

BEST SPIRITS

of 2006

What with being a spirits editor and all, I taste a lot of distillates every year. Then there are the ones I don't taste—if it's aimed primarily at the 22-year-old nightclubber with a sweet tooth the size of Alaska and a taste for pretty colors, I figure I can give it a pass. Likewise with products whose only viability is as knockoffs (there's a good deal of overlap between these two categories). But that still leaves an awful lot of new vodkas, gins, whiskeys (American and Irish), whiskies (Scotch and Canadian), rums, brandies, tequilas and...and I know I'm forgetting something, but you get the idea.

Very few of these are truly bad (at least once you get beyond the well brands). Modern distilleries are clean and efficient, and the distiller's art holds few mysteries. As a result, quite a few of them are actually very good indeed. Every year, though, there are a few spirits that jump out of the pack. I'm hesitant to say that they're simply better than all the others, because at this level, things get pretty subjective. So let's just say here are five that I reach for first, even when I'm not working.



by David Wondrich

Ragnaud-Sabourin Domaine LaVoûte 35-Year-Old Unblended Cognac

If there's one thing from 2006 for which my palate will thank me in perpetuity, it's this. The vast majority of Cognacs at every rung on the price ladder are blended; indeed, Cognac-making is a blender's art, and many of the most respected houses have neither vineyards nor distilleries. There's sound logic and centuries of skill behind this, but every once in a while you get your hands on something that makes you daydream about what would happen if they ran the business more like the single-malt Scotch trade, where things get put in barrels and left there until they're bottled, without blending. The Ragnaud-Sabourin, sweet and darkly musky, yet still springtime-fresh and perfumed with honeysuckle, is perhaps too rich for its own good. But a little nip of it every once in a while sure does have a way of improving one's general outlook on life. \$110; *Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines, New York, NY*

Highland Park 15-Year-Old Scotch Whisky

In 1934 the great Scottish whisky writer Aeneas MacDonald wrote that "the best opinion holds that a whisky which has been more than fifteen years in the cask tends to deteriorate." I used to shake my head at this and smile about how little they knew then and how much we know now. Yet I'm starting to falter a little in my faith in progress. Perhaps I've had one too many ancient Scotches nip my tongue with the bite of excess tannins, but I'm beginning to think Mr. MacDonald may have had a point. The Highland Park 18 has been universally acclaimed as one of the world's best tipples, and you'll get no argument from me. But the 15, lighter, livelier and without a hint of fire or heat, presents a powerful argument that less is more. \$60; *Rémy Cointreau USA, New York, NY*

Pisco Montesierpe

Pisco is an often-misunderstood spirit with a long and noble tradition. When poorly made, which it often is, this clear South American grape brandy can be fiery and unpleasantly industrial or, conversely, oddly sweet and floral in an overripe sort of way. When made well, as it is by Montesierpe, it's a spirit of impressive complexity, with notes of carob and cinnamon and earth to offset the sweetness of the grapes. Nice. \$19; *Pecos Trading Co., Miami Lakes, FL*

4 Copas Reposado Tequila

In the flood of new tequilas, it's easy for one to get lost. I sincerely hope that this doesn't happen to 4 Copas, an earthy and meticulously-crafted lowlands-style tequila that is a master class on just how elegant—and yet firm and forthright—the spirit can be. There are other new tequilas as good (the Partida Reposado comes to mind), but it would be hard to make one better. \$90; *4 Copas USA, Newport Beach, CA*

Agua Luca Cachaça

Our offices have been awash in sugarcane-based spirits lately, with a particular profusion of those distilled from fresh-fermented sugarcane juice, rather than the more common molasses—chiefly rum agricoles from Martinique and cachaças from Brazil. You would think that fresher is better, but it's not that simple: Cane juice does offer more flavor, but that cuts both ways. If not properly handled, it can be harsh and even rather stinky. Treated with respect and finesse, though, as it was in Agua Luca, it can make for a wonderfully rich and thick spirit that hits flavor receptors you didn't even know you had. \$25; *Excelsior Imports, Atlanta, GA*