful to note the legitimacy of shōchū and world whisky blends. “There is no difference in quality between Japanese whisky that fits the definition and Japanese whisky that doesn’t, for example, those produced by blending whisky produced in Japan and whisky produced outside of Japan; each has its own deliciousness,” he says.



**“It ruins your first experience if you buy cheap Scotch and pay extra because you think it’s Japanese whisky.”**

—Liam McNulty, *Nomunication*

But because a well-regarded blend like Nikka From the Barrel contains some Scotch, Nikka has removed “Japanese whisky” from its label, making sure to note on its website, “This product does not meet all the criteria of ‘Japanese whisky’ defined by the Japan Spirits & Liqueur Makers Association.” The three-year lag time in the full enactment of the JSLMA standards allowed producers time to change labels of whiskies like this that were already on the market.

“Suntory, Nikka, Kirin, Mars, and Chichibu—why would the big boys want to regulate themselves, if they’re already controlling most of the market?” asks Pedro Shanahan, the spirit guide at Pouring With Heart, a hospitality company headquartered in Los Angeles. One reason, he says, is “to protect the sanctity of their high-end single malts.” But they’re also using differentiation to strengthen the

world whisky market. “You can still blend Japanese and other whiskies. From a historic point of view, they always did.” After all, he says, Masataka Taketsuru, Japan’s first master distiller, learned to make whisky in Scotland, where trading spirits for blending is common.

“Japan’s flexibility in product development is unique. The currently established category of world whisky is a progressive product that is unparalleled abroad,” says Chichibu global ambassador Yumi Yoshikawa. “We believe that what matters is not whether it is Japanese or not. The important thing is transparency. Consumers may mistakenly believe

BELOW: Liam McNulty, the editor of Japanese whisky site *Nomunication*.





TOP LEFT: Yumi Yoshikawa, the global ambassador for Chichibu; TOP RIGHT: Chichibu Distillery in Saitama, Japan.



that Japanese whisky is higher in the hierarchy, but the standards only provide a clear indication of where the whisky originates. We are conscious of communicating clearly what kind of whisky each product is made from and the concept of the product itself.”

In this way, distillers like Chichibu can capitalize on their history of global blending with clearly labeled products like their Ichiro’s Malt & Grain World Blended Whisky, at the same time that they’re promoting other bottles that fit the new definition of Japanese whisky.

### STANDARDS AS A MARKETING TOOL

The JSLMA standards, says Othenin-Girard, are “really are about marketing. You need an identity, a way to tell people what Japanese whisky is. It gives people a framework to make the best purchase.”

Given a history of limited supplies, Japanese whisky has been expensive. “When you’re competing with Wild Turkey 101, which is excellent at \$20, how can you break in when your base price is \$90? Transparency is going to give the

**“We believe that what matters is not whether it is Japanese or not. The important thing is transparency.”**

—Yumi Yoshikawa, Chichibu

consumer confidence in their willingness to pay higher prices. It will allow smaller distilleries that are really able to say they are creating Japanese whisky to get shelf space,” says Shanahan.

“Any Japanese craft whisky distillery will potentially benefit from a standard,” McNulty agrees. “It enables them to give more of a luxury, hand-crafted image. Whisky fans appreciate that.” He cites Toyama prefecture’s Saburamaru Distillery, which he says has been “quite vocal about the need for a standard since several years ago,” as well as Hokkaido’s Akkeshi Distillery, which has “been pretty specific about recreating Islay malts using Japanese ingredients, wood, and peat.”

Adler sees precedence in other geographically designated brands with a reputation for luxury. “It helps Japan in the same way Champagne is a designation. There might be Crémant just as high quality, but they are saying this is Champagne and it is only Champagne.”

### THE CASE FOR FURTHER MEASURES

For some observers, voluntary standards are not enough. Shanahan and Othenin-Girard argue for a holographic tax stamp indicating authenticity. That would require government action. Whisky critic Mamoru Tsuchiya of the Japanese Whisky Research Centre has launched a nonprofit, the Japanese Whisky Culture Promotion Committee (JWCPA), to lobby the National Tax Agency to issue a decree that would make the JSLMA standards law.

“They went to the JSLMA, but the JSLMA said they are not going to help,” says McNulty. He complains that the JSLMA has done no global marketing or English-language press release for the new standards beyond a PDF on its website. “A lot of people are still not aware that the standards exist.” He suspects bigger producers have a vested interest in keeping compliance voluntary. “If you look at Suntory sales, 98 percent of whiskey they sell here doesn’t qualify as Japanese whisky.”

Yet, Bowker, Suntory’s global ambassador, asserts, “Suntory would be supportive of legal regulations to protect these guidelines. We’ve been pushing for good regulation for some time, now in negotiation with government agencies and the JSMLA. This is the first step.” Chichibu, says Yoshikawa, supports a law, too.

If producers are in favor of legalizing the definition, why hasn’t more been done? “One thing you find that’s different about how Asians perceive things com-

pared to Westerners, we don't expect a hard law to change our behavior," Ng says. Bowker agrees: "The soft power of these trade associations is not to be overlooked."

Arai is taking a wait-and-see approach. "First, after establishing the standards, the situation of products being sold as Japanese whisky in both domestic and international markets will be investigated to decide whether legalization or regulation by the National Tax Agency is necessary."

In the meantime, Tardie has faith in the ability of trade pros and serious whiskey consumers to discern authenticity now that they have guidelines to point to. "We saw that with transparency in the American whiskey market, when people were held accountable for these romantic stories that were fictional, like they found the recipe in the attic, but really it was produced at MGP. The information is out there, and people are vocal about it," he says.

#### WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Experts say there will be attrition, as the market corrects itself, calming its earlier fervor. "There are small craft distilleries that will follow the standards, but they're built on this ideal of an insatiable market, and I don't know that it's insatiable. I think we have to earn it," says Swanson. With labeling requirements in place, "now you have to win by quality. How many will survive? Maybe they're so small-scale that they can't."

Ng points to the competitiveness of the export market. "For someone who doesn't speak English, drop-shipping through an importer and distributor to America and expecting them to explain why your whisky is different—it is going to be tough. Some will succeed through investment or consolidation. Some can't."

But a group of upstarts will succeed. "There's a new wave of Japanese whisky coming, and American buyers should



ABOVE: Jonathan Adler, the beverage director of Japanese whisky specialist Shinji's Bar in New York City.

**"Just as we have different designations of Scotch based on loose styles, it would be interesting for the Japanese to do the same now that they have a standard in place."**

—Jonathan Adler, Shinji's Bar

give it a try," Ng continues. "There are a lot of different choices than just those of the larger houses." Take the distillery he works for, Kanosuke. With a three-year-old minority investment from Diageo, the brand has been able to market itself in an iconoclastic way. "We are positioning as next-gen craft whisky from Kagoshima following whisky-making tradition but also challenging convention. We're not beholden to making whisky like Scotland. That's the difference you'll see."

"Kanosuke is in a prime position to see growth," Shanahan observes. "They

have land, the soil is great, there are hot summers, cold winters, and massive drops in temperature during the year for faster maturation, so Kyushu sounds like Kentucky to me. Kentucky's whiskey trail is a huge economic engine. It could be the same for Kyushu, where you can surf, hike the volcano, eat sashimi on the beach, and taste whisky."

That would take more whisky production on the island. But with multiple shōchū makers there, it's not inconceivable that others join Kanosuke, and regional economies engender regional styles. Adler points to Nikka's smoky Yoi-chi Single Malt. "Masataka Taketsuru went to Hokkaido thinking it was similar terroir to Scotland and he could replicate a peated style. Now there is Akkeshi in Hokkaido. Their goal is Islay-style whisky. So I'm interested to see if heavily peated is going to be a trend in Hokkaido. Just as we have different designations of Scotch based on loose styles, it would be interesting for the Japanese to do the same now that they have a standard in place."

Ng sees another new phenomenon on the horizon. "Largely for the whole history, it was two distilleries that didn't like each other," he says, referring to Suntory and Nikka, the distillery Masataka Taketsuru launched when he left Suntory. Now whisky distillers have unified around the new standards. As they purchase less juice from abroad in the future to meet the criteria for their Japanese whiskies, "we're going to see collaboration. Chichibu and Mars collaborated on a malt exchange. The five blenders from the biggest houses all got casks from each other and made blends in commemoration of 100 years of Japanese whisky. So times are changing."

In the meantime, he has a message for American buyers: "Don't be afraid to ask questions. Producers who are making authentic whisky have nothing to hide." ■

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# WHISKEY: WHAT'S NEW



## FRENCH TOUCH

For the second Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey in **2XO's** Oak Series, founder Dixon Dedman has crafted a 92-proof French oak expression. Embracing his signature double oak technique, he placed chains of the charred wood into casks holding liquid with 18 percent rye in the mash bill. The heightened flavors of baking spice and caramel yielded by this interaction work especially well in cocktails like the Manhattan.

**SRP: \$49.99 per 750-ml bottle**

## GOOD LOOK

The **Busker Irish Whiskey's** Single Collection, comprising a single malt, single grain, and single pot still, is now packaged in thicker glass bottles flaunting embossed details. This elegant revamp, designed to convey the spirits' quality and craftsmanship, also features a refined label.

**SRP: \$29.99 per 700-ml bottle**



## BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

Oregon's **Westward Whiskey** has unveiled a bottled-in-bond offering, its third club release of 2024. The 100-proof floral single malt was aged for seven years—three more than the norm—and showcases layers of subtle ginger, dark fruit, and honeyed pecans.

**SRP: \$99.95 per 750-ml bottle**

## THE COMEBACK

**Baker's** Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey—named for Jim Beam's grandnephew—has relaunched its coveted limited-edition 13-year-old bottling. On the palate, the 107-proof single-barrel spirit expresses oak, vanilla, fruit, and toasted nuts.

**SRP: \$149.99 per 750-ml bottle**



## AFTER DINNER

Melding notes of brazen tobacco and gentle smoke, The QuintEssential: The Untitled Cigar Malt Project is **Cedar Ridge Distillery's** third expression in a limited-edition series of American single malts. The 114.9-proof whiskey evokes the ritual of unwinding with a Havana, and to achieve this distinctive flavor profile, master blender Murphy Quint finished a blend of single malts matured in former Cedar Ridge bourbon barrels in the Iowan distillery's own Madeira-inspired dessert wine casks as well as first-fill amontillado sherry, new French and American oak, and ruby port-finished peated malt varieties.

**SRP: \$99.99 per 750-ml bottle**



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Provi and *SevenFifty Daily* launched Beyond the Glass, a virtual roundtable series, earlier this year, featuring leaders throughout the beverage alcohol and hospitality industry to discuss emerging and topical issues.

Hosted by *SevenFifty Daily* editor-in-chief, Courtney Schiessl Magrini, panelists share their perspectives and ideas to help foster growth and progression of the community.

# UNITING MODERN WINE LOVERS WITH CLASSIC LAMBRUSCO

COMBINING GENERATIONS OF EXPERTISE WITH EYE-CATCHING LABELS AND ITS OWN RIFF ON THE SPRITZ, ITALIAN POWERHOUSE RIUNITE SHOWCASES THE TIMELESS APPEAL THE WORLD'S FAVORITE LAMBRUSCO



**R**iunite has been a global leader in Lambrusco since Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. In the decades since, the brand became—and remains—America's top-selling Italian red wine under \$11, thanks to Riunite's devotion to quality, and extolling the virtues of naturally low-alcohol, frizzante



## RIUNITE LAMBRUSCO SPRITZ

3 oz. Riunite Lambrusco  
3 oz. chilled sparkling wine  
1 oz. lemonade  
Lemon wheel for garnish

**Method:** Fill a wine glass with ice. Add Riunite Lambrusco and chilled sparkling wine. Top with a splash of lemonade and garnish with a lemon wheel.

Riunite®  CAMPAIGN FINANCED ACCORDING TO EU REG. N. 2021/2115

wines. This year, the Italian stalwart introduces chic new labels and its signature Riunite Lambrusco Spritz, revitalizing the classic brand to connect with a new generation of Lambrusco lovers.

Currently, Lambrusco is the third best-selling Italian red wine variety in the United States, and second in volume of cases sold nationally. Though its roots are ancient, Riunite Lambrusco's refreshing fizz, zero added sugars, and 8% ABV make it appealing to modern consumers seeking fresh, easy-to-enjoy, and lower-alcohol wines.

Founded in post-war Italy in 1950, Riunite—which literally translates to 'reunited'—brought together nine local wine cooperatives in Emilia Romagna, giving over 1,400 local farmers the purchasing power and marketing clout to put Lambrusco, long a regional speciality, onto the world stage. Today, Riunite remains the global leader in Lambrusco and continues to build on its collaborative foundation: The brand still relies on hundreds of small farmers to source their grapes, which are processed across eight local, cooperative wineries.

This year, Riunite unveiled eye-catching new labels featuring bold colors

and sketches of the Emilia Romagna landscape, highlighting the wines' connection to their agrarian origins. Each label utilizes a unique color and includes the grape variety, making it simple for consumers to choose their preferred wine. With sleek, premium design elements, including an "R" embossed into the glass, Riunite's refreshed look pays homage to the brand's history while appealing to modern wine drinkers.

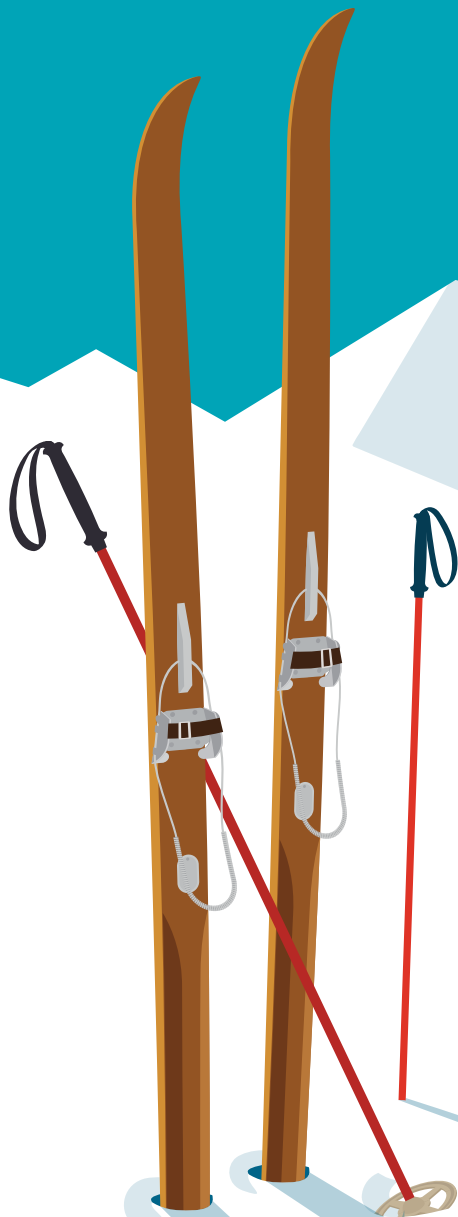
Similarly, the introduction of the Riunite Lambrusco Spritz confirms Riunite's connection to current drinking trends and the inherent versatility of lightly sparkling Lambrusco. Made with Riunite Lambrusco, sparkling wine, and lemonade or a squeeze of lemon, the drink offers a vibrant twist on the current spritz craze. Simple and visually appealing, it resonates with contemporary consumers seeking a delicious cocktail that's photo-ready yet easy to make. The drink likewise embodies how lower-alcohol, wine-based cocktails are ideal for myriad occasions and settings.

Grounded in ancient traditions yet looking forward, Riunite is poised to continue leading the way for the Lambrusco category and for the next generation of drinkers. ■

This content was produced in collaboration with our partner, Riunite Wines.

# Riunite

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# HOW SAGAMORE SPIRIT PUT MARYLAND RYE BACK ON THE GLOBAL MAP

A DISTILLERY COMMITTED TO RESPONSIBLE FARMING AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY USHERS A LOST RYE WHISKEY STYLE ONTO THE WORLD'S STAGE

It can seem like bourbon gets all the glory. That corn-based whiskey may lay claim to the title of official American spirit, as declared by Congress in the Bourbon Act of 1964, but American rye whiskey commands heritage and prestige of its own. It was, after all, the first whiskey produced and sold commercially on American soil when the U.S. was still a nascent nation.

And Maryland is part of that story; rye production boomed in the Free State in the 19th century, and then vanished over time—but not before a distinct regional style emerged. Today, one distillery is committed to not only reviving it, but making sure the signature old-world style is recognized on the world's stage.

Baltimore-based Sagamore Spirit released the Sagamore Small Batch Rye Whiskey in May; its first core range release since Illva Saronno Holding S.p.A group, the family-owned Italian

company known for Disaronno, purchased a majority stake in the company, and its first 100 percent Maryland rye whiskey to be available worldwide. This release is representative of a milestone for the brand, expanding its reach globally—and in doing so amplifying not just the brand, but the whole Maryland rye story.

## A HEYDAY, A FALL, A REVIVAL

Sagamore Spirit's award-winning distillery sits across five acres on the Baltimore Peninsula, overlooking the Middle Branch Patapsco River. It could be called hallowed grounds for founders and Baltimore natives Kevin Plank, best known for creating sportswear brand Under Armour, and Bill McDermond, a tech entrepreneur and previous director of the sportswear brand. That's because Maryland played a key role in the American whiskey industry's evolution.

The first whiskey commercially made and sold in Ameri-

ca—albeit a much smaller nation than it is today—was distilled by George Washington (yes, that George Washington). His Scots-Irish farm manager taught him how to make whiskey at a distillery the first president built at his Mount Vernon estate. Rye-making was a keystone of Colonial commerce well before settlers even reached Kentucky, where abundant corn was available to ferment and distill. Rye whiskey production spread so vastly that different regions developed their own signature style. Arguably the best known were Monongahela rye from Pennsylvania and Maryland's sweeter variety.

Distilleries proliferated in Maryland in the late 1800s. By the early 20th century, there were 44 distilleries in Maryland, 21 of which were in Baltimore. While many didn't survive Prohibition, a significant number did. Chalk that up to the fact that when the 18th Amendment enacting Prohibition went into effect, Annapolis legislators declined to pass legislation enforcing the federal law. World War II, however, marked the demise of Maryland



rye, as distilleries were tapped to distill fuel ethanol. Moreover, subsidies for corn came into play, giving farmers financial incentive to grow it.

Only one distillery, Pikesville, made rye in the state that had turned out a third of the country's supply before the war. But in 1972, Pikesville shuttered, too. Production moved to Kentucky when Heaven Hill bought the brand in 1982.

Plank and McDermond recognized that a large part of America's whiskey heritage would be lost if Maryland rye continued to be forgotten. In 2012, Sagamore Spirit unveiled its new facility, marking the return of whiskey-making to Maryland after a 40-year drought.

"Kevin and Bill believe strongly in Maryland and Baltimore specifically and want to put Maryland back on the map for making rye," says Ryan Norwood, Sagamore Spirit's vice president of operations. "They've done a lot to change the narrative around the city. Under Armour has long been based here. It creates jobs and lifts the city up. Their investment in building a distillery is no different."

## EXCAVATING AND RECREATING A LOST STANDARD-BEARER

It takes some detective work to resuscitate a virtually extinct whiskey style. "When we started the process, we approached it historically and talked to families whose grandparents distilled in Maryland," says Norwood. "We tasted through some of

Sagamore Spirit partners with Maryland farmers to grow and develop rye for its whiskey.



Sagamore Spirit's rye whiskeys are triple distilled and aged separately prior to blending.

what was found in attics. We talked to historical societies and dug up old articles, but we knew there was no set recipe. Our whiskey recipes are what we interpreted from recipes we were able to see."

One fact they knew for sure is that Maryland rye was traditionally less spice-forward than Monongahela rye. It was sweeter, more balanced, and all-around more approachable, too, which they figured out was due in part to the slight corn content, explains Norwood. That signature profile is honored in each Sagamore expression thanks in part to careful attention to sourcing ingredients and thoughtful distillation and aging methods.

In 2012, as the brand got started, they contract-distilled at MGP in Indiana. The distillery wouldn't be ready until 2017, and they were open about distilling outside of Maryland. The whiskey was of such high quality, says Norwood, that they used the same grain brokers when the distillery opened. Then things changed. The development of Sagamore's grain-to-glass process started in 2018 when they partnered with the University of Maryland Agricultural Extension to plant several rye varieties and determined which varieties were best suited for distillation.

As the project developed, so did relationships with area farmers. Growing rye is a mutually beneficial proposition, explains Norwood. It's a superior cover crop that traps nitrogen in the soil and protects against erosion. Farmers receive subsidies when it's used that way, but once it's harvested, they're stuck with it. This agricultural excess is a

whisky-maker's jackpot—and a farmer's unexpected revenue stream. Moreover, the distillery's promise to buy the harvest reduces the farmers' financial risks, which allows them to experiment with new rye hybrids. Over 1.6 million pounds of rye was harvested in Maryland last year for use in Sagamore whiskey.

The newest release, Sagamore Small Batch Rye Whiskey (SRP \$39.99), is the culmination of years of research on Maryland rye's flavor profile. The exclusively non-GMO grains are used in two separate mash bill recipes: high-rye (95 percent rye, five percent malted barley) and low-rye (52 percent rye, 43 percent corn, five percent malted barley). They're individually triple distilled, matured separately for four to six years, then blended, when ready, 20 barrels at a time. Sagamore Small Batch Rye Whiskey clocks in at a muscular 93-proof, but the strength doesn't overwhelm the characteristic easy sweetness.

A versatile spirit that stands up on the rocks, it's also an ideal whiskey to use in cocktails, especially those classic whiskey drink recipes that were first made with rye. The historically accurate sweetness manifests with a nose of clove, nutmeg, allspice, and cinnamon stick woven through with golden apples, honey, and light oak. Rye spice makes a bold entrance on the palate and leaves a finish of robust graininess, white pepper spice, and vanilla in its wake. Sagamore Small Batch stands as a tribute and a living paradigm of Maryland's heritage. ■

This content was produced in collaboration with our partner, Sagamore Spirit.



# HOW BARREL ENTRY PROOF IMPACTS WHISKEY CHARACTER

THE FILLING STRENGTH OF WHISKEY WHEN IT ENTERS A CASK IS A CRUCIAL YET UNDEREXPLORED FACTOR IN ITS MATURATION PROCESS

BY JACOPO MAZZEO

Whiskey professionals tend to agree that the primary factor influencing a whiskey's character is the time it spends in wooden barrels. Throughout maturation, the whisky engages with the wood, absorbing various compounds and undergoing complex chemical reactions, all interactions that gradually shape and refine its flavor, aroma, texture, and appearance.

Among all factors that influence this process, however, the effect of cask filling strength is one of the least understood. Most distilleries base their processes on conventions that owe their current state to economic and historical factors. For example, in Scotland, new make spirit destined to become single malt is typically barreled at 127 proof. In other whiskey-making regions, conventions are often

dictated by law, such as in the U.S., where the maximum strength for freshly distilled spirits entering barrels is 125 proof.

Lower entry proof thresholds are based on the minimum strength required for a spirit to be legally called whiskey. For example, in Scotland, a bottle of single malt Scotch must have a minimum strength of 80 proof. To meet this requirement, producers barrel their new make spirit at a proof somewhat above this threshold, ensuring that, even with alcohol evaporation during maturation, the whiskey does not fall below the legal minimum before bottling.

Yet, the global whiskey industry is undergoing transformative changes. In traditional whiskey-making regions, craft distillers are challenging established conventions, while new producers in emerging markets are developing their

TOP LEFT: Grasmere Brewing Distillery barrels.  
TOP RIGHT: Brent Elliott, Four Roses master distiller.

processes from the ground up, free from the constraints of tradition. Among these evolving practices, established approaches to barrel entry proof are being questioned, debated, and reimagined. Here *SevenFifty Daily* explores the science behind this crucial step in the whiskey-making process and looks at how distillers—seasoned and novel—navigate the complex decisions involved in choosing their approach.

## THE ACADEMIC CONSENSUS ON BARREL ENTRY PROOF

Distillers deciding on their approach to barrel entry proof often draw on decades-old—albeit still relevant—literature. A seminal study, published in the *Journal of the Association of Official Analytical Chemists*, reports on trials conducted between the 1960s and 1970s that examined congener development—essentially, the amount of flavor compounds—in bourbon matured at various proofs in new American oak barrels. The study found that as



**“Industry consensus generally suggests that lower proof yields softer, more rounded flavors, while higher proof may result in brighter, more robust, and woody characteristics.”**

—Brent Elliott, Four Roses

the entry proof increases (from 109 to 155 proof), both color intensity and overall concentration of congeners in the whiskeys decreases. This occurs because the compounds released from the barrel are more soluble in water.

While no subsequent research has matched the scope of that multi-decade study, several have touched on the is-



sue of cask filling strength, often corroborating—and occasionally shedding further light on—its findings. Some, for example, emphasize the impact that distillate strength has on maturation speed, highlighting that while reactions such as the breakdown of polymeric materials require water, the solubility of the resulting compounds increases with higher alcohol concentrations. This suggests that the optimal rate of extraction occurs at the point where the water-to-ethanol ratio is most effectively balanced.

Further studies stress that different cask filling strengths significantly affect the color intensity of whiskey, showing that higher ABVs tend to reduce the level of color developed during maturation. Meanwhile, a recent doctoral thesis examined cask filling strength in relation to different types of casks. The research indicates that casks filled at 125 proof have the highest levels of wood-derived congeners, with French oak casks reaching levels similar to those of American oak casks. It also reveals that a lower entry proof may reduce the risk of developing off-flavors when using ex-wine casks.

#### **DISCOVERING THE NUANCE BETWEEN FILLING STRENGTHS**

To refine their processes and adapt insights to their specific conditions, distilleries often complement academic research with their own trials. Four Roses Bourbon,

LEFT: Grasmere Distillery tends towards a lower barrel entry proof, but founder Paul Abbott is still assessing the impact of different strengths.

TOP LEFT: Cascade Hollow Distillery Co., where George Dickel Tennessee Whisky is made.  
TOP RIGHT: Nicole Austin, George Dickel Tennessee Whisky distiller.

for instance, has long been filling casks at 120, which is below the maximum allowed in the U.S. for bourbon production. In the early 2000s, the distillery conducted a six-year experiment to test different entry proofs, aiming to determine if its long-standing approach was truly optimal to achieve the desired flavor profile.

“Industry consensus generally suggests that lower proof yields softer, more rounded flavors, while higher proof may result in brighter, more robust, and woody characteristics,” says Brent Elliott, Four Roses’ master distiller. “Our experiment largely confirmed this theory, finding that a medium-high entry proof of 120 produced the distinctive Four Roses character we seek.”

As part of his ongoing research at Independent Stave Company, the director of spirits research and innovation Andrew Wiehebrink recently conducted a similar, six-year-long experiment to evaluate the development of whiskey at 100, 110, and 125 entry proof. It involved investigating approximately 45 compounds through gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), a technique that allows the analysis of small, volatile molecules in complex chemical mixtures. The experiment revealed that components like vanillin, trans isoeugenol, phenol, and cis isoeugenol, which are associated with vanilla



and spicy aromas, tended to favor higher entry proofs. Conversely, elements such as guaiacol, furfural, 5-HMF, and 5-methyl furfural, which are associated with nutty, caramelly, and smoky flavors, were more pronounced in the lower ABV samples.

“Our expectations based on previous studies were largely confirmed,” says Wiehebrink. “But, when we then tasted the samples, we noticed significant differences in the whiskeys’ structure, fattiness, and sweetness. This suggests that barrel components are not the sole factors influenced by entry proof during maturation. Elements like acids, esters, and aldehydes [in the new make] also play a role.”

### THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF A LOW ENTRY PROOF

Ari Sussman, the whiskey maker at Outsider Spirits and Three Chord Bourbon, fills his casks with liquid at varying alcoholic strengths and evaluates their progress quarterly. He confirms that a lower entry proof makes whiskeys more palatable at a younger age, arguing that this approach is especially suited for distillers targeting a so-called more “modern” whiskey drinker, keen on spirits that focus on the raw ingredient, rather than wood character and length of aging.

“When working with single grains, it’s crucial to use a [low] entry proof between 105 and 110,” he explains. “It helps

**“When working with single grains, it’s crucial to use a [low] entry proof ... It helps control the wood’s potentially aggressive influence early on while preserving the character of the new make spirit.”**

— Ari Sussman, Outsider Spirits and Three Chord Bourbon

control the wood’s potentially aggressive influence early on while preserving the character of the new make spirit. Plus, the proofing water is also aged in the barrel, which imparts much more character to the entire whiskey.”

Nicole Austin, the distiller at George Dickel Tennessee Whisky, notes that the distillery’s historical practice of using a lower 115 entry proof has proven beneficial. “Our whiskeys can age for 15 to 18 years and still remain vibrant and lively.” There are, however, significant downsides

TOP RIGHT: A George Dickel whisky pour.  
BELOW: Ari Sussman, the whiskey maker at Outsider Spirits and Three Chord Bourbon.



to this approach. The longer maturation time and the need of more wooden casks to mature lower ABV liquid result in both a higher carbon footprint and increased costs for the distillery. This led Austin to start filling some casks at the maximum allowed proof of 125, too.

Meanwhile, Paul Abbott, the founder of England’s Grasmere Distillery, argues that lower entry proofs present an additional, more practical challenge. “Our cask entry ranges from 94 up to 140 proof. At 94 proof, the liquid is extracting color and tannin much faster,” he says. “But because the ABV is low, it does not have a long aging potential due to ethanol evaporation. Once the liquid falls below 80 proof it is no longer legally whiskey so if you start at 94, you don’t have many years before it has to be bottled.”

Despite the downsides, Abbot remains committed to using lower entry proofs. “We will likely settle in the low 100s to allow more margin for error,” he says. “[But] I need a few summers before I can make a full assessment.”

Indeed, when it comes to entry proof, available data must be backed by empirical testing that takes into account specific factors from warehouse conditions to the new make’s character, alongside market and financial considerations. As Elliott puts it: “You can’t simply take an experiment and apply it globally. You should adapt it to different conditions. There’s a lot of complexity involved, but it’s precisely that complexity that makes this work so fascinating.” ■

