

# The Best New Spirits and Liqueurs of 2017

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If **2017 has driven you to drink**, at least you've got plenty of options. With consumers becoming increasingly discerning of what's in their glass, so have producers upped the ante on innovating what's in the bottle.

This year, we tried dozens of new spirits and liqueurs, taking notes and nursing hangovers along the way. Here are some of the things I noticed—from both in front of and behind the bar—as an NYC booze writer and bartender. Brandy continued to earn rightful recognition as the original American spirit for cocktails; more Taiwanese, Canadian, and Irish whiskies joined their Japanese counterparts in the ranks of celebrated non-American whiskies; and speaking of Japanese, as my friend Kara Newman reports, Japanese gin is on the rise. Beyond specific styles, we're also seeing continued interest in aging with a wider range of casks and barrels, from sherry and other fortified wines to applejack.

## **RECOMMENDED: SAVEUR Gift Guide 2017: Bottles We Love**

The below not-so-scientific, nowhere-near-comprehensive compilation of field notes represents bottles we loved this year—both those meant for sipping and for mixing, familiar producers and new faces, crowd-pleasers and quirkier personal favorites. From barrel-aged cachaça to sherry-cask-aged Taiwanese whiskey and one funky sotol, here are our favorite spirits and liqueurs of 2017.

Approachable but worthy of intrigue, the debut house whiskey from rare spirits hunter Nicolas Palazzi's PM Spirits makes a strong statement in an already crowded brown-spirits market. A full-proof, MGP-made Indiana bourbon, it sips pleasantly dry on account of an increased rye mash, and balances spicy, earthy, and caramel-y to perfection. Offering sophistication beyond its eight years, this is my 2017 must-have for any whiskey lover. And not that it matters, but it's also one of my favorite bottle designs of the year (that glass stopper!). Mic drop indeed, y'all.  
\$94.99

We waxed poetic about this versatile, bartender-approved liqueur in our Dec/Jan issue, so here's the condensed version. The brainchild of Amalfi Coast-born barman Giuseppe Gallo, Italicus updates the recipe for *rosolio*—the traditional rose petal liqueur enjoyed by Italian nobles—with the addition of bergamot, that distinctive citrus native to the UNESCO-protected Calabria region. The perfect harmony of sweet, bright, and bitter, Italicus took home the prestigious Best Cocktail Ingredient title at this year's Tales of the Cocktail event. Sip it solo as an aperitif or top it off with sparkling wine. \$40

Big age statements certainly carry a wow factor, but sometimes, the stuff in the bottle doesn't justify the splurge. While we'd generally not include something so pricey on this kind of list, a whiff and taste of this blended (yes, *blended*) vintage Scotch whiskey—especially after it's had a moment to breathe and open up—had me thinking of missing a month of rent to pick up one of only 1,352 bottles produced. For collectors of fine scotches and other special-occasion pours, the ultra-rare products in the portfolio of exclusive spirits company Last Drop Distillers often fit the bill.

In this, their tenth release, 40 different malt and grain whiskies, all distilled in 1971, come together in a “triple-matured” product—it was aged for 12 years before its initial blend, then the remainder was rested in ex-oloroso sherry butts for nine years, *then* partially re-blended and transferred to oak barrels for 24 years. There's a lot going on here taste-wise—candied orange, almond, vanilla, baked fruit—all working in harmony for an unforgettable sip. \$3,247+

Juniper, meet yuzu. If you're a gin connoisseur, you'll likely do a double-take after the first sip from this groundbreaking, unabashedly Asian-inflected bottle, the first gin from the acclaimed Japanese whiskey producer Nikka. You may also have to Google some of the Japanese and Taiwanese fruits and botanicals that have made their way into the mix—including *kabosu*, *amanatsu*, and *sansho* pepper, a cousin of the Sichuan peppercorn—which accent the barley-corn base with bright punches of citrus and a bitterness that catch you off guard (in a good way). And lastly, since you'll definitely want another pour, chilled-and-neat works great, or try it in a stirred cocktail. Only 12,000 bottles were produced, so get on this fast. \$39.99-\$59.99

When it comes to original American bottles, no producer has been as innovative as Joe Heron's Copper & Kings. Sitting in the heart of bourbon country, the Louisville-based distillery puts out all manner of fun spirits and liqueurs—think juniper barrel-aged absinthe and a gin made from grape wine and German beer. Their traditional flagship brandy, American Craft, is an all-time great, and this new 100-proof apple brandy, which came to NYC early this year, brings the same depth and character to a new medium.

Blending copper pot-distilled apple brandy aged in two separate environments—Kentucky bourbon barrels and 250-liter oloroso sherry casks—the bottling offers heavy hits of baking spices to accompany expected layers of molasses and caramel. \$42.99

American brandy may be having a moment, but there's enough room in this country for the French stuff too. On the sipping end of the spectrum, the Pierre Ferrand Reserve (or XO) replacement takes cognac aged in oak barrels for 7-10 years, then blends it with 20-year-old cognac and ages all that together in former Banyuls wine casks (Banyuls is a delicious French fortified wine). As suggested in the name, that double cask quality is the primary draw here, with whiffs of caramel and vanilla giving way to baking spices nuttiness, and a dessert-like finish. \$69.99

Taiwan's first whisky distillery, King Car, has been making waves in whisky since 2015 when it took home the title for best single malt at the World Whiskies Awards. This year, they've introduced their Solist line of single barrel, sherry cask single malts—amontillado, manzanilla,

moscatel and Pedro Ximenez (PX)—to the States. I tried the lot with a group of bartenders whose general consensus was that, of the bunch, the PX bottling was the standout.

Playing off the flavors of Spain’s viscous, sweet dessert sherry, the whisky is amped up with notes of molasses, raisin, coffee, and cocoa from its time in the casks. It’s a little higher in ABV at 55.6%, and makes for ideal sipping neat or on ice. \$570.05-\$999.99

With Irish whiskey seeing consecutive double-digit growth year-on-year, it was high time bartenders got a product as versatile as this new release from Brown-Forman, which is the company’s first in the style. There’s some fun history behind the bottle: it’s produced near the village of Slane (population 1,400), located in the Boyne River Valley and considered to be Ireland’s cradle of civilization as well as a long time hub of Irish whiskey production. The grain and malt base is put through a triple-cask maturation process that’s unique for aging in virgin oak as well as seasoned oak formerly used for American whiskey and finally oloroso sherry casks. Its robust, spicy palate makes for nice sipping, but its price point also makes it lovely for cocktails, both spirits-forward and shaken. \$35

The mythical jackrabbit graces the label of this bottle and it’s almost as hard to find. A limited release from the highly-awarded Utah distillery, the bottle features a very unusual blend of straight Bourbon and straight rye (hence the name)—both aged between 10 and 14 years—that truly captures the best of both worlds: a nose of apple and spice; a palate of nuttiness, berry, and vanilla; and even more spice on the long finish. Being more of a bourbon drinker myself, I think this would be nice for someone looking to dip their feet into rye without being hit head-on with the style’s dry spice. \$80

We don’t get to try tequila’s terroir-driven “cousin” sotol much, so I was excited to see this unaged offering from the state of Durango’s oldest sotol distillery arrive in the States. (The nickname is a bit of a misnomer, though, since sotol is made from a different succulent known as wild Dasylyrion wheeleri, or “Dessert Spoon.”). It’s being imported by Hecho en Dumbo chef Danny Mena, who’s also a partner in one of our favorite mezcals, Mezcales de Leyenda.

Like most, Fabriquero’s operation uses plants that are 100% estate grown, which are hand-picked when ripe, cooked for 5 days in a lava rock pit using acacia and mesquite, then crushed by hand and fermented in open air. Boasting a nice rich mouthfeel, lighter smokiness than mezcal, and lots of green and floral notes ranging from lemon peel to ripe tropical fruit, it’s a fun bottle to test in recipes that traditionally call for tequila or mezcal (it doesn’t always work since it’s a little sweeter). Definitely worth a try. \$64.99

For their latest, a limited release, New York Distilling Company takes their signature rye—a blend of three, four, and five-year-old whiskies—and ages it for five months in barrels once used for applejack by fellow New York producer Black Dirt Distillery. It brings together two of America’s oldest spirits—there is an entire category of cocktails that split their base between rye and applejack, which have an affinity for each other—and makes for a fun pour that adds some bright apple to existing notes of cherry and vanilla. It’s good alone but also makes a mean Manhattan. \$45.99

Launched earlier this month, this ruby-red bottle from Australian producer Four Pillars Gin is certainly one of the most fun gins available right now: produced using a French technique “saignée” (or bleeding), it uses shiraz grapes that are steeped in gin for eight weeks. There are loads of red berry and other fruit flavors here, alongside pine, citrus, and spice, but juniper is still center stage. The producer notes that, like a shiraz wine, the flavor will change over time and is best enjoyed within two years. Bonus: When mixed with tonic or soda, it turns a bright pink color that photographs well (sue me). \$38.00-\$39.99

The Macallan could do whatever it wanted and thousands of Macallan neats would still be served in bars across the country each night. So I can appreciate their desire to continue innovating and doing “fun” things—see their special “Editions” series that includes a collaboration between their master whisky maker Bob Dalgarno and the perfumist Roja Dove. But of the things I tried in 2017, I thought Dalgarno’s high-ABV Classic Cut—matured in oloroso sherry-seasoned oak casks and offering notes of fruit, spice, and caramel—presented the best bang for your buck, especially when compared to the rest of their portfolio. For its drinkability *and* affordability, I’d recommend this bottle. \$89

Kentucky’s Bardstown Bourbon Company is hopping on the trend of second-finishing whiskey here with their two Collabor&tion bottles, produced with their neighbors Copper & Kings. One is aged in casks first used for C&K’s American Craft brandy, and the other is aged in those used for their Muscat Mistelle—a grape juice fortified with un-aged brandy, like a Pineau de Charentes. While both are interesting pours, I’m drawn to the latter for being totally different from a traditional bourbon or even another wine-finished bourbon.

While it has the ABV of a whiskey, the Mistelle’s influence is very prevalent here with dark fruit sweetness and a bitter, wine-like aftertaste. It’s a bit of a risky move, I’m sure, for the whiskey cognoscenti, but nonetheless a great product if you can forgo preconceptions about style. \$124.99

Come for the sustainable production and stay for an excellent cachaça. Brazilian distillery Novo Fogo has always had my heart for its sustainable farming methods, using organic cane and operating a zero-waste distillery. A special release for 2017, the Colibri has been aged in both repurposed American oak and legally-sourced amburana oak casks. Amburana, sometimes called Brazilian teak, brings lovely cinnamon and spice into the mix, which complements the style’s natural sweetness. I’m ready for my caipirinha. \$34.99

We love this clean, medium-bodied vodka produced using magical-sounding glacier water and barley sourced from a small southern Finnish village. It’s been growing its legendary presence in Finland since 1953 (and has been winning international awards for almost as long), but it’s only recently landed on US shores. Interesting production note: the barley base undergoes continuous distillation—some 250 times before bottling. It’s perfect for mixing or just knocking back chilled. \$25

Giffard is a mainstay of fruit liqueurs that actually taste like the fruit they're supposed to taste like (I die for their banana version). This new release puts a less common, and seriously underrated, flavor behind the bar. Have you ever tasted actual passion fruit? Citrusy, bright, and a bit sweet, it's the perfect ingredient when you need a little something-something tropical. (They also released a Pineapple this year if that's more your thing). \$24.99

**Honorable Mention:** Highwire Distilling Jimmy Red Straight Bourbon Whiskey, \$99.99; EI Tesoro 80th Anniversary Extra Aged Tequila, \$200; Appleton Estate Joy Anniversary Blend, \$250; Knappogue Castle Special Barrel Release, \$65; The Street Pumas - Rum, \$29.99