

The US Distillers Making Great Versions of Traditionally Un-American Spirits

By Jason Horn

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Photo by Jason Varney

When you're toasting the independence of a nation, it's probably a good idea to be drinking something actually made in that nation, especially one as fiercely proud as the good ol' U.S. of A. So if you're a bourbon fan on the Fourth of July, you're fine. But what if you like cognac, or Scotch, or tequila? Until recently, those pickins were slim.

Thankfully, the craft-distilling boom going on right now means that creative American distillers are making a wide variety of booze, including spirits styles that are usually imported. Here are several options for this Independence Day that'll let you drink red, white and blue no matter what your taste.



Photo courtesy of Baller

BALLER SINGLE MALT WHISKEY (\$65)

There are many layers of homage in this whisky: St. George Spirits master distiller Lance Winters calls it "a California take on the Japanese spin on Scotch whisky." And with Japan making the best whisky in the world right now, it was a wise choice. Designed for Japanese-favorite highballs (thus the name), Baller is made from malted barley and aged in a combo of ex-bourbon barrels and French-oak wine casks, then finished in barrels that held umeshu, a Japanese plum liqueur. The spirit is remarkably complex, starting off dry and a little smoky on the front of the tongue, then blooming into an explosion of fruit after you swallow.

BLUECOAT GIN (\$29)



Photo by Jason Varney

The best type of gin for a Martini is the juniper- and citrus-heavy London dry style, but drinking British gin on the Fourth of July is just plain sacrilege. Instead, choose this all-American alternative. Most U.S.-made gins choose unusual flavors, but Philadelphia's Bluecoat takes on British gin head-on, using only four botanicals—juniper, coriander, angelica root and citrus peel. It's a clean and crisp spirit with a nice citrus finish that's great for refreshing brunch drinks in the morning or classy Martinis after the sun goes down.

GERMAIN-ROBIN SELECT BARREL XO (\$120)



Photo courtesy of Germain-Robin

In the early 1980s, a Mendocino County rancher met a Frenchman from a cognac-producing family, and the pair decided to make brandy in Northern California, importing an antique French still from an abandoned distillery. Germain-Robin's spirits aren't cognac (which must be made in France), but in basically everything but name, they are. The brand's XO is absolutely a sipper, made from mostly pinot noir grapes and aged in French oak barrels for 17 years. Pour a glass neat as a digestif from all those July 4 hot dogs while you watch the fireworks this year.

ATSBY AMBERTHORN VERMOUTH (\$35)



Photo courtesy of Atsby

New York cocktail geek Adam Ford got a little obsessed with vermouth, spent a few years researching the fortified wine's history and recipes, and then launched his very own vermouth company with Atsby in 2012, becoming one of the first in a small but growing handful of American producers. (He later literally wrote the book on vermouth.) Made using Long Island chardonnay and New York-made apple brandy, Amberthorn is Atsby's version of dry vermouth, though it's a fair bit sweeter and more complex than many European cousins thanks to Ford's use of honey as a sweetener.

TAILWINDS SILVER AGAVE (\$40)



Photo courtesy of Tailwinds

Like cognac and its region in southwestern France, tequila must come from its native homeland in and around Mexico's Jalisco state. But you can get your hands on agave anywhere, and so a handful of American distilleries have started experimenting with domestic tequila-like spirits. Illinois' Tailwinds Distilling Co. sources agave from the foothills of Guadalajara but ferments it in-house over 12 long days, which ensures lots of characteristic peppery, vegetal flavor. Silver Agave and its bourbon barrel-aged counterpart Rested Agave are available throughout the Midwest, as well as online.

THE EMERALD 1865 AMERICAN STRAIGHT WHISKEY (\$86)



Photo courtesy of The Emerald

Want to taste Irish whiskey the way it was made in the 19th century? Then you should look to Oregon! The Beaver State's Ransom Spirits enlisted the help of booze historian David Wondrich to recreate an 1865 Irish whiskey mash bill. It includes the standard barley and rye, but what makes it different is the inclusion of oats, a grain common in Ireland back in the day but almost never used for whiskey today. The result has the typical smooth sweetness of an Irish whiskey but a bit more richness and a weightier

mouthfeel.

THREE SHEETS RUM (\$30)



Photo courtesy of Ballast Point

Though it's based in Southern California and known better as a brewery than a distillery, San Diego's Ballast Point makes a mean Caribbean-style white rum. It's smooth and crisp, much like the styles of Cuban and Puerto Rican spirits. This makes it ideal for a Daiquiri or anything else bright and fruity—exactly the kinds of drinks you want on the Fourth.

KROGSTAD FESTLIG AQUAVIT (\$27)



Photo courtesy of Krogstad Festlig

Snowy Scandinavia may not be the first place you think of when planning your Fourth of July drinking, but the region does have a summer, and its signature caraway seed-infused spirit is also delicious when it's hot out. Named after its master distiller, Krogstad is an aquavit made by Portland (Ore.)'s House Spirits, and the clean and crisp Festlig bottling is actually best served straight out of the freezer. Sip it between bites of rich, fatty foods (like, say, burgers and hot dogs) to both cleanse your palate and fight the heat.