This year's Top 50 Spirits showcases the depth of the spirits category.

BY F. PAUL PACULT | PHOTO JON VAN GORDER

Each year, I arrive at this point trying to whittle down the year's finest 50 spirits from among all those that received high ratings reviewed in the Spirits Buying Guides. It's not an easy task, especially when a growing number of fine spirits is receiving glowing reviews in the Superb and Classic ranges. The increase in higher ratings is not, I assure you, due to me becoming more lenient or indulgent with age. Just the opposite is true, my peers tell me. If anything, I've grown even more demanding after 20 years as a spirits evaluator and as the art of distillation has advanced and the skill level of distillers has pressed forward in tune with the technology.

If anything, I feel more compelled than ever to ferret out and report on the genuinely good from the horde of mediocre spirits as prices have risen (sometimes unjustifiably, even laughingly so) and categories have ballooned due to more line extensions taking advantage of the marketability of established brands. What I have witnessed firsthand over the last half-decade is the overall quality of spirits improving and that truth alone is responsible for the slight up-tick in better scores.

In difficult economic times, in particular, the role of the critic in any discipline, be it movies, cars, books, clothes, etc., is to guide consumers to true value and authentic brilliance, all in the name of saving the two most important commodities of the day, money and time. To that end, please allow me to introduce you to the 50 most brilliant spirits that I've reviewed for *Wine Enthusiast* in 2009, both in the magazine and on the web site.

GIN

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Old Raj Gin (United Kingdom; Preiss Imports, Ramona, CA); 46% abv, $50. This is the lower-proof version of the classic Old Raj. Lovely, complex gin bouquet offers aromas of coriander, juniper, anise, orris root, ground pepper, lemon peel, lead pencil, earth and tree bark. Palate entry is creamy, fruity, spicy and minty; midpalate offers layers of botanical complexity over the core juniper taste. Finishes with a wonderful rush of mint and baking spice. Fabulous.

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Citadelle Gin Reserve (France; WJ Deutsch, White Plains, NY); 44% abv, $35. An oak-matured gin aged in Cognac barrels for six months. The nosing passes find intensely herbal and cedar needle notes with more subtle aromas of citrus, orange peel and stone arriving after aeration time. Palate entry is the first time the oak influence appears as sweet tastes of vanilla and butter dominate; midpalate similarly features more of the wood than the botanicals. Finishes as much a brandy as a gin.

Whitley Neill London Dry Gin (England; Velocity International, LLC, Houston, TX); 42% abv, $29. Opening smell reminds me of new leather luggage and toasted bread; aeration brings about more fruit and spice and juniper. Palate entry is medium-bodied, silky and buttery, but clearly junipery, citrusy and fresh; midpalate is more juniper-driven than the entry yet displays other botanicals, including orris and angelica. ***Best Buy.***

VODKA

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Cape North Vodka (France; MHW Ltd., Manhasset, NY); 40% abv, $39. First whiffs detect warm, toasty notes of baked bread and even a dash of spice; later sniffs find aromatic traces of nutmeat, kernels and charcoal. Remarkably smooth and seamless at palate entry; midpalate is creamy, beany dry, bread-like and extended. Finishes with a dose of bittersweet graininess. Stylish, world-class.



Crop Organic Cucumber Flavored Vodka (USA; Chatham Imports, Inc. New York, NY); 35% abv, $30. The bouquet offers delightful lush, gently vegetal and garden-fresh scents of cucumber with subtle hints of spices. Palate entry is balanced, elegant, fresh and off-dry; midpalate features just-sliced tastes of cucumber and a tangy pepperiness that nicely complements the vegetable element. Finishes clean, veggie-like, off-dry and savory.

Double Cross Luxury Vodka (Slovak Republic; Old Nassau Imports, LLC, Princeton, NJ); 40% abv, $50. Upfront, the nose is grainy, dry and delicate. Palate entry is peppery and sweeter than I thought it would be, but not cloying; midpalate displays vibrant, spicy fragrances of snack crackers laced with pepper, black peppercorn, lemon zest and mustard seed; the texture is creamy and full. Concludes on a silky, citrusy note. Substantial and well-made.

Grand Traverse True North Vodka (USA Grand Traverse Distillery, Traverse City, MI); 40% abv, $30. Very nice bouquet consisting of pleasant aromas of bread dough, black pepper, new leather and toasted grain. The grainy toastiness and spiciness continue at palate entry; midpalate shows a touch of spirity heat in line with the inherent peppery quality. Finishes with tastes of fudge, egg cream, toasted wheat and toasted rye bread.

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Purus 100% Organic Wheat Vodka (Italy; Purus, St. Louis, MO); 40% abv, $36. No aromas other than traces of wet stone. Palate entry is surprisingly (after the undemonstrative bouquet) sweet, mellow and buttery in texture; midpalate continues the mild breakfast cereal sweetness in style and elegance; firm, oily texture is a real bonus on my scoring chart. Concludes delicately sweet, buttery and with loads of layered character.

Zubrowka Bison Grass Vodka (Poland; Adamba Imports International, Brooklyn, NY); 41% abv, $25. Smells nicely of sweet grass, paraffin, acetate and wheat crackers; aeration bolsters the aromatic impressions of the first round and adds a subtle spiciness (nutmeg?) that complements the grassy quality. Palate entry teems with zesty, spicy, medicinal and grassy flavors; midpalate flavors come off chocolaty and milky, with disparate background tastes of egg cream and green pepper.

RUM

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

English Harbour 25 Year Old Reserve Rum 1981 Vintage (Antigua; Preiss Imports, Ramona, CA); 40% abv, $395. This gorgeous, classical rum aroma offers vivid scents of vanilla cake frosting, brown sugar, honey and fresh orange blossom. Palate entry is fruity sweet and ripe as much as it is confectionery-like; midpalate features harmonious and multilayered tastes of candied plums, Raisinettes, candied yellow fruit, ripe peach, honey and gentle sweetness. Fabulous.

Renegade Rum Company Panama Rum 1997 (Panama; Renegade Rum Company, Bedford, NH); 46% abv, $68. A beguiling rum bouquet offering pleasing biscuity smells and a natural juiciness. Palate entry finds succulent flavors of marshmallow, cotton candy and light caramel; midpalate is alive with chocolate-covered raisins, treacle, marzipan and candied almonds. Concludes smooth, rich, integrated and more bittersweet than all-out sweet. Luscious, world-class.

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Brugal Ron Extra Viejo Gran Reserva Familiar Dominican Rum (Dominican Republic; Shaw-Ross International Importers, Miami, FL); 40% abv, $25. The bouquet features aromas of oak barrel, toasted cereal, dried fruit and toasted nuts. Entry is spicy and buttered-toasty; midpalate turns more honeyed with background tastes of egg yolk. Ends caramel sweet and toasted marshmallow-like.

Mount Gay Rum Eclipse Silver (Barbados; Remy Cointreau USA, New York, NY); 40% abv, $16. Initial aroma is caney, grassy and fruity. Palate entry is crisp, moderately sweet and properly bittersweet in bearing; midpalate displays excellent balance, sweetness level, medium-bodied texture, and even some background cinnamon spiciness. Finishes long, crisp, nicely sweet and caney, and delicious. ***Best Buy.***

CACHAÇA

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

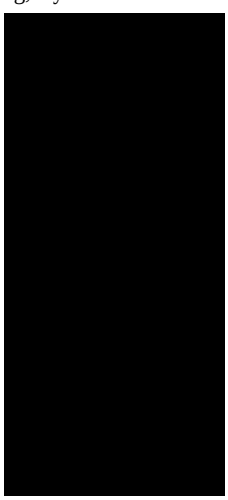
Sagatiba Cachaça Brazilian Rum (Brazil; Sagabita USA, Manhasset, NY); 40% abv, $28. Aromas of grass, sugarcane, moss and earth initially; aeration introduces a nice mineral scent as well as a fruit component. Palate entry continues with the ripe fruit element, but adds a spicy, jalapeño pepper quality; midpalate is spicy, appropriately grassy and slightly sweet. Finishes prickly, spirity and warm. ***Best Buy.***

Weber Haus Brazilian Cachaça (Brazil; JPVCo, Petaluma, CA); 40% abv, $40. The nosing passes find nicely assertive aromas of green vegetables and an acute spiciness and herbaceousness that's one-part white pepper and one-part dill. Palate entry is mildly sweet, herbal (dill, sage) and pleasingly warm; midpalate is substantial, nicely textured, almost oily and intensely grassy. Concludes moderately sweet and mineral-like.

TEQUILA

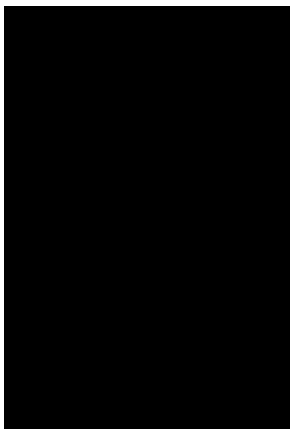
CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Gran Patron Burdeos Añejo 100% de Agave Tequila (Mexico; The Patron Spirits Co., Las Vegas, NV); 40% abv, $500. Delightful aromas of dill, asparagus, baked bread and black peppercorn; following aeration subtle notes of vanilla, just-sawn oak, loose leaf tobacco and fennel are added. Entry is poised, sap-like and delicately honeyed; midpalate is regal, satiny textured, rich in grapy yet vegetal and spicy flavor. Concludes long, layered and succulent.



Herradura Añejo 100% de Agave Tequila Natural (Mexico; Brown-Forman Beverage International, Louisville, KY); 40% abv, $65. The bouquet features wonderful aromas of caramel, cream, pastry dough and nutmeg with a background hint of honeyed peanuts. Entry is spicy and full-bodied; the midpalate displays a trace of vanillin that supports the more vibrant flavors of brine, salt, green vegetable and green pepper. Finishes clean, a touch smoky and delicately spiced. A classic añejo Tequila. Delicious.

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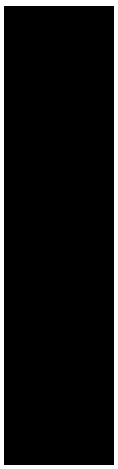


Los Arango Reposado 100% Agave Tequila (Mexico; Royal Wine Corp., Bayonne, NJ); 40% abv, $60. Displays pleasant green vegetable (asparagus, kale) aromas right upfront along with a background agave brininess; further air contact stimulates a creaminess that's oily and sinewy. Palate entry is long, satiny, with vibrant tastes of chili pepper, salt and steamed asparagus; midpalate is full-weighted, juicy, sweet, toffee-like and oily.

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Jose Cuervo Tradicional Reposado 100% Agave Tequila (Mexico; Heublein, Norwalk, CT); 40% abv, $30. Opening inhalations encounter notes of green olive, brine and sea salt; following another seven minutes of air contact, a distinct spiciness emerges, mostly black peppercorn, as well as a none-too-subtle thrust of dill pickle. Palate entry offers low-grade agave juice sweetness and pepperiness; midpalate features jalapeño pepper, green pepper, dill, and a touch of vanilla. ***Best Buy.***

Leguas 7 Reposado 100% Agave Tequila (Mexico; Gemini Wine & Spirits, New Orleans, LA); 40% abv, $46. First nosings find soft, elegant aromas of gentle cinnamon and vanilla, agave juice, green vegetable, and black peppercorn; these are replaced following aeration by delicate traces of spice and oak. Entry is buttery, almost light toffee sweet, yet correctly acidic; midpalate is lightly peppery, with hints of vanilla and nutmeg. Finish is wonderfully restrained and elegant. ***Best Buy.***



Reserva del Maestro Dobel Diamond Reposado 100% Puro de Agave Tequila (Mexico; Proximo Spirits, New York, NY); 40% abv, $80. A blend of reposado, añejo and extra añejo Tequilas. Opening aroma is very ripe, oily and peppery; further aeration stimulates keenly acidic agave notes which allow an inherent saltiness to come through. Entry is off-dry and minerally (lead, slate); midpalate goes sweeter, more biscuity and vanilla-like than the drier entry. Finishes clean, smooth, creamy and savory.

COGNAC

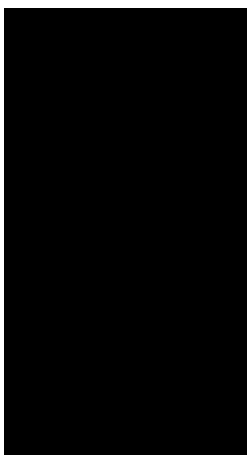
CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Delamain Le Voyage Grande Champagne Cognac (France; Kobrand Corporation, Purchase, NY); 42% abv, $7,000. The fabulous bouquet features wonderful scents of white chocolate, marshmallow, dried apricot, tropical fruit, English toffee, buttercream, chocolate covered orange rind, marmalade, and the beginnings of rancio. Palate entry is resiny, beany, and moderately oily; midpalate includes tastes of caramel, treacle, prunes and very old Sherry. Ends elegantly yet forcefully. A gem.

Martell Creation Grand Extra Cognac (France; Pernod Ricard USA, Purchase, NY); 40% abv, $299. The nosing passes find aromas of cherries, strawberries, blueberries, white chocolate, prunes and black raisins with subtle hints of oak. Palate entry is full-weighted, long and nougat-sweet; midpalate is multilayered with aspects of dried fruits, pastry fillings, brown butter and dryness. Concludes extended, but dry and cocoa bean-like. Supremely satisfying.

Pierre Ferrand Vintage 1972 Grande Champagne Cognac (France; WJ Deutsch, White Plains, NY); 45% abv, $450. The bouquet offers an intensely leathery/tanning note and a multilayered aroma of buttered toast. Palate entry is chockfull of bittersweet dried fruit and pastry tastes; midpalate features vigorous flavors of oak resin, hard cheese (rancio evidence?), light caramel, light fudge, loose leaf tobacco, and white raisins. Finish is stately, seamless, and world-class. Fabulous.

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED



Bache-Gabrielsen Natur & Eleganse XO Cognac (France; J&M Heritage Imports, LLC, Glenwood, IA); 40% abv, $100. Nice nutty aromas countered with subtle notes of tropical fruit. Palate entry features roasted tastes of toasted wheat bread, buttered almonds, nougat and sweet oak. Concludes with a bit of tobacco leaf, prune, fig and honey. Lithe, nutty and delicious.

Leopold Gourmel L'Age de Epices Fins Bois Cognac (France; Preiss Imports, Ramona, CA); 43% abv, $180. The bouquet is MIA except for meager aromas of spice and fruit. Palate entry is succulent and dried fruit-like and seductively honey-like; midpalate shows a touch of rancio flavor as well as lots of black raisin, prune Danish and baked pear tastes. Concludes pruny, sap-like, maple-like and intensely honeyed.

Rémy Martin 1989 Grape Harvest Grande Champagne Cognac (France; Rémy Cointreau USA, New York, NY); 45% abv, $300. Aromas of mature, ripe tropical fruit with a vibrant spirit "thread" running through. Palate entry is intensely fruity, baked, and resiny; midpalate is oily with medium-sweet flavors of baked fruits, old oak, dark toffee, dark chocolate, and nougat. Finishes solid, nicely structured, pleasantly oaky.

ARMAGNAC

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Laubade Extra Bas Armagnac (France; Baron Francois Ltd., New York, NY); 40% abv, $300. The nosing passes find luxuriously mature aromas of old library leather, dried yellow fruit, nougat, cocoa paste, oak, honey, candied orange, and even some black pepper. Palate entry is full-weighted, sweet, concentrated, nutty, and buttery; midpalate highlights all of the entry tastes and adds rancio, honey, earth, and apricot nectar. Concludes sweet, tobacco-like, mildly smoky, and marshmallow-like. Flat-out delicious.

IRISH WHISKEY

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Bushmills 1608 Blended Irish Whiskey (Northern Ireland; Diageo North America, Inc., Norwalk, CT); 46% abv, $75. The nosing passes find notes of almond paste, straw, brown butter, nougat, dark toffee, worn saddle leather and canola oil. Rich flavors of caramel, cocoa, and malted barley at entry; midpalate adds flavors of tapioca, old honey and butter cream on top of the intense graininess. Finishes malty sweet, buttery, oily and multilayered. Very nice.

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James MacArthur's Old Masters 14 Year Old Peated Single Malt Irish Whiskey Cask Strength/Cask #3676 (Ireland; CVI Brands, San Carlos, CA); 56.8% abv, $150. The bouquet features smells of rubber tire, rubber band, glue, yeast, celery, brown rice, soy, burning sage, and peat. Palate entry features sweet, malty and caramel-like tastes; midpalate becomes very smoky with a sweet, grainy leaning. Concludes delightfully sweet, malty, smoky and piquant. Great job here.

Jameson Gold Reserve Irish Whiskey (Ireland; Pernod Ricard USA, Purchase, NY); 40% abv, $60. Not much aroma initially; following aeration time succulent notes of sweet grain, sweet oak, marzipan and nuts appear. Entry is firm, focused and moderately sweet and grainy; midpalate is intensely honeyed, featuring plump tastes of marshmallow, dark caramel, fudge, cake frosting and wood. Finishes sweet and full-bodied. Very good and straightforward.

Tullamore Dew Reserve 10 Year Old Blended Irish Whiskey (Ireland; Skyy Spirits, San Francisco, CA); 40% abv, $35. Lovely smells of butterscotch, maple and baked pineapple first off; aeration and swirling stimulate fruity scents, in particular, banana, applesauce and baked pear. Entry offers delicately sweet tastes of ripe yellow fruit, oaky vanilla, cinnamon and nutmeg; at midpalate the fruit elements go into overdrive. Finish is long and biscuity. Sweet, uncomplicated taste enjoyment.

I think somebody should come up with way to breed a very large shrimp. That way, you could ride him, then, after you camped at night, you could eat him. How about it, science?

—Jack Handey

AMERICAN WHISKEY

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Russell's Reserve 6-Year-Old Straight Rye Whiskey (USA; Austin Nichols Distilling Co., Lawrenceburg, KY); 45% abv, $25. Initial sniffs find fruit, lanolin and vanilla bean aromas; later sniffs encounter dry grain, breakfast cereal, trail mix and dried yellow fruit. Palate entry is wonderfully oily, concentrated, off-dry and grainy; midpalate is focused on delicious tastes of rye bread, sesame seed, sesame oil, peanut oil and unsalted butter. Ends creamy, robust and elegant. ***Best Buy.***

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Evan Williams Vintage 1998 Single Barrel Kentucky Straight Bourbon Barrel #1 (USA; Heaven Hill Distilleries, Bardstown, KY); 43.3% abv, $25. The bouquet offers aromas of peanuts, flowers, vinyl, flowers, light toffee, lead pencil and margarine. Palate entry is biscuity, popcorn-like and minerally; midpalate features intriguing flavors that include coins, oak resin, unsalted butter and that ever-present taste of popcorn. Finishes with a dash of soothing warmth. Elegant and austere. ***Best Buy.***

Old Forester Repeal Bourbon Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey (USA; Brown-Forman Distillers Co., Louisville, KY); 50% abv, $25. The opening sniffs find focused, lean woody/oaky/resiny notes; aeration rounds out the bouquet making it nicely corny sweet and peppery. Entry explodes with vivid tastes of oak, vanilla, brown sugar, and light toffee; midpalate features semi-rich flavors of dried fruits, pastry shop almond paste, and oak-influenced vanilla. Ends up sweet, woody, and a touch yeasty. ***Best Buy.***

Parker's Heritage Collection 2nd Edition 27 Year Old Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey (USA; Heaven Hill Distilleries, Bardstown, KY); 48% abv, $200. Smells of yellow fruit, wax paper, paraffin, and resin but, no graininess. The grain deficiency is corrected at entry as tastes of sweet corn, buttered popcorn, and corn syrup flavors come on strong; midpalate brings the oak factor and acidity into play and perfectly balances the corny sweetness. Finishes with tastes of loose leaf tobacco and honey.

Rittenhouse 23 Year Old Single Barrel Straight Rye Whiskey Barrel #8, Bottle #95 (USA; Heaven Hill Distilleries, Bardstown, KY); 50% abv, $169. Delightful aromas of old leather, library books, pipe tobacco, pineapple, oak resin and trail mix. Palate entry features deep flavors of brown butter, walnut butter and palm oil; midpalate is luscious and resiny with integrated flavors of black pepper, oak and dried fruits. Finish is long, honeyed and treacle-like. Not for the faint of heart.

SCOTCH WHISKY

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Aberlour a'bunadh Speyside Single Malt Whisky Batch No. 21 (Scotland; Pernod Ricard USA, Purchase, NY); 59.5% abv, $65. Intriguing and challenging bouquet of aromas of roasted nuts, old leather, black pepper, old oak and dried fruit. Palate entry is aggressive in spirit, but sweet and pruny; midpalate is drier and features tastes of leather and grain. Aftertaste teems with oak resin, hard cheese (meaning, rancio), candied nuts, candied fruit and dark honey. Add mineral water. ***Best Buy.***

Balvenie Sherry Oak 17 Year Old Speyside Single Malt Whisky (Scotland; William Grant & Sons, New York, NY); 43% abv, $120. Deep scents of charred oak, caramelized onion, bacon fat, dark honey, oloroso Sherry, dates, prunes and dark caramel. Palate entry is intensely sweet and honey-like; midpalate features toasted tastes of chocolate covered- walnuts, coffee beans and chocolate fudge. Concludes fat, chewy, and buttery. Terrific as a digestif.

Longrow 7 Year Old Gaja Barolo Campbeltown Single Malt Whisky (Scotland; Preiss Imports, Ramona, CA); 55.8% abv, $124. Vibrant, wine-like and punchy aromas settle down following aeration and mesmerizing aromas of new spirit, rose petals, biscuit batter and margarine appear. Palate entry is wonderfully assertive with flavors of peach, red grapes and slightly over-ripe red plums; midpalate is succu-

lent, fruity and honey-sweet. Concludes ripe and sweet with a dash of oak and vigorous alcohol. Unbelievably delicious.

The Glenlivet Archive 21 Year Old Speyside Single Malt Whisky (Scotland; Pernod Ricard USA, Purchase, NY); 43% abv, $120. Opening bouquet offers sedate fragrances of dried flowers and malted barley; aeration stimulates marginally bigger aromas of dried yellow fruit (baked banana), toasty oak barrel and still-vigorous spirit. Palate entry is succulent, honeyed and luscious; midpalate tastes of dates, figs, S'mores, cocoa butter, nougat and dark fudge. Finishes oily, buttery, honey-sweet and focused.

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Bruichladdich Links "Torrey Pines USA" 15 Year Old Islay Single Malt Whisky (Scotland; Winebow, New York, NY); 46% abv, $80. First whiffs pick up garden fresh aromas of rose petals, jasmine and grain; further aeration stimulates elements of spice, newly tanned leather, citrus and grapes. Palate entry is wonderfully floral, fruity and winey; midpalate features spicy notes that complement the assertive grainy alcohol. Finishes medium-long, astringent, crisp, winey and satisfying.

Johnnie Walker Swing Blended Whisky (Scotland; Diageo, N.A., Norwalk, CT); 40% abv, $65. Biscuity, caramel and floral opening aroma; further air contact stimulates scents of baked bread, toasted bread, buttered popcorn and light smoke. Flavor is dominated by sweet toffee and fudge notes. Sweetest and most buttery of all Johnnie Walker expressions.

Mitchell's Glengyle Blended Whisky (Scotland; Preiss Imports, Ramona, CA); 40% abv, $49. Lightly peated and briny initially; aeration stimulates deeper, fruitier fragrances to salted pretzel, kiwi, kumquat and smoldering embers. Palate entry is salty and seaweed-like, with hints of cigarette ash and loose-leaf tobacco; midpalate highlights the briny sea air and powdered cocoa. Finishes zesty, delicately peaty and clean. Delightfully agile and lean.

Wemyss Vintage Malts The Smooth Gentleman 8 Year Old Blended Malt Whisky (Scotland; American Wine Distributors, San Francisco, CA); 40% abv, $37. The first inhalations find toasty scents of roasted cereal and oak-char; after aeration a pleasant dried fruit aspect emerges. Palate entry shows a surprising smokiness/sootiness which I love; midpalate is chewy, intensely grainy, stone dry, breakfast cereal-like, and without an ounce of fat or oiliness. Ends up clean, crisp, dry and totally integrated. ***Best Buy.***

LIQUEURS

CLASSIC (96–100)/ HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION

Aqua Perfecta Kirsch Eau-de-Vie Cherry Brandy (USA; St. George Spirits, Oakland, CA); 40% abv, $40/375 ml. The sublime bouquet offers authentic, ripe scents of red cherry; aeration stimulates deeper red cherry fruit and juice smells. Palate entry is delicate, elegant, intensely fruit stone-like and astringent; midpalate features the flowery taste of unaged distillate that complements the cherry fruit tastes. Finishes grandly and firmly, with a welcome touch of oiliness. Wow.

Coole Swan Superior Dairy Cream Liqueur (Ireland; Coole Quay Liqueur Co., Manhasset, NY); 16% abv, $25. Delightful aromas of vanilla, double cream, egg cream, nutmeg, plus some beeswax and cocoa. Palate entry features succulent tastes of cocoa, white chocolate and Irish double cream; midpalate is thick, rich, gently sweet, ideally spicy (mostly cinnamon) and a touch grainy. Concludes luxuriously textured and dashed with holiday spices. Delicious. ***Best Buy.***

Crispin's Rose Liqueur (USA; Craft Distillers, Ukiah, CA); 25.4% abv, $85/375 ml. The remarkable, fabulous bouquet smells of a room filled with (genuine) roses at their peak bloom; aeration allows a beguiling sap-like, pollen-like sweetness to emerge. Palate entry is delicate, concentrated, flowery and sweetly rosy; midpalate offers layer after layer of gentle, stately rose tastes. Ends moderately sweet, with a slight metal-like edge. Spectacular.

Joseph Cartron Pomegranate Grenade Liqueur (France; A. Hardy USA, Rosemont, IL); 18% abv, $26. Piquant aromas of black pepper, marmalade and crushed pomegranate buds greet the olfactory sense. Palate entry is juicy, tart, yet lusciously ripe and berry sweet; the fruit, texture, sweetness and crisp acidity are perfectly balanced at midpalate. Finish is concentrated and scrumptious. ***Best Buy.***

SUPERB (90–95)/ HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Mata Hari Absinthe (Austria; Beacon Beverage Imports, Manhasset, NY); 60% abv, $50. The nosing passes find prickly but pleasant highly spirited buttery/oily, grassy/vegetal aromas. Palate entry is sweet, fruity, and herbal; anise enters at midpalate and blends well with the fruitiness. Concludes sweeter than most absinthes, nicely herbal and a touch honeyed.

Here's to 2010 and to healthy and responsible consumption.

I have often noticed that when chickens quit quarreling over their food they often find that there is enough for all of them. I wonder if it might not be the same with the human race.
—Don Marquis

That Tuscan cooking has remained so simple is a long tribute to the abilities of peasant women who cooked so well, that no one, even now, wants to veer into new directions.
—Frances Mayes

The only stumbling block is the fear of failure. In cooking, you've got to have a what-the-hell attitude.
—Julia Child

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