

SIPPING 101

Hone Your Tasting Skills with These Tips

There's a certain satisfaction to enjoying spirits with a purpose. There are subtleties and nuances that can only be discerned if you're paying attention — experiences that are going to fly right past the neophyte with a lemon wedge between his fingers and salt on the back of his hand.

Tasting slowly and with intention, paying attention to elements such as aromas, flavors, mouthfeel and finish, can open up a world of flavorful and aromatic sensations unique to finely crafted spirits. So slow down, simplify, wash the salt off your hand and leave the sugary juices and sodas in the fridge.

By Bill Burke

A few tips from the pros:

- Different parts of the tongue respond to flavors differently. Pass the spirit over your entire tongue to experience the full range of flavors.
- The more air there is, the easier it is to detect different flavors — which is why wine experts sometimes slurp wine.
- It can help to sniff coffee beans between sips to cleanse the palate.
- Don't be discouraged if you can't detect certain aromas or flavors at first. These skills get stronger with practice.

Here's your syllabus for sampling spirits with purpose:

Whiskey

Whether it's bourbon, Scotch, rye or a blend, there's one thing every whiskey has in common — it's a spirit full of dramatic aromas and flavors. In the world of whiskey, there are some close cousins with a few very distinct differences:

Irish whiskey

To be called Irish whiskey, the spirit must be distilled in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland and it's commonly triple-distilled, which gives it a lighter, less smoky flavor and smoother finish. Whiskey itself is an Anglicized version of the Irish, "uisce beatha," which means "water of life."

Scotch whisky

There are several styles of Scotch whisky (hold the 'e,' please,) which can range from light and floral to rich and rounded to full bodied and smoky. Scotch must be produced at a distillery in Scotland from water and malted barley, it must be a minimum of 80 proof, and must be matured in oak casks of no more than 700 liters for at least three years.

Bourbon

Known as "America's Native Spirit," bourbon is a distinctly American take on this popular category. Bourbon must contain at least 51 percent corn, it must be aged in new, charred oak barrels, it must be bottled at 80 proof or more and it must be produced in the U.S.

Rye whiskey

Notable by its big, spicier taste, American Rye whiskey is similar in many ways to bourbon, however, it must be distilled from at least 51 percent rye, and like bourbon, must be aged in charred, new oak barrels.

Canadian whisky

Typically a blend of spirits, Canadian whisky (again, hold the 'e,') is usually lighter and smoother than other styles, and its quality often relies on the expertise and skills of the master blenders. Each grain is fermented, distilled and then aged separately and blended at the end of the process. Canadian whisky must be mashed, distilled and aged at least three years in Canada.

IF POSSIBLE, TRY YOUR WHISKEY NEAT in a small tulip-shaped glass (this concentrates the aromas) and serve it at room temperature.

LOOK: Notice the color. Typically, the longer a whiskey is aged in the barrel, the darker the color — provided no coloring agent has been used. A lighter color may mean a lighter, sweeter whiskey, while a darker color is likely an older whiskey. Swirl the liquid and notice the 'legs' — columns of liquid that run down the inside of the glass. Slow, thick legs can indicate a whiskey that has been aged longer.

NOSE: Aromas play a major role in taste, so get right in the glass and breathe in gently. A vast array of notes can be sensed, depending on the aging process, ingredients, fermentation and distillation processes. Whiskey can produce aromas ranging from smoky, spicy and woody to vanilla, orange and chocolate.

TASTE: Sip the whiskey and hold it on the tongue momentarily, which will provide an opportunity to taste the broader flavors mid-palate. Typically, you'll taste sweeter

notes on the tip of your tongue, and look for the finish on the back of the tongue. Whiskey can be rich or it can have a thinner mouthfeel, like wine. Flavors can range dramatically from caramel and orange to toffee, marzipan, leather and peat. Bourbon is normally sweeter with a smoky finish due to the charred oak aging, and rye tends to have a spiciness.

ADDING A FEW DROPS OF WATER can open up even more aromas and flavors, and ice will continually melt, adding more water and changing the experience even further throughout.

In his book, *Bourbon in Kentucky: A History of Distilleries in Kentucky*, whiskey expert Chet Zoeller offers this set of instructions:



- **Notice the color** — the "soul of the whiskey." It should have a rich and brilliant amber color.
- **Hold the glass in your hands** to warm the spirit, and notice the bouquet. Open your mouth slightly and breathe gently through your mouth and nose at the same time.
- **Sip just enough of the whiskey** to cover your tongue. It should be full-bodied, but soft and well-rounded with no bite or burn.

MIX IT UP / ON THE COVER

Hot Toddy

courtesy liquor.com

- 2 ounces Maker's Mark Bourbon
- ¼ lemon
- 1 tablespoon honey
- Hot water

Squeeze the lemon wedge into a mug and leave it in the bottom. Add the honey, bourbon and top with hot water. Option: garnish with a lemon wheel and cinnamon stick.

Gin

Gin begins its life as a neutral-based spirit. Flavors are then added through distillation techniques, using botanicals which can result in dramatically different styles and flavors from brand to brand. The most common elements in gin are the presence of juniper, coriander, citrus peels and licorice. From there, distillers can experiment in several styles:

London Dry, the best-known and most popular style, is juniper-forward, dry, cannot contain added color.

Old Tom style provides less juniper, and is slightly sweeter than London Dry and with more malt.

New World, also known as American Style, among other titles, takes advantage of a wider range of botanicals in the distilling process.

Genever, a Dutch and Belgian style, features flavors of malt and more savory botanicals like fennel, which creates similarities to whiskey.

Gin is often mixed with tonic or as part of a cocktail, but sipping it neat can reveal a variety of interesting flavors. (Barr Hill Tom Cat Gin is often sipped neat, according to agency store owners throughout Vermont.) Pour the gin into a rocks glass, which will allow the air to circulate, and serve it at room temperature.

MIX IT UP

Rosemary, Gin, & Grapefruit Cocktail

courtesy cookingbride.com

- 2 ounces Sipsmith London Dry Gin
- 3 ounces ruby red grapefruit juice
- 1 ounce simple syrup
- 1 rosemary sprig crushed
- Rosemary sprig for garnish
- Grapefruit slices for garnish

Combine cocktail ingredients in a shaker filled with ice. Shake vigorously for a few seconds until everything is combined. Strain into ice-filled glasses. Garnish with grapefruit slices and rosemary sprig.

LOOK: Most gins are crystal clear, but again, in the case of the renowned and oft-talked about Barr Hill Tom Cat Gin, which is actually aged in new American Oak barrels, it presents a caramel color.

NOSE: Hold the glass 3-4 inches from your nose and inhale. The most common aromas are piney, juniper notes, along with citrus, floral, spicy, fruit and woods.

TASTE: Let the gin rest on your tongue for a few moments and then swirl it around. Swallow, and then exhale. Your tongue will come alive with all of the complex flavors and character present in most gins. Depending on the style of gin, you're likely to detect flavors of citrus, licorice, cinnamon and herbs.

As with whiskey, adding a few drops of water can release additional smells and flavors. It will dilute it slightly, remove a bit of the stronger alcohol flavor and reveal new botanicals and spices.



Tequila

Like Cognac or Champagne, tequila must be made in a specific region — the state of Jalisco in western Mexico, in many ways the cultural home of the nation. The region's rich, volcanic soil lends itself perfectly to growing blue agave, from which tequila is made. Workers, known as jimadores, use long-handled knives to remove the long, spiky, barbed leaves, exposing the heart of the plant — the pina. The agave pinas are cooked, crushed and ground to release and extract the juice, which is then fermented and distilled. It is then aged to the preferred state and bottled. There are several types of tequila, typically categorized by how long it is aged. Simplified, tequila can be either blanco (unaged), reposado (aged 2-11 months) or anejo (or extra-anejo, aged 1-3 years.) Serve it in a narrow tequila glass to help reveal more complexity.

LOOK: Blanco tequila will be clear, reposado will likely have a tawny, golden color and anejo will be darker, like a brandy, due to being aged longer.

NOSE: According to tequila experts, as much as 60 percent of perception is based on smell, so take your time, turn the glass on its side and get the tequila as close to the rim as possible. Quite often, a variety of aromas can be identified during the nosing, ranging from citrus and fruity, to smoky and floral. Quite often, you'll notice cooked agave, pepper and earthy notes.

TASTE: Those in-the-know will advise: inhale, sip and hold the tequila in your mouth momentarily. Next, inhale through the nose, swallow and then exhale to excite the taste buds. Look for flavors of blue agave, in the case of blanco; honey, caramel and butter-scotch, toffee or spice in reposado; and vanilla, brown sugar, almond, chocolate oak or spice in anejo. The finish can be smooth and mellow, with flavors that linger on the palate.

"If you want to truly appreciate what the spirit is all about, if you want to enjoy what it is and enjoy the quality, then drink it neat," Herradura Brand Ambassador Ruben Aceves says. "It's the best way to enjoy it."



MIX IT UP

Tommy's Margarita

courtesy thrillist.com

- 2 ounces tequila
- 1 ounce fresh-squeezed lime juice
- ½ ounce agave syrup

Combine all ingredients in a shaker half-filled with ice. Shake to chill and strain over fresh shaved ice.

Delivery Service

How you get the liquid to your palate can have an effect on what you taste. The right glass can make a difference. Sipping a fine, aged bourbon from a red Solo cup just isn't going to be the same as it would be sipped from a Glencairn.

And keeping in mind that sensations such as taste can be subjective, we've put together a brief guide to suggested glassware for your tasting experience.

Rocks glass — Like a tumbler, but shorter, straight, and with a wide mouth and base. It works well for any mixed drink that you'll be adding ice to. **Try:** Since it's also known as an Old Fashioned glass, try an Old Fashioned, White Russian, Negroni.

Coupe — A stemmed glass with a wide, flat cup, the coupe is good for strained cocktails with no ice in them. **Try:** Sidecar, Aviation.

Martini glass — This glass has a long stem with an inverted cone on top. Forget about ice. **Try:** Martini, Cosmopolitan.

Highball — A tumbler, taller than a rocks or Old Fashioned glass, with room for ice. **Try:** Bloody Mary, Dark 'n Stormy, gin and tonic.

Glencairn — A smaller glass that's typically tulip-shaped with a narrow opening, it concentrates the aromatics of your spirit. **Try:** Scotch, whiskey.

Shot glass — Short and to the point, holding 1½ to 2 ounces of liquid. **Try:** Whatever you want to drink quickly.

Brandy snifter — These large glasses are wider at the bottom with a narrower opening that concentrates the aromatics. **Try:** Brandy, whiskey.



Vodka

Vodka, typically produced from grains such as corn, rye or wheat, is commonly thought of as a neutral base for a wide variety of mixed drinks.

LOOK: Unflavored vodka typically appears crystal clear — but it can sometimes present a blue or yellow tint.

NOSE: According to Vodkaphiles.com, a good vodka will have a creamy, sweet or grainy odor. Be sure to avoid any vodka that produces an aggressive odor of ethyl spirits.

TASTE: Sip the vodka and let it sit on your palate while exhaling through your nose. Pairing it with foods such as breads, salty dishes or potatoes can reveal additional characteristics. The Vodkaphiles advise that it should taste soft, creamy and it should not be bitter or burn your palate.

According to vodka experts, look for a rich and grainy taste with notes of butterscotch and dried fruit that punctuates the flavor throughout, resulting in a smooth, clean, full-bodied taste with a fresh, grainy character.



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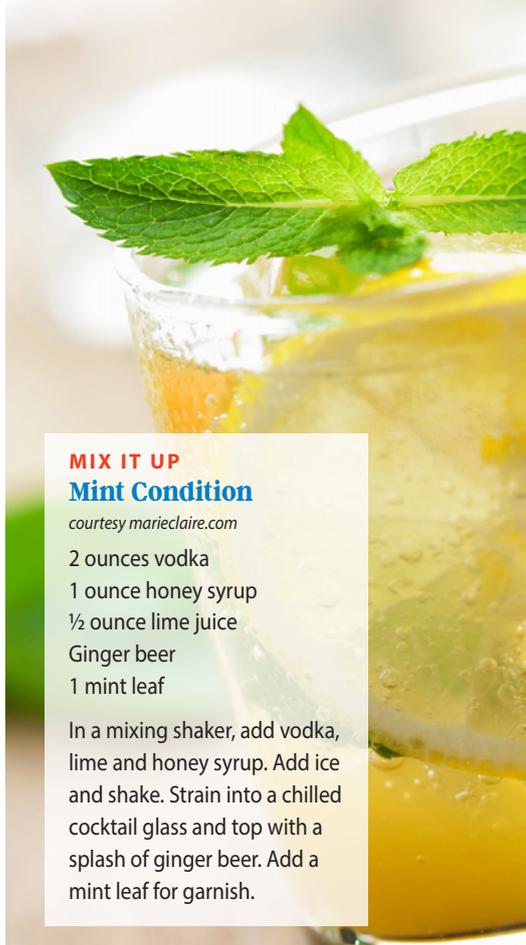
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MIX IT UP
Mint Condition
courtesy marieclaire.com

- 2 ounces vodka
- 1 ounce honey syrup
- ½ ounce lime juice
- Ginger beer
- 1 mint leaf

In a mixing shaker, add vodka, lime and honey syrup. Add ice and shake. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and top with a splash of ginger beer. Add a mint leaf for garnish.

Liquor Lexicon

Knowing what you're asking for can go a long way toward increasing your sipping pleasure.

- **Neat** — Served straight with no ice.
- **On the rocks** — Served with ice cubes.
- **Straight up** — Chilled with ice and then strained into a glass.



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