



# SPIRITS 101

## SPIRITS EDUCATION FOR INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

“Alcohol is proof that God loves us  
and wants us to be happy” –  
Benjamin Franklin



# SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

**OUR COMMITMENT TO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY MAKES A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE BY ENRICHING THE SPIRIT AND WELL-BEING OF OUR ASSOCIATES, COMMUNITIES, AND BUSINESS PARTNERS.**

OUR ASSOCIATES	OUR COMMUNITIES	OUR PARTNERS	OUR GOVERNANCE
<p>WE ENCOURAGE AND INVEST IN OUR ASSOCIATES TO ACHIEVE THEIR PERSONAL BEST - BOTH AT WORK AND AT HOME.</p>	<p>WE PARTICIPATE IN PHILANTHROPIC AND ADVOCACY EFFORTS THAT STRENGTHEN THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF OUR COMMUNITIES.</p>	<p>WE OPERATE WITH INTEGRITY TO PROMOTE RESPONSIBLE DRINKING AND CONSUMPTION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OUR ASSOCIATES, SUPPLIERS AND CUSTOMERS.</p>	<p>WE DO THE RIGHT THINGS, THE RIGHT WAY TO DEMONSTRATE OUR ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS.</p>

# WHAT ARE SPIRITS?

Spirits are alcohol beverages that are produced by the art of distillation.

Spirits are stronger than wine and beer, because distillation is a means to increase alcohol levels.

Spirits can be made from many base ingredients including grains, fruits, sugar cane and more.

# THE BEGINNING

No one knows for sure when people started drinking beverages containing alcohol, but it is known that the desire to create such beverages became a major driving reason to establish that first permanent settlements. The first such beverages were the result of naturally occurring fermentation, but they are the direct antecedents of today's distilled spirits brands.

# ANCIENT DISTILLING

When and where distilling was first practiced is still a mystery, but it is undoubtedly an ancient art. Archaeological evidence has been discovered suggesting that ancient Egyptians were distilling. Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote that "seawater can be made potable by distillation".



# IT ALL STARTS THE SAME WAY

You may not realize it, but your favorite beverage alcohol brands, be they spirits, wine, or beer, all start with the same process of fermentation.

The common denominator for all types of beverage alcohol is fermentation, which is nothing more than the natural decomposition of organic materials containing carbohydrates and the conversion of the sugars in those carbohydrates into ethyl alcohol.

Fermentation occurs whenever the two necessary ingredients, sugar and yeast, are combined in a liquid. The liquid in which the fermentation takes place goes by different names depending on the genre of spirit being produced. For instance, in whiskey production the fermenting liquid is known as “mash”, but is referred to as “tepache” in regards to tequila production. Fermentation stops when the sugars in the mash are depleted or when yeast activity ceases.

# SUGAR FOR FERMENTATION

The raw materials used for making a distilled spirit are of two basic types: those containing a high concentration of natural sugars and those containing other carbohydrates that can easily be converted to sugars by enzymes. Among the most commonly used materials with high sugar contents are grapes, various other fruits, sugarcane and molasses in addition to sugar itself. Starches that can easily be converted to sugars include grains such as corn, rye, rice, barley, wheat and potatoes.



# SUGAR FOR FERMENTATION

After combining sugar and yeast together in a liquid base and allowing it to ferment, the next step is to process it through a still. The earliest stills were composed of a heated closed container, a condenser and a receptacle to receive the condensate. These evolved into the pot still, which is still in use, particularly for making malt whiskeys, some gins and some brandies. However, even large pot stills are limited to their capacity, which eventually led to innovation and efforts to increase the efficiency, volume and velocity of spirit production.

After fermentation, the modestly alcoholic liquid is then moved to a still and will be “distilled” one or more times depending on which genre of spirit is being produced. The art of distilling is basically a purification process that decreases water volume and increases alcohol volume. Beer averages between 2% and 12% alcohol by volume or “abv” and wine averages between 8-14% abv. Distilled spirits range upwards of 60%+ abv and more.

# DISTILLATION

The process of distillation is based on a very simple principle, that is, alcohol boils at a lower temperature than water. Alcohol boils and thus evaporates at 173°F whereas water boils at 212°F, so if you have a modestly alcoholic mash or fermented liquid and you heat the liquid in a still to 190°F, then the alcohol in the solution will evaporate before the water, leaving behind various impurities and considerable volume.

# DISTILLATION AND CONDENSATION

The alcohol “vapor” is then channeled to a condenser of sorts that will cool the vapor back into its liquid form, now much higher in alcohol strength and with much less volume. The word “distillation” comes from the Latin “distillare” which translates as “to drip down” or “the recovery of”, speaking to the recovery of a more pure, higher alcoholic liquid than its previous form. Further, some spirits types undergo more than one distillation and/or in various types of stills in order to impart certain desired characteristics.

There are two primary approaches to distillation; utilization of a “pot still” or utilization of a “continuous still.”

The simple pot still is an enclosed vessel, heated either by direct firing on the bottom or by steam coils. There is a cylindrical bulb at its top leading to a partially cooled vapor line. Everything works together to turn lower proof alcohol into vapor and then condense it back to a higher proof liquid. The usual pot-still operation involves a series of two or three pot stills.

The pot still is used largely in Scotland and Ireland for whiskey production and in France for brandies. The flavor profile of a pot-still product is more complex than that of a continuous-still product of the same alcohol content.

A Mr. Robert Stein of Scotland created the first continuous or “column” still, which was improved upon by Irishman, Aeneas Coffey in 1831. The Coffey design was patented and many continuous stills are commonly referred to as “Coffey” stills or “column” stills as they consist of a column or a series of columns that involve a continuous “inflow” of fermented liquid and a continuous “outflow” of higher proof alcohol. The continuous nature of the column still makes it a much more efficient still than the batch process of the pot still.



# CONTINUOUS STILL

A column still consists of a tall cylindrical column filled with perforated plates onto which water-rich vapors condense while alcohol-enriched vapors pass through. Steam, used as the heat source, is fed into the bottom of the still, and the liquid to be distilled is fed near the top. The steam systemically heat the incoming liquid to the point of alcohol vaporization. The vapor is then condensed into a higher proof alcohol.

# BOTH POT STILL AND DISTILLATION

Many distillation operations combine column and pot stills. The flavor profile of a pot still product is more complex than that of a continuous still, but continuous stills offer a greater consistency of product from batch to batch. In attempting to take advantage of the best of both worlds, many distilleries use both column and pot stills.

Many spirits are aged for various periods of time after distillation occurs. Most commonly, the barrels used for aging distilled spirits are made of oak. Oak is one of the few woods that can hold liquids while still allowing the process of breathing through the wood's pores. Oak barrels are aerobic vessels, or they allow interaction and exchange between the liquid in the barrel and the air outside the barrels.

The pore size of the oak staves that make up the barrels is such that small molecules such as water move through the wood more easily than larger molecules such as alcohol. The exposure to oxygen and the resulting change in color, aroma, flavor, and mouthfeel are facilitated by this “breathing” process that would not happen if the beverage were simply stored in a container made of glass or stainless steel.

A number of interactions take place between aging spirit and the oak barrel it rest in.

**Extractive** – Because oak barrels are permeable, a certain amount of the interior surface of the oak stave will be penetrated by both alcohol and water and as a result certain components in the wood will be extracted. These components contribute tastes and aromas of vanilla, cocoa, coffee and caramel.

**Evaporative** – Since air can get into barrels, you're going to lose some liquid to evaporation and that decrease of liquid volume serves to both concentrate flavors in the aging spirit while simultaneously increasing headspace, or that space between the aging spirit and the top of the barrel, which further increases the contact of the spirit with more oxygen, in turn increasing flavor.

**Reactive** – More complex aromatic molecular structures develop with controlled exposure to oxygen during the aging process.

**Concentration** – Concentration is simply the overall combination of extractive, evaporative, and reactive processes from a spirit's interaction with oxygen and oak and the complex flavor enhancing chemical reactions that take place.

# PRIMARY CATEGORIES OF SPIRITS

THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF SPIRITS COMING FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. HERE ARE THE MAJOR TYPES OF SPIRITS.

## VODKA

A neutral spirit

## GIN

A spirit that has been flavored with juniper, various botanicals and other ingredients.

## RUM

Spirit made from sugarcane or sugarcane bi-products

## TEQUILA/MEZCAL

Spirit from Mexico made from the agave plant

## BRANDY

Spirit that is made from fruit

## WHISK(E)Y

Grain based spirit that often spends time in oak.

## LIQUEURS

Spirits that are sweetened and flavored with various ingredients



**THE ORIGINS OF VODKA GO AS FAR BACK AS A THOUSAND YEARS TO RUSSIA AND POLAND**

**DESPITE SUCH AN EXTENSIVE HISTORY, VODKA DIDN'T BECOME POPULAR IN THE USA UNTIL THE MID-20TH CENTURY.**

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, VODKA IS DEFINED AS:

Neutral spirit produced from any base  
Neutral spirit produced in such a way to be without distinctive character, aroma, taste and color.

Distilled at or above 95% alc

Bottled at or above 40% alc



The famous vodka and ginger beer cocktail, “Moscow Mule”, became popularized in the 1950s.

Vodka is the #1 selling genre of spirit by volume in the United States.

The neutral character of vodka has been one of the secrets of vodka's success, as you're able to mix it well with just about anything. For years vodka benefited from the movement of consumers towards lighter, less flavorful beverages, it is now a beneficiary of a new movement returning to the flavorful cocktails of the past.

Most brands today are made from grains, i.e. rye, wheat, barley, and corn. Potatoes are rarely used anymore, which was especially popular during World War II when grains were scarce. Vodka is purified by undergoing a process that treats the spirit with organic charcoal.

The eventual quality of the vodka is often determined by the finishing process -- the varieties of charcoal used, the method of distillation, the equipment used, the water used, and of course, the grain, factors that can all be highly secretive. This rather recent phenomenon of vodka bringing taste and flavors, especially in the luxury category, has spawned the martini explosion across this country.

# FLAVORS OF VODKA

Potato vodkas often display a touch of sweetness and a discernable viscosity that make them exceptionally silky on the palate and the finish. Wheat is often delicate with a subtle grain note while corn is often the most delicate of all offering a silky, soft note of talc. Rye creates spicy vodka with viscosity to match. It is also often fruity and somewhat floral.

# FLAVORED VODKA

The TTB defines “flavored vodka” as, “vodka flavored with natural flavoring materials, with or without the addition of sugar, bottled at not less than 30% alcohol by volume (60 proof). Further, the name of the predominant flavor shall appear as part of the class and type designation on the label. Lastly, wine may be added, but if the volume addition exceeds 2.5% of finished product the class or types of wines and percentages by volume must be stated as part of the class and type designation.

**Gin is historically associated with the Dutch, as far back as the late 16th century.**

**A Dutch professor, Doctor sylvius, is credited with popularizing a medicinal tonic for curing various ailments, which came to be known as “gin tonic”**

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, gin is defined as:

- Spirit with primary flavor of juniper
- Bottled no less than 40% alc
- Flavoring with juniper and other ingredients must be done according to approved production techniques.
- Sub-categories gin (old tom, London dry, Geneva, Holland) must confirm to other production standards.



The “London Dry” style did originate in London, but does not have to actually come from London.

In addition to juniper, gin is often flavored with many botanicals, herbs, spices, citrus fruits and more.

Originally created by Holland based physician, Dr. Sylvius, gin is the Anglicized name of Genievre, which is French for juniper. Dr. Sylvius was looking for an inexpensive medicine in the 1600s and was familiar with the diuretic properties of the juniper berry, thus he attempted to capture the therapeutic oils of the berries in spirit and gin was born. Gin quickly gained popularity throughout Europe, particularly in England.



At its most basic, gin is a distillate of grain mash combined with various flavoring agents. It gets its primary flavor from juniper berries, but many other herbs and spices go into the makeup as well. A wide array of natural flavoring agents can be used in gin including seeds (aniseed, caraway, cardamom, coriander, vanilla), herbs (angelica, chamomile, marjoram, mint, rosemary, sage), bark (quinine, cinnamon, cassia), citrus peels (lemon, lime), as well as roots and more.

## London Dry Gin

Though original of London in the 19th century, “London Dry Gin”, does not have to come from London. It’s simply a lighter, heavily juniper flavored gin.

## Plymouth Gin

Historically, different distilleries in various parts of England were known for various styles and flavor profiles. One recipe of gin of particular note came from the port of Plymouth, hence the name. Plymouth gin tends to have more mouth feel and have more body than London dry gin.

## Old Tom Gin

A sweetened style of gin hailing from 18th century London, pubs were known to have cheap, exterior dispensaries in the shape of a black cat (an “Old Tom”) where Londoners could put a coin in the cat’s mouth and get a shot of gin.

## Genever/Holland Gin

Actually awarded an AOC by the European Union, Genever is made with a base of malted barley and other cereal grains and experiences a more complicated distillation process.

**Many countries produce rum and there are many regional styles, but rum is primarily categorized three ways.**

White – Also known as silver, clear, & blanco, these rums are not aged in wood and represent the most popular rum in the world.

Amber/Gold – Also known as “oro”, Gold rum has more color from aging and more oak aromas and complexity.

Dark – Aged even longer than gold rum, dark rum should be smooth and rich with lots of complexity from aging process.

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, RUM IS DEFINED AS:

- Spirit distilled from sugarcane or sugarcane bi-products like molasses.
- Distilled no higher than 190 proof
- Bottle no less than 80 proof



Christopher Columbus brought sugarcane with him to the West Indies.



**Today, rum is produced in over 100 countries around the world.**

Though the bulk of the world's rum comes from Puerto Rico, rum is a global category of spirit and can come from anywhere as long as it's derived from sugarcane or bi-product of sugarcane, molasses.

There are a wide variety of rums from a geographic standpoint and from a production standpoint. Within the rum category, you have un-oaked rums, oaked rums, cask strength rums, rums aged in solera barrel systems and rums from a single barrel. The relatively relaxed criterion for defining rum has resulted in many variations.

Rum has to be made from sugar cane or bi-products of sugar cane. Sugar cane itself has a tremendous history dating as far back as 4th BCE, where Alexander the Great made account of it while in India.

Sugar cane belongs to the perennial plant, grass family of *Gramineae*, specifically the species *Sasccharum Officinarum*. There are various clonal deviations and hybrids of this species which are specific to climatic and growing conditions.

# HARVESTING SUGARCANE

Harvesting of the plant can be done manually or mechanically. The sugar cane is then washed, milled, crushed and mixed with water to create a sugary solution, which is filtered and then moved to experience an evaporation period, concentrating sugars. The concentrated liquid is basically a high grade of molasses. The molasses develops sugar crystals and is placed into a high speed centrifuge to separate the crystals from the otherwise saturated molasses.

Fermentation can last several days and generally the longer the fermentation the more complex the rum will be. Producers can also introduce the dregs of previous distillations, known as *dunder*.

Distillation is not regulated in rum production, outside of maximum alcohol levels or minimum bottling levels. Producers can use continuous stills or pot stills or a mixture of both. Lighter rums are associated with column stills and more flavorful rum are associated with fuller flavored rums.

Two major categories of rum:

*Agricole* – *Agricole* is a type of rum made solely from fresh pressed sugar cane juice. *Agricole* rums are stylistically more aromatic and most often associated with the Caribbean Islands that are have French orientations. These are typically more expensive than molasses based rums.

*Industriel* – Rum made from molasses is known as *industriel* or industrial. These rums are the more widely produced rums in the world.



# REGIONAL CHARACTER IN RUM

Rum is produced in no less than 100 countries including Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, Martinique, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Columbia, St Croix and Cuba. It's difficult to generalize about flavor profiles in consideration of the relaxed laws regulating rum and all the variations of rum production.

Rums from Barbados, Guyana and Jamaica are typically bigger, fuller and darker in color and flavor. Puerto Rican rum tends to be lighter in flavor and color as they follow Cuban Bacardi style. Martinique, Haiti and Guadeloupe often use sugar cane juice and are more aromatic and brandy like.

# FLAVORED RUM

Flavored rum is defined just as flavored vodka and flavored gin are defined; “rum flavored with natural flavoring materials, with or without the addition of sugar, bottled at not less than 30% alcohol by volume (60 proof). Further, the name of the predominant flavor shall appear as part of the class and type designation on the label.

**Tequila is named after an actual town, tequila, which translates to “a place of work.”**

**Tequila is made from the agave plant. The agave plant can take up to 8 – 10 years to mature before it’s ready to be harvested.**

**The plants are cooked, brewed into a beer-ish liquid and then distilled.**

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, tequila is defined as:

- Spirit distilled principally from the blue agave plant
- A distinctly Mexican product, which must be produced in agreement with Mexican laws
- Must be made within specified states in Mexico
- Must be minimum 51% blue agave
- Tequila labelled 100% blue agave must be made with 100% blue agave
- Bottled between 35%-55% (min 40% if exported to US)



There are several categories of tequila based on type and age.

**MIXTO** – Is tequila that is not made from 100% Blue Agave

**BLANCO** – Also known as, “silver”, is tequila that has been aged 0 – 60 days.

**REPOSADO** – Tequila that has been aged 60 days to 1 year.

**ANEJO** – Tequila that has been aged at least 1 year.

In 1902, a botanist named Weber identified a particular species as special among the agave, classifying it as *Agave Tequilana* Weber Azul. *Agave Tequilana*, or “blue agave” as it became known for its appearance.

Blue agave must make up at least 51% of any agave based spirit hoping to be labeled “tequila”. The agave plant is an amazing plant that very much resembles a cactus with approximately 200 razor sharp, blade-like leaves known as *pincas*. They are ready to be harvested between every 8-12 years, can grow over 7 feet tall, weighing between 80 to 300 lbs upon harvest.

The center of the plant beneath the pointy leaf exterior is known as the *pina* and looks very similar to a very large pineapple. Most of the “campos de agave”, or agave orchards, are concentrated in the state of Jalisco. By law, there are five states in Mexico that can produce tequila. Nayarit, Michoacan, Tamaulipas and Guanajuato can all legally produce tequila. When ripe, the sharp leaves are removed with a machete and then harvested.

# ROASTING AND FERMENTATION

The agave plants are transported to the distillery and then cooked to convert un-fermentable sugars into fermentable sugars. After the pinas have been cooked, they are broken up, water is added and a fermentable liquid, known as “honey water” is fermented to a low proof beverage.

The low proof beverage will experience two fermentations. After the 1st distillation, a modestly high 20% alcohol level spirit known as *ordinario* is produced and put back in the still for a second distillation. Once the spirit emerges from the second distillation, it is now tequila and the distiller needs to decide what type of tequila he wants to make and what sort of aging regimen he will assign to his new tequila.

Tequila is broken down into two major categories, those made entirely of 100% blue agave and “mixto”. Mixto allows for 49% of other ingredients besides blue agave.

100% Blue Agave Tequila – Made from 100% blue agave coming from within the 5 states approved for tequila production that can be further categorized into the following age categories.

- Blanco – Also known as silver or plata. Aged 0 – 60 days.
- Reposado – Meaning “rested”, is aged between 60 days to 1 year.
- Anejo – “Aged” tequila, which has to be aged at least 1 year.



**Brandy's are fruit based spirits and are made all over the world.**

**Cognac is from France and is the world's most famous brandy. It's made with grapes.**

**The term "Brandy" comes from the dutch *brandewijn*, which means "burnt wine".**

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, BRANDY IS DEFINED AS:

Spirit produced from fermented fruit  
Cannot be distilled over 95% alcohol  
Must be produced in such a way as to resemble the flavor of the base ingredient  
Bottled with a minimum 40% alcohol



There are many types of brandy that are made from various fruits.

Cognac - Grapes  
Armagnac - Grapes  
Calvados - Apples  
Kirsch - Cherry  
Poire - Pear  
Framboise - Raspberry

As a distillate made from fruit. You can easily divide brandy into two major categories, those based on grapes (basically distilled wine) and those based on non-grape fruits like plums, apples, cherries and/or dried fruits.

Grape Based – Cognac and Armagnac are easily the world's two most famous grape based brandies and both are French. Cognac is a much larger region and makes a lot more brandy than Armagnac.

Other Fruit Based – Many fruits including cherries, pears, apples and more can be made into brandy. The world's most famous fruit brandy is apple based and known as Calvados, coming from northern France.

Cognac production allows three different varieties including Ugni Blanc, Folle Blanche, and Colombard. Ugni Blanc is by far the most widely planted grape variety for eau-de-vie production, accounting for approximately 90% of acreage.

Two regions known as Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne yield the finest fruit for brandy production, though typically cognac is usually a blend of Ugni Blanc from multiple regions.

Cognac is made using the “Charentais Method”, which requires all Cognac to be twice distilled in copper pot stills. All cognac has to be aged at least 2 years before it can qualify as cognac. However, this is only a minimum for entry level cognac and any quality conscious producer ages their spirits considerably longer.

# WHISK(E)Y

**Major whisky producing countries include the United states, Scotland, Ireland and Canada.**

**Scotland is largely known for their famous single malt scotch bottlings, which often have a “peaty” smoky flavor.**

**Bourbon is the national spirit of the U.s., decreed such by congress in 1964. Made with a minimum of 51% corn, bourbons are known to be round, sweet and oaky whiskies, enjoyed around the world.**

In the United States, if a bottle of whiskey is labelled “straight whiskey”, then it must be aged two years in New American oak barrels.

**Irish and Canadian whiskies tend to be lighter and more smooth in style.**

ACCORDING TO USA LAW, WHISKEY IS DEFINED AS:

- Spirit produced from grain
- Distilled no more than 95% alc
- Stored in oak containers
- Bottled at least at 40% alc



The United States and Ireland spell “whiskey” (with an e), while Scotland and Canada spell “Whisky” without the e.

# WHISK(E)Y

The term “whiskey” is defined globally in the most basic sense as a spirit that is obtained from the fermented mash of grain, distilled at less than 190 proof, most often stored in oak containers for a minimum, mandated period relatively to its geographic origin, and bottled at no less than 80 proof.

Whisky should be most generally broken down into 2 major categories: Old World Whiskies and New World Whiskies. The differences between these 2 major categories are largely geography.

Old World Whiskies – Old world whiskies, also known as Celtic whiskies, are simply those whiskies coming from Ireland and Scotland.

New World Whiskies – New world whiskies are simply whiskies that do not come from Europe. The whiskies of North America, including the US and Canada, and Japan are the primary new world whisky producing countries.

Regardless of a whisky's origin and the related legislative criteria imposed on production and maturation standards, all whisky will be crafted according to the same five primary stages:

- 1st – Creating the recipe of the grains used as the base.
- 2nd – The use of water.
- 3rd – The fermentation of the mash, establishing the base alcohol.
- 4th – The actual distillation process itself.
- 5th – The maturation period post distillation.

Whisky from Scotland has a long history of being the world's definitive whisky.

The grain used in the mash for making single malt whisky is specially selected barley, which has been soaked in water for sprouting. This process, known as “germination”, is how carbohydrates are converted into fermentable sugars. The sprouted barley is then dried in kilns fired by peat and coal. Peat, or has historically been used as a natural fuel source throughout Scotland, and its role in arresting or stopping the germination process of the barley is largely responsible for Scotch whisky's identifiably smoking and pungent character that often separates it aromatically from other whiskies around the world. All Scotch whisky has to be distilled at least twice according to the Scotch Whisky Act.



# TYPES OF SCOTCH

Blended Scotch – Blended Scotch whiskies are known as “blends” because they are indeed blends in two important ways; blended scotch whiskies are first known as “blends” because they are a blend of different base ingredients and secondly because they are a “blend” of different finished whiskies from different distilleries throughout Scotland.

Single Malt Scotch – Single malt whiskies differ from blended whiskies in that they must be made solely from only malted barley and they must have been produced solely at one single distillery.

Blended Malt – Considerably less common than single malt scotch whiskies, “blended Malt” whiskies originally marketed as “pure malt” whiskies, are unique in that they are “blends” of single malt whiskies.

Grain Whisky – Grain whiskies are made from various other grains besides malted barley and make up the bulk of the blend of “blended” whiskies.

\*A Note on Age Statements – If an age statement is listed on a bottle of whisky then it must strictly conform to the minimum age on the bottle.

# SCOTCH WHISKEY GEOGRAPHICALLY

Lowlands - Lowland whiskies, of which there are very few, are often notably softer and lighter.

Highlands – Highland whiskies span throughout the northern area of Scotland north of Glasgow and Edinburgh moving into the west, east, and then north of Inverness. The highlands of Scotland can be generally associated with larger, more round, opulent and extracted styles of whisky.

Speyside – This area of the Scottish highlands houses a high concentration of operating distilleries. As a “sub-region” in the Highlands, Speyside whiskies show the sweeter, rounder Highland style, but are often on the softer, more elegant side with honeyed characteristics.

Islay, Skye, & the Islands – The Island regions of Scotland can range from reasonably dry to full, sweet and malty. The island character is strongest where malt is made with local peat - the peat on these windy islands absorbs other influences, especially briny saltiness on Orkney and medicinal seaweed on Islay.

Historically, many attribute the Irish to be the first country to create whiskey and there are records suggesting this as far back as 5th century AD with stories of St Patrick bringing the art of distillation over from the mainland of Europe. A fun story indeed, but most likely monastic orders brought the art of distillation to Ireland from the East between the 5th and 7th centuries. As early as the 17th century, King James authorized the first “license” to distill to a town about 2 hours north of Belfast in 1608. Even Queen Victoria was reported to be a huge fan of Irish whiskey.

From a flavor and stylistic perspective, by and large, Irish whiskies have historically been considered to be lighter and often “smoother” than Scotch whisky. A flavor profile most likely attributed to the fact that Irish whiskey undergoes a third distillation in the production process and does not employ the smoky and earthy peat fire when arresting the germination of the barley.

Just like Scotch whisky, Irish whiskey can be categorized into blended whiskey, single Malt, grain, and single Grain.

Although several styles of whiskey have been produced in the U.S. from the colonial period until the present, only one--bourbon--has been officially identified as America's national spirit. Since a 1964 act of Congress made that distinction, we will begin our look at American whiskeys with bourbon.

According to Federal regulations, for an American whiskey to be labeled as "bourbon" it must be made from a mash containing between 51% and maximum of 80% corn. If the corn content is higher than 80%, the product must be designated as corn whiskey. Bourbon, according to the law, must be distilled at 160 proof (80% alcohol) or less. If bourbon is labeled with the word "straight" then it must be aged for a minimum of 2 years in new American oak, though most is aged between 4 and 9 years. If bourbon is bottled before its fourth year of maturation, it must be labeled with an age statement. By law, Bourbon can be made anywhere in the USA.

According to U.S. federal regulations, “Canadian whisky is a distinctive product of Canada, manufactured in Canada in compliance with laws of the Dominion of Canada containing no distilled spirits less than three years old. Such whisky is blended Canadian Whisky. Canadian whisky shall not be designated as “straight.”

According to Canadian law, Canadian whisky must be produced from cereal grain only. While the Canadian Excise Tax Bureau exercises the customary controls to ensure proper collection of the tax, the government sets no other limitation as to grain formulas, distilling proofs, or special type of aging cooperage. It believes the distillers are better judges than the government of what the public, both at home and abroad, wants in a Canadian whisky.

The cordial and liqueur category is the largest and most diverse in terms of the number of brands, flavors and alcohol content. Cordials and liqueurs must contain at least 2.5% sugar by weight although most cordials are considerably higher in their sugar content and many contain up to 35% of a sweetening agent.

Cordials can be easily categorized into two major categories, proprietary and generic. Proprietary liqueurs are specific trademarked recipes, many of which are extremely famous. Grand Marnier, Baileys, Benedictine and Kahlua are some examples of proprietary cordials.

Generic liqueurs are those produced and marketed by several producers under the same universally used name. Some of the more common varieties are amaretto, sambuca, triple sec and peppermint schnapps. But even among generic liqueurs brand names are prominent. Proprietary liqueurs are those brands usually produced from a closely guarded formula and sold under a trademarked name by only one producer. Famous proprietary liqueurs include Galliano, Cointreau, Frangelico and Licor 43.