



WINE ENTHUSIAST

# TOP 50 SPIRITS

OF 2014

*Standouts from the Spirit Realm*

BY KARA NEWMAN

Out of the hundreds of spirits reviewed for this year's Spirit Buying Guides, this list represents 50 of the best picks.

It's a particularly diverse group this year, spanning a number of categories, provenances and flavor profiles. Of course, it's not comprehensive; only categories reviewed this year are eligible for inclusion, so unflavored vodkas, for example, aren't strongly represented here, although they had a strong showing in 2013.

The diversity extends to bottle prices as well, which range from \$425 for a rare, hop-flavored American whiskey down to \$17 for an amazingly refreshing cucumber vodka. "Top" in this context isn't meant to be synonymous with most expensive, oldest or most rare—instead, it signifies best-in-breed, whatever the breed happens to be.

So, in addition to classically styled whiskies, rums, Tequilas and more, some delightful oddballs enter the mix. Carrot eau-de-vie? Peanut butter-and-jelly flavored vodka? An Indian-spiced cream liqueur? Yes to all three—bold flavors and a lot of fun are coming off the stills these days.

Whether your taste runs to well-made cocktails or straight-up sippers, at least one of these exceptional bottles deserves space on your home bar. Turn the page to discover your new best bar friend.



## Amaro



**97** **Amaro Montenegro (Italy; Total Beverage Solutions, Mount Pleasant, SC).** One of the lightest and gentlest *amari*, this amber spirit delicately mixes sarsaparilla-like herbal notes and honey sweetness with just the right bitter edge. Mix it into cocktails—mixologists love this amaro—or sip it as a delightful digestif.  
**abv:** 23% **Price:** \$29



**96** **Amaro Nonino (Italy; Terlato Wines International, Hoboken, NJ).** Tawny and bright in the glass, this mellow, bittersweet beauty offers caramel and vanilla, braced by allspice and bitter orange. Although Nonino is best known for its grappas, this amaro, flavored with herbs from the mountains of Friuli, is worth seeking out. Consider it for dessert pairings or an edgy spin on a negroni.  
**abv:** 35% **Price:** \$54

**94** **Ramazzotti Amaro (Italy; Evaton, Stamford, CT).** Although it appears dark, inky and sinister in the glass, this amaro is on the sweet and gentle side. Think ripe plums, dark berries and cola,

with a pleasingly spiced finish and just the faintest bitter edge. It's enjoyable to sip straight up with a twist of lemon peel, or lightened with a splash of club soda.  
**abv:** 30% **Price:** \$25

## Bourbon



**97** **Wild Turkey Diamond Anniversary (USA; Wild Turkey, Lawrenceburg, KY).** Made from a blend of very rare 13- to 16-year-old whiskeys, this bottling pays tribute to Master Distiller Jimmy Russell's 60 years at the Wild Turkey Distillery. This light, silky Bourbon shows lots of vanilla-maple and brown sugar flavors accented by a hint of peach, and tapers off delicately, with clove, cinnamon, ginger and burnt orange peel notes on the finish.  
**abv:** 45.5% **Price:** \$125

**96** **Blanton's Single Barrel Bourbon Whiskey (USA; Sazerac Company; Frankfort, KY).** Bold and well structured, this Bourbon features warming vanilla and caramel accented by orange peel, stone fruit and a dry baking-spice finish. Sip it with a chunk of ice, or mix up a round of juleps. The trademark round, faceted bottle with the horse-topped cork is perfect for Derby Day.  
**abv:** 46.5% **Price:** \$55

**95** **Booker's Bourbon (USA; Jim Distilling, Clermont, KY).** This uncut, barrel-strength Bourbon is bold and flavorful. The caramel aroma is rich and luxe. On the palate, it's quite tannic and drying, but the flavor shines through, showing toffee, caramel and dried cherry, with a spicy finish of clove, dried fig and date. The alcohol feels remarkably balanced despite the high proof. It needs no adornment: just add a chunk of ice and enjoy.  
**abv:** 63% **Price:** \$50

**94** **Evan Williams Single Barrel 2004 Edition (USA; Heaven Hill Distillery, Bardstown, KY).** Number 19 in a series, this robust Bourbon offers big, butterscotch-like notes alongside touches of

fresh apple, baking spice and a fiery cinnamon finish. **Best Buy.**  
**abv:** 43.3% **Price:** \$27



**94** **Old Forester Birthday Bourbon 2013 Bottling (USA; Brown-Forman, Louisville, KY).** This limited-edition bottling is released once a year, on Sept. 2, the birthdate of Old Forester founder George Garvin Brown. This one, aged 12 years, was bottled in 2013. It's bold, aromatic and sweet on the palate, with notes of toffee, oak and red fruit. It finishes long and spicy. Though it feels a bit hot, it settles down with a modest amount of water into a warming, flavorful sip.  
**abv:** 49% **Price:** \$55

**93** **Oola Waitsburg Bourbon Whiskey (USA; Oola Distillery, Seattle, WA).** Surprisingly evolved for a three-year-old whiskey, this one has a four-grain mash bill (corn, wheat, barley and rye). It's on the sweeter side, with notes of caramel and hazelnut interspersed with orange peel and spice. It's mouth-watering, and would be particularly good in an old-fashioned or other cocktails.  
**abv:** 47% **Price:** \$50

## Brandy

**95** **Vecchia Romagna Riserva (Italy; Total Beverage Solutions, Mount Pleasant, SC).** Rivaling fine French brandies of similar age (10 years), this riserva is scented with honey and dates. On the palate, complex flavors run to dried fruit, baking spice and caramel.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$40

**94** **Dominique Brandy Italiano Riserva (Italy; Caffo Beverages, Carlstadt, NJ).** Burnished gold in color, this soft Friuli brandy, aged for more than three years, hints at golden raisins drizzled with honey, dried apricots and figs, and ripe pears. Use this warming sipper to spike a dessert, or serve it alongside the grand finale to a meal.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$24/1 L

## Eau de Vie

**95 Reisetbauer Carrot (Austria; Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, NY).** Fresh, clean and lightly vegetal—but not outright carroty—this palate-cleanser of an eau de vie will remind some of a delicate aquavit. It would be dynamite in a refined take on a bloody mary with tomato water instead of tomato juice.  
**abv:** 41.5% **Price:** \$55/375 ml

**94 Clear Creek Distillery Williams Pear Brandy (USA; Clear Creek Distillery, Portland, OR).** Soft and subtle, this clear eau de vie has a gentle but authentic fresh pear aroma. On the palate, it's slightly perfumy, then pear flavor bursts through on the finish, accompanied by spicy ginger and white-pepper notes. Overall, this offers a remarkably pure expression of fruit.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$28/375 ml

## Flavored Whiskey



**95 Charbay Hop Flavored Whiskey—Release III 1999 (USA; Charbay Distillers, Ukiah, CA).** Double-distilled from Pilsner beer, flavored with hops and aged for 14 years (six years in oak, eight years out of oak), this limited-edition whiskey isn't for everyone. It's powerful, big and oaky on the palate, with lots of tannins rounding out into vanilla, honey and sweet-yet-bitter orange peel. Bottled at an over-the-top 132 proof, it needs a lot of dilution, but once the alcohol is tamed, an enticing velvetiness emerges. This whiskey is different, interesting and oddly haunting. It would make a wild Manhattan.  
**abv:** 66.2% **Price:** \$425

## Gin

**96 Tanqueray No. Ten (England; Diageo, Norwalk, CT).** More citrus-forward than the standard Tanqueray Dry bottling, this is gin-and-tonic perfection. The classic aroma features juniper and touches of mint, anise and coriander. The same is echoed on the palate, though it's also bursting with grapefruit and lemon peel, finishing soft and herbaceous but perked up with a white peppercorn spark. The No. Ten also has a new art deco-inspired bottle, making it a particularly gift-worthy choice for summer party-goers.  
**abv:** 47.3% **Price:** \$42



**94 Bourbon Barrel Gin (USA; Watershed Distillery, Columbus, OH).** Infused with citrus peel and spices, then aged in a former Bourbon barrel for 12 months, this mellow, soft gin has lots of body. Look for a good dose of vanilla chased by cinnamon heat, plus touches of honey, oak and citrus on the finish. With a splash of simple syrup, this complex, golden gin is almost a cocktail on its own.  
**abv:** 44% **Price:** \$40

**94 Damrak Amsterdam Gin (Holland; Lucas Bols USA, New York, NY).** Versatile and crisp, this cocktail-ready gin offers a mild lemon peel aroma and mouth-filling notes of sweet, juicy grapefruit tempered by coriander and white pepper. **Best Buy.**  
**abv:** 41.8% **Price:** \$23

**93 Karner Blue Distilled Gin (USA; Flag Hill Distillery, Lee, NH).** This brisk, citrusy gin is made for classic cocktails. Bold lemon and grapefruit notes meld with a light floral note and just enough juniper to hold it all together. Amid the bright citrus bouquet, you might detect another, more elusive fruity scent. Surprise! This gin is distilled from apples.  
**abv:** 44% **Price:** \$30

## Irish Whiskey

**96 Bushmills Black Bush (Ireland; Diageo, Norwalk, CT).** This elegant, super-soft sipper is a blend of grain whiskey and malt whiskey that was finished in oloroso Sherry casks—the emphasis on the latter. The Sherry influence shows in the baked apple and dried apricot flavors that round into caramel and butterscotch tones on the finish.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$29

**94 2 Gingers Irish Whiskey (Ireland; Beam Inc., Deerfield, IL).** A newcomer to the marketplace, this velvety, blended Irish whiskey offers sweet, malty flavors that incorporate baked apple, honey and warm butterscotch. **Best Buy.**  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$20

**94 Jameson Select Reserve Black Barrel (Ireland; Pernod Ricard, New York, NY).** Like a liquid (if boozy) apple pie, this blended whiskey offers bold, rich aromatics, with lots of dried and

stewed fruit flavors and butterscotch. The drawn-out finish incorporates touches of cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice and even a mouthwatering sprinkle of salt.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$35

**94 Tullamore D.E.W. Phoenix (Ireland; William Grant & Sons, New York, NY).** Teasingly sweet on the palate, this easy-drinking blend has a dark gold cast and notes of honey, rich vanilla, fruit and spice. The finish is long and warming—note the high proof. It's delicious but not too precious to mix into cocktails.  
**abv:** 55% **Price:** \$55



**92 The Irishman Founder's Reserve Small Batch Irish Whiskey (Ireland; Palm Bay International, Port Washington, NY).** Light and easy-drinking, this blended Irish whiskey features aromas of apples, pears and fresh-cut grass. On the palate, look for vanilla and salted caramel, with a moderately spiced finish showing allspice and clove. **Best Buy.**  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$30

## Japanese Whisky

**95 Taketsuru Pure Malt 21 Year Old (Japan; Anchor Distilling, San Francisco, CA).** Scented with honey and dried apricots, this blended Japanese whisky is remarkably soft for a 21-year-old bottling, with just the evidence of oak tannins as a reminder of age. Complex flavors included mellow, rounded vanilla and caramel, peach and apricot, orange peel, plus a light cover of smoke fading to toffee and citrus on the long finish.  
**abv:** 43% **Price:** \$180

## Liqueurs

**95 Caffo Solara (Italy; Caffo Beverages, Carlstadt, NJ).** Made with brandy and oranges from southern Italy, this orange liqueur is rich and authentic, with orange peel and blossom aromas and flavors as well as a long, vanilla-forward finish. A flicker of alcohol-derived heat balances out the sweetness. Savor it as a delicious finish to a meal or use it as a versatile cocktail mixer.  
**abv:** 40% **Price:** \$27



**95** Rain City Spirits DRIP Coffee Liqueur (USA; Rain City Spirits, Seattle, WA). Made with local cold-brewed coffee, cane sugar and Rain City's vodka, this liqueur has a bold, authentic coffee aroma and flavor, with light sweetness and a slightly creamy mouthfeel. Just add cream for a head start on a white Russian-style cocktail. **Best Buy.** abv: 26% **Price: \$22**



**94** Sômrus Indian Cream Liqueur (USA; Som-Priya Fine Spirits, New York, NY). This unusual rum-based liqueur hints at exotic cardamom, almond and rosewater. It's creamy but light, and would be a palate-cleansing way to end a richly spiced meal. The ornate gold and red bottle is an eye-catcher, too. Sip it or try the producer's recommendation to serve frozen into a "kulsicle." abv: 13% **Price: \$25**



**93** Marie Brizard Orange Curaçao (France; The Other Wine and Spirits, Miami, FL). Made with bitter orange from Haiti and Cognac, this is an orange liqueur with a dark side. It has a deep amber hue and a robust, enticing orange-peel scent. On the palate, it's appropriately thick and syrupy, bursting with orange peel and fruit, burnt orange peel, almond and vanilla. Would work particularly well in cocktails to sweeten dark spirits like aged brandy or rye whiskey. **Best Buy.** abv: 30% **Price: \$20**

## Rum



**98** Appleton Estate Aged 21 Years (Jamaica; Campari America, San Francisco, CA). This gorgeous copper-hued rum seems to shift flavors with every sip, encouraging contemplation. It starts with dry notes of espresso and bittersweet chocolate, then morphs into dark, mouthwatering brown sugar, toffee and clove, before easing into a spiced finish reminiscent of chai tea with a hint of white peach. abv: 43% **Price: \$140**

**97** Facundo Paraiso XA Rum (Bahamas; Bacardi USA, Coral Gables, FL). Nut-brown in the glass, this conveys deep toffee, espresso and fudge notes, plus a heady sprinkling of baking spice. The finish is dry and spiced, flaunting dried orange peel and a light Sherried note. The hefty, decorative bottle features images of the original Bacardi distillery and the Edificio Bacardi in Cuba. Part of a special-edition rum line intended to honor the founder of Bacardi and 150 years of rum-making. abv: 40% **Price: \$250**



**96** Cockspur Old Gold (Barbados; Cockspur USA, Manhasset, NY). Bold and flavorful, this amber sipping rum offers sweet allspice, birch beer, brown sugar and caramel, plus darker notes of espresso and fudge. Finishes long, with a delicately spicy fade. **Best Buy.** abv: 40% **Price: \$21**

**95** Smith & Cross Traditional Jamaica Rum (Jamaica; Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN). A top pick for tiki and tropical drinks, this practically begs for lime juice. Scented with warm honey notes, the palate shows lots of brown sugar and spice, plus an enticingly untamed, funky finish (the fabled *hogo*). Since it's "navy strength," you might not want to sip it straight up—the producer wisely recommends exploring the profile first in a daiquiri—though it's smooth and interesting enough if you want to try. abv: 57% **Price: \$29**

**94** Mount Gay Black Barrel (Barbados; Remy Cointreau, New York, NY). Finished in "deeply toasted and charred" Bourbon casks, this mouthwatering small-batch rum skews to the sweeter side, offering bold notes of cola, allspice and vanilla, finishing brisk and spicy. Sip straight or mix for the ultimate rum and Coke. abv: 43% **Price: \$30**

**94** Old Reserve 2001 Plantation Rum Jamaica (Jamaica; Deutsch Family Wines & Spirits, White Plains, NY). This honey-hued rum is richly aromatic, suggesting creamy caramel and baking spice, with just a hint of banana in the background. On the palate, look for lots of spicy fireworks upfront—black pepper, hot cinnamon, clove—followed by a gentle fade of brown sugar and butterscotch. Mix for a mind-blowing mai tai. abv: 42% **Price: \$45**

**93** Brinley Gold Shipwreck Vanilla Rum (St. Kitts; Market Street Spirits, Glen Rock, NJ). Blended with Madagascar vanilla extract, this flavored rum has a mild, oaky aroma, a rounded, robust vanilla-bean flavor touched with coffee and a cinnamon zing. abv: 36% **Price: \$26**

## Scotch

**98** The Classic Cask Rare Scotch Whisky Single Batch 40 (Scotland; Spirit Imports, Sunrise, FL). Distilled in 1972 and bottled in 2012, this 40-year-old blended Scotch is special. The nut-brown hue and rich aromas of sweet spice and brown sugar hint at what's to come. It delivers bold, complex flavor: rounded toffee, allspice, leather, tea and oak, with a mouthwatering saline note and a long but gentle finish. abv: 43% **Price: \$400**

**96** Chivas Regal 18 Years (Scotland; Pernod Ricard, New York, NY). Amber and bright in the glass, this 18-year-old blended whisky melds vanilla, cigar wrapper and chamomile tea notes with nutmeg and cinnamon spice, plus a delicate puff of sweet smoke. Feels light and silky, finishes long and gently. abv: 40% **Price: \$75**





**96 Dewar's 18** (Scotland; Bacardi USA, Coral Gables, FL). This golden blended Scotch is remarkably complex, showing creamy vanilla, crème brûlée and almond before tapering to dry, warm notes of cedar, sandalwood and clove. Finishes long and feather-light, with just a trace of smokiness.

abv: 40% Price: \$80

**92 Big Peat** (Scotland; International Spirits & Wines, Mt. Kisco, NY). The name says it all: this Scotch is blended from "a shovelful" of Islay single malts, including Ardbeg, Caol Ila, Bowmore and Port Ellen—producers of some of the peatiest Scotches around. The bold iodine aroma is like breathing salt air at the seashore, and is just subtly smoky. On the palate, expect fleeting vanilla sweetness followed by a huge rush of peat smoke, which pulls back to finish with campfire s'mores and bitter chocolate notes.

abv: 46% Price: \$60

**92 The Fat Trout Blended Scotch Whisky** (Scotland; BH Group USA Imports, Manhasset, NY). Bright gold in the glass, this whisky offers vanilla and fresh-cut grass aromatics. It's similarly light and fresh on the palate, with touches of oak, vanilla and a fleeting tropical fruit note, finishing with a faint salt-air touch. The label makes this bottle a fun gift for a favorite fishing enthusiast. **Best Buy.**

abv: 40% Price: \$25

## Tequila



**95 Reserva Tequila Partida Blanco** (Mexico; Partida Tequila, San Francisco, CA). This elegant blanco features gentle floral notes, agave sweetness

and a refreshing touch of minerality, finishing crisp and peppery. Shows surprising finesse for an unaged Tequila.

abv: 40% Price: \$40

**94 Tequila Don Ramon Añejo** (Mexico; ER Distributors, San Antonio, TX). Soft and well-structured, this aged Tequila mixes spicy and sweet to delightful effect. Long honey notes linger on the tongue, tapering off with a welcome touch of cayenne-ginger heat. Sip straight up or pair with Mexican dishes with bold flavors. **Best Buy.**

abv: 40% Price: \$24

**93 Cruz Silver Tequila** (Mexico; Los Diablos Intl, Scottsdale, AZ). A refined, classic take on blanco, this Tequila has a soft feel and rounded agave sweetness. The peppery heat—more cayenne and cinnamon than vegetal jalapeño—is muted at first, but builds with repeated sips.

abv: 40% Price: \$45



**92 Casamigos Tequila Blanco** (Mexico; Sidney Frank Importing Company, Inc, New Rochelle, NY). Co-owned by actor George Clooney and nightlife impresario Rande Gerber, this blanco is smooth and light. The aromas are restrained, but on the palate look for mild agave sweetness backed by lemon zest, ginger and white pepper sparks, plus a candied lemon-peel note on the gentle exit.

abv: 40% Price: \$43

**92 Tequila Gran Dovejo Blanco** (Mexico; Mendez Imports, Dixon, CA). Inside the handsome, hefty bottle are spice-rack aromas. But the flavors are light and complex, interlacing honey with lime zest, mineral and faint white flowers that float off at the end. A top pick for pitchers of high-end margaritas.

abv: 40% Price: \$44

## Vodka



**94 Crop Organic Spiced Pumpkin Vodka** (USA; Chatham Imports, New York, NY). A must-have for autumn cocktails, this amber-hued vodka is redolent of pumpkin pie and baking spices, and has a slight vanilla sweetness. Rich and full-bodied, some might mistake this for pumpkin-flavored whiskey rather than vodka.

abv: 35% Price: \$28

**94 Rain Cucumber Vodka** (USA; Sazerac Co., Frankfort, KY). Light, fresh and just faintly sweet, this flavored vodka has spa-like notes of cucumber and lime peel. Smooth sipping, especially when chilled, and a natural for spring and summer cocktails. **Best Buy.**

abv: 30% Price: \$17

**93 Van Gogh PB&J Vodka** (Holland; Van Gogh Imports, Orlando, FL). Give this ode to a childhood favorite a chance. Clear in the glass, it has an enticing scent that evokes an actual peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It's very sweet on the palate, dominated by the peanut flavor, though the grape flavor comes through on the finish. It's addictive and makes for wonderfully campy cocktail ideas, including dessert drinks.

abv: 35% Price: \$27



**92 Devotion Vodka Wild Cherry** (USA; Devotion Spirits, Bridgeport, PA). The succulent aroma, like black cherries in syrup from a can, ready for cherry pie, makes this vodka remarkable. The flavor is almost completely neutral, with just the faintest suggestion of cherry in the brisk finish. **Best Buy.**

abv: 40% Price: \$20

**91 Belvedere Mango Passion** (Poland; Moët Hennessy USA, New York, NY). The bouquet offers aromas of mango and orange segments. On the palate, expect just a suggestion of fruitiness, with mango juiciness around the edges and into the gentle finish, rather than full-on fruit. As a result, it's well-structured for sipping (if you don't have a sweet tooth) or mixing (if you do).

abv: 40% Price: \$35