

HOORAY FOR THE

MADURO WINE AND SPIRIT GUIDE

...here to answer all several of your questions, whether they crossed your mind or not.

MADURO WINE AND SPIRIT GUIDE

Section 1 - Whisk(e)y

Whisk(e)y is a grain-based distillate that is made throughout the world. The word comes from old Gaelic, *usquebaugh*, which means 'water of life'. Aquavit/Akavit and Vodka are really whiskey, but for practical reasons they are thought of separately. Whiskey is spelled with the 'e' just about every place except Scotland, which is a big exception given the great number and the quality of Scotch Whiskies.

Scotch

We sell oodles of 'em, probably more than any other bar in the state. Scotches are really cool and cover a great range of flavors and styles. Very often they have flavor profiles that include a smokiness... like a cigar bar has smokiness (onions have layers, ogres have layers).

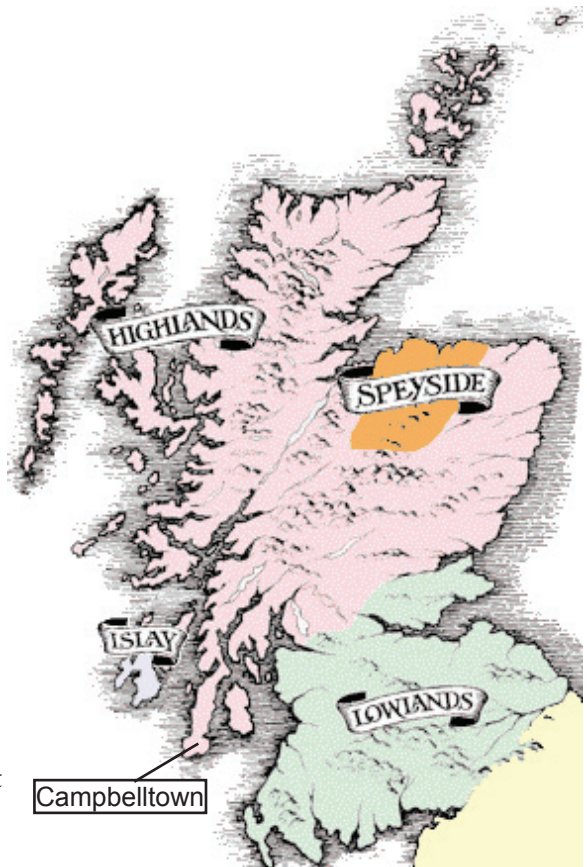
Scotch, at its best, is made from malted barley (malt). The barley is harvested and soaked to begin germination; just as the grains begin to sprout they are heated in (often) peat-fired kilns to stop the growth. This is malt, and is the basis for single malt and most top blended scotch whiskies.

Single Malt Scotch refers to scotch from one producer or house, as opposed to Blended Scotch in which scotch from many houses are blended to produce a broader product. The analogy that is often used is that of a symphony (blended scotch) versus a soloist (single malt). We sell mainly single malts because they are cooler and there are more of them available.

We separate the scotches into categories based on where in Scotland they were made (in case it is not self-evident, Scotch can only come from Scotland). Where they were made in turn helps to define their general style and flavor.

Lowlands - Scotches from the area south of Glasgow and Edinburgh are lowland scotches. The land is less mountainous than the highlands, as the name implies. A key ingredient in scotch is water. The water used is mainly from runoff. Water in the highlands runs through rocks, etc. Water in the lowlands runs through rolling hills of heather and Gaelic moss. Lowland scotches are, as a whole, softer, lighter, and more delicate than highland or island scotches. They tend to need less time aging before bottling because they are lighter (too much time in oak would overpower the subtlety). That is why they are typically less expensive: not because they are of lesser quality, but because they require less time taking up space in warehouses until they are ready for market.

Highlands - Most scotch distilleries are in the Highlands. It is a diverse geographic area extending from Campbelltown on the Atlantic coast to Speyside on the eastern coast to the Orkney Islands in the North Sea. We distinguish Speyside scotches on our list from the rest of the highlands because of their unique characteristics and the great number of distilleries there. Campbelltown is considered its own region in many Scotch guides, as they have as much in common with Islay scotches as they do with highlands (one look at a map of Scotland will point to why).



Speysides come from east of Inverness and the Firth of Forth. They are generally the richest and most full-bodied scotches on our list. They tend to be less floral and delicate, and more intense, robust, and bigger. They respond better to extended periods of oak aging and are hence typically more expensive. Most of our sherry-aged scotches are from Speyside. When used for aging scotch, sherry casks provide a sweetness and softness that one doesn't get from straight oak.

Islands - In official scotch designations, there are four geographic regions (Lowland, Highland, Campbeltown, Islay). We group together the scotches made on any of the many islands around the country with the Islay scotches. The traditional and still widely used method of heating the germinated barley on the islands is with peat (compact earth and bio-matter). The use of peat gives a distinct taste to these scotches; one whiff of Laphroig will tell you what peat smells like. The other distinguishing factor in island scotches is that they are aged by the sea (islands, get it?).

Oak is porous, and it breathes throughout the aging process, bringing in a bit of sea air to the whisky. Island scotches tend to have a briny or salty quality because of this. Where a whisky (or a whiskey, for that matter) is aged has a great impact on how it ages, mainly due to humidity. Casks that are stored in warehouses along the sea have a slower rate of exchange with the air, resulting in a slower and more delicate aging process. Conversely, casks in lower humidity environments breath more through the drier oak (this loss due to evaporation is called the Angel's Share).

Irish Whiskey

The Irish are credited with the first modern whiskey distilleries (and the first modern brandy distilleries, god love 'em). Irish whiskey differs from scotch in two general ways; it is made with a third distillation, and does it not use peat fired kilns to dry the barley. This makes the final product taste less smoky/peaty and gives it a cleaner taste (for better or worse). Most all readily available Irish whiskey is blended and is barley-based. It is tempting to compare Irish whiskeys with Single Malt scotch, but a better comparison is with blended scotches (Walker, Dewar's, etc).

Bourbon

Bourbon is America's contribution to the whiskey world (no offense to American straight whiskey or Canadian whiskey... at least no more offense to them than they give us). Bourbon was the choice drink of the royal family of France in the 1800s and bourbon casks are the first choice of many scotch producers for aging or finishing their whiskies.

Place, process, and ingredients define bourbon relative to other whiskeys. Technically, there is no distinct appellation for bourbon (appellation meaning geographically defined area), though as a matter of practicality, bourbons are from Kentucky (named after Bourbon County). Jack Daniels is not a bourbon because it comes from Tennessee, though it should be thought of as one for our purposes. More importantly, bourbons are made partially with corn (sour mash) and aged in charcoal-charred barrels. Corn has natural sweetness that barley does not, so the end product is sweeter (which is undoubtedly why it is such a favorite of younger whiskey drinkers).

That extra sugar in the mash is also what gives bourbon its higher cask strength proof. Cask strength is the ABV (alcohol by volume) before bottling. Bourbons are more often bottled at cask strength than are scotches; just take a look at the proofs of our bourbons... near or over 100 is not uncommon. Because of this they need to be cut with water to fully appreciate their flavor without having the alcohol deaden one's senses (unless you are Joel).

Rye

Rye is also an American whiskey thing, often made by the same people who make bourbons. Where bourbon needs to have at least 51% corn, rye must have at least 51% rye grain as its base.

American and Canadian Straight Whiskey

Whiskeys that are made with (typically) wheat grain as their base. Producing whiskey with wheat instead of barley is less expensive, but makes for a lighter and less smooth end product. The Canadians have a track record for better straight whiskey than the US does, and obviously Crown Royal and CC have their following. Beyond that there isn't much we need to care about. One exception is Michter's. By definition it is American whiskey, yet it tastes very bourbon-like. It is my guess that there is some sour mash used in the production, but not enough to call it a bourbon (they do make a bourbon and a rye bottling as well).

Section 2 - Brandy

Cognac

If you distill beer you get whiskey, if you distill wine you get brandy. Cognac is brandy from Cognac, France that is made by a specific method with specific grapes. The grapes used in Cognac make nasty, acidic wine (which is why they distilled them in the first place), but make for a great brandy that ages really well.

VS means very special and is used for cognacs that are (in practice) at least 3 years old. VSOP means very special old pale and is typically used for cognacs at least 6 years old. Terms like XO and Napoleon are brand-specific and are used for older cognacs. Cognacs do not normally have vintage dates, in fact, in France they cannot. Cognacs like the Ferrand 1968 are Early Landed Cognacs. They were bought young in cask and aged in England where they can be released as vintage dated.

The term Champagne appears on many cognac labels. This has nothing to do with the sparkling wine and everything to do with the rolling hills (champagne) that make up both areas. Grande Champagne is the most prized area for cognac production, making bigger, more robust brandies. Petite Champagne is more about finesse and elegance. Fine Champagne is a blend of the two and must be at least half Grande Champagne.

Cognac is made in a pot still, the same type used in scotch production (as opposed to a continuous still).

Armagnac

Like cognac, armagnac is a French brandy. It comes from south of Bordeaux around the town of Armagnac and is made with the same grapes as cognac with the addition of a few more varieties. The major distinction between the two is that armagnac is made (traditionally) in a continuous still. The end product is (traditionally) more rustic and aggressive, though it lends itself better to extended aging. Armagnacs are often vintage dated.

Other Brandies

Though we don't currently sell any, Spanish brandies are quite popular. Many come from Jerez, the center of Sherry production. Asbach is German brandy, Pisco is South American (usually from Peru or Chile) brandy. California makes a lot of brandy, mainly for domestic sale. Wisconsin is the largest consumer of brandy in the US; drinks like old fashioned and manhattans are seldom made with brandy outside of the upper Midwest.

Germain-Robin is a unique producer. The family traces their past back to Cognac, where they made brandies. One limiting factor in cognac production is the requirement to use one of three nasty, acidic grape varieties. The family chose to move to California to make brandy where there is no such limitation. They make domestic brandy with the quality of cognacs, but from grapes like Pinot Noir, etc. Germain-Robin also makes Hanger One vodkas.

Grappa, Marc

If you make brandy in France outside of Cognac or Armagnac, and you have marc. Grappa is made from the pomace of wine grapes (the pressings left after crushing grapes to extract their juice). There are a lot of volatile compounds in the stems, skins, and seeds of grapes. When distilled this can make for a unique liquor which is not everyone's cup of tea.

Calvados

Similar to the whole cognac thing, but made from apples, not grapes. Calvados is made in Normandy and Brittany (northwestern France).

Section 3 - White Spirits

Vodka, Gin, Akavit

Vodka's main characteristic is the multiple distillations it undergoes to provide a very clean, pure spirit. Grain-based vodkas are made from the same stuff that makes scotch and other whiskeys. The difference is in the extreme distillations and lack of aging. (As an annoying aside, while some justification for \$30+ scotches and brandies exists because of aging (storage space, tying up inventory), how can the same product without the aging cost the same?)

Vodkas are also made from potatoes (traditional in eastern Europe), corn, or anything else that has a starch that can be converted to sugar and alcohol.

Gin can be thought of as flavored vodka. The same base clean grain alcohol is either distilled with or infused with spices and herbs. The most pronounced flavor is usually juniper (genever in Dutch, which is where the word gin comes from).

Likewise, akavit is basically a vodka infused with spices, mainly caraway seed. Akavit, aqua vitae, whiskey, eau de vie, and vodka all derive their names from 'water of life' (vodka is Russian for 'little water'). Akavit is simply the Scandinavian term for the same root words.

Tequila, Mescal

Tequila and mescal differ from the rest mainly because of their base ingredient. They are made from Agave (kind of like Yuca Plant). Tequila must be made from at least 51% agave, though in practice high-end tequilas are 100% agave. The coloration in tequila comes from aging in oak (anejo is aged longer than reposado, plato is not aged), unless you are making cheap, nasty tequila (see Cuervo), then they use artificial coloring.

Mescal comes from the state of Oaxaca (Tequila is in Jalisco) and must be made from 100% agave. The typical process for making mescal is more artisan than that for tequila. Mescal tends to be more flavorful and rustic.

Rhum

For our purposes, rhum is sugar cane based liquor (forget about the eastern European freak rhums made from sugar beets). If you distill a mash of cane sugar you get white rum, if you age the white rum you get gold rum. If you distill molasses (the dregs of sugar production) you get dark rum. If you take barely passable crap white rum and caramel-color it, adding artificial sweeteners and imitation spice flavors you get Captain Morgans. There is an intermediate step in sugar production that results in Demerara sugar (named for a place in Venezuela). If you start with this as a base you get demerara rhum (i.e. Blackbeards).

Section 4 - Fortified Wine

Sherry

Fortified wines are a combination of fermented grape juice (wine) and distilled grape juice (brandy). Sherry and Port are the most popular fortified wines.

Jerez/Xeres/Sherry is the name of the place in Spanish/French/English where sherry comes from. Actually, it comes from the area around three coastal towns in southern Spain, near Jerez de la Frontera. Sherries run from dry to sweet and are all made with the same two grape varieties (this contrasts with port - all sweet, same grapes; and Madeira - dry to sweet, different grapes). The main grape is Palomino, the secondary grape is Pedro Ximenez (PX).

Sherries come in two major styles: fino and oloroso. Amontillado is aged fino, cream is sweetened oloroso. Palo Cortado is an intermediate style between amontillado and oloroso. Manzanilla is fino produced along the coast. Pasada is aged manzanilla. Finos and amontillados are dry, olorosos can be dry or medium sweet, cream sherries are sweet. Got it?, Good.

Sherry is made in open casks. A beneficial mold forms along the top of the fermenting wine (the flor). If the flor breaks and air gets into the wine you have oloroso sherry... if it remains intact, you have fino. Finos are considered the finest of the sherries, and the best examples rarely make it here. Still, for its complexity, balance, and ability to go with food, sherry is relatively underpriced compared to table wines in general. Learn to like sherry, it will make you a better person.

The Alvear sherries we sell are not truly sherries. They are made from PX grapes in Montilla-Moriles just north of Jerez.

Port

From the river Duero and the coastal city Oporto, comes Port (or Porto). Port comes in two major types: ruby and tawny. Ruby ports see less time in barrel than do tawnies. It is the extended aging that gives the wine a browner color, hence the term.

The pinnacle of ruby port is Vintage Port, making up less than 3% of all port production. Vintage port is only made in years deemed worthy by the Port Board (typically three years every decade). It spends two years in oak and can take another ten to twenty years in bottle to mature. They can last 50+ years in bottle if cellared properly.

In non-declared years, individual port houses may decide to bottle vintage dated single Quinta ports. A quinta is a vineyard, and in any given year a particular vineyard may produce a great bottling of wine. The house can sell this as (i.e.) Warre's 1987 Quinta do Cavadinha; 1987 being a non-declared year, but a great one for the Quinta of Cavadinha.

LBV (late bottled vintage) is the best bang for the buck in ruby port. It is vintage port from any year (declared or not) and is aged six years in cask before being bottled. The extended oak aging softens the wine more rapidly than it would in bottle so that it is ready to drink upon release. Vintage Character ports (Warre's Warrior, Fonseca Bin 27, etc.) are better than simple bottlings labelled only Ruby Port, but a often heard comment is that Vintage Character ports are neither - they are not vintage and have little character.

Tawny ports are labeled for the length of time they have spent in wood. If no designation of age is given they are either 7-10 years old or a complete joke and are simply caramel colored. 10 year old is the most common bottling seen. There are of course 20 year, 30 year, and 40 year tawny ports. 40 year tawnies are priced almost as highly as vintage port. It is very rare to see bottlings of over 40 years. The exception is Colheita port, which is vintage tawny port. These will have both a date of vintage and a date of bottling. With that much time in cask, very little maturation will occur in bottle... so a 1937 Colheita bottled in 1977 is a 40 year vintage tawny, not a 67 year old tawny (in 2004).

One more trick about port. If the bottles are finished with a T-cap, they are meant to be drunk over time as the cap can repeatedly be taken off and put back on. If they are finished with a regular cork they are

meant to be consumed over a much shorter period of time. A Vintage Port (traditional cork) will last a week or two open without losing its stuff. A tawny port (T-cap) will last months once opened.

Port (that isn't true port because of the place-name requirements) comes from other places besides Portugal. South Africa, Australia and California all make port-type wines from grapes other than the traditional blend.

Madeira

Madeira is made in much the same way as port, but in this case the wines can be either dry or sweet. Unlike sherry and port, madeira is made from several different grape varieties. Dry Sercial madeira is made from at least 85% Sercial grapes, medium dry Verdelho from 85% Verdelho grapes. Medium sweet bual and sweet malmsey are made similarly.

Madeira is aged in heated rooms so that the wine is literally slow cooked. Madeiras last much longer than any other wine because in essence, they have already seen the worst... what could possibly kill them now? The cooked aroma, when present in other wines that have seen too high temperatures in storage, is called madeirization. This quality makes madeira a great choice to have with a cigar.

VDN

Vin Doux Naturels (naturally sweet wine) is the term for a variety of other French fortified wines including several Muscats, Banyuls, Maury, etc. Much like port, they begin as sweet wines then the fermentation is stopped by the addition of brandy (which kills the yeasts that is converting the sugar to alcohol). So one is left with a sweet and strong wine.

Section 5 - Sparkling Wines

Champagne

Ooh la la. Champagne is a place and a wine. The EU restricts the use of the term to sparkling wines that come from Champagne. The INAO (french wine law organization) restricts the use of the term to sparkling wines that come from Champagne and are made in the traditional method with any of three specified grape varieties. Some places outside the EU (Korbel winery, etc) don't obey the restrictions and call non-champagnes champagne. French wines that are otherwise like champagne but come from elsewhere can be labelled 'Methode Champenoise', or 'Methode Traditionelle' (subtle difference between the two terms, but both denote quality sparkling wine).

The Champagne Method is not the only way to make still wine bubbly, but it is considered the way to make the finest sparkling wines. The crux of the method is a secondary fermentation that takes place in the bottle. The first fermentation is the standard sugar to alcohol that makes all wine so much fun. The second is similar, but by containing the wine in the bottle the CO₂ (natural by-product of fermentation) the wine becomes bubbly; hence the need for heavy glass and a cage around the cork. Other ways of making wine sparkle include doing this same process in a large vessel then bottling the CO₂ed juice (this is the standard for cheap 'champagne', cold duck, etc). Also, CO₂ can be injected into the wine directly which makes for a coarser bubble and a much less expensive product.

True champagne is made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and/or Pinot Muenier. Muenier and Pinot Noir are red grapes. Champagnes made from either of these two (or both) are labelled Blanc de Noirs. Champagnes made exclusively from Chardonnay are labelled Blanc de Blancs. Vintage champagne comes from a single year that has been deemed worthy by the wine powers that be. Not every year produces Vintage Champagne. Much like Vintage Port, there are typically three vintages each decade that are bottled as Vintage Champagne. Otherwise the wines are blended across a few years to maintain a standard house flavor. Clicquot Yellow tastes roughly the same year in and year out because of this.

Other Bubbles

Cava is the de rigueur sparkling by the glass in most good restaurants and bars. It is inexpensive and of reasonable quality (some are great, most are fine). Cava comes from Spain, and it is interesting that there is no specific geographic limit to cava production. Most cavas come from northeastern Spain, but they can be made almost anywhere in the country. Cava is made in the “methode champenoise”. Cava is made from Xarel-lo, Parellada, and Macabeo/Viura (quiz tomorrow), but who really cares? It is great bubbly for champagne cocktails, mimosas, French or Italian 75s, etc.

Italy's contribution to reasonable sparkling is Prosecco. Prosecco is a grape and a wine. It comes from northeastern Italy. Typically, light and fresh and lovely. It is made in the bulk method

Section 6 - Good Old Wine

Way too much to go into here. Wine School starts soon, and we will cover still wine, region by region, over time. In brief, wine is fermented grape juice. The more sugar in the grape at harvest, the more potential alcohol in the finished wine. Wines from hotter climates tend to produce higher alcohol (and more intense) wines because the grapes get big and ripe. Cooler climates tend to produce lower alcohol wines and more white wines (the pigmentation in the skins acts as a survival mechanism for the grapes in hotter climates). Where hot climate wines are intense, full-bodied, tannic and alcoholic, cool climate wines are more elegant, lighter, more acidic, finer.

Another major distinction when assessing wines is whether they are old-world styled wines or new-world styled wines. Old-world implies Europe, and the wines are generally better suited to food. They are more earthy, acidic, and tannic; three things that can go really well with vegetables and herbs, dairy products, and red meats, respectively. New-world wines are the ‘fruit-bomb’ wines of California and Australia for the most part. They are more fruit than earth, more sweet than acidic, and more lush than tannic. This style of wine is, perhaps, better suited to wine drinking on its own. The very elements that make old-world wines so appealing with food can make them off-putting when consumed by themselves.

Section 7 - Beer

Beer is fermented barley, water, yeast, and hops. Again, beer is to whisk(e)y as wine is to brandy: the fermented beverage vs. the distilled beverage.

There are two big categories in the beer world, top fermented or bottom fermented. Lagers are bottom fermented and matured for weeks to months (lager in German means to store) before bottling and release. Pilsner is a type of light lager originally from Plzen in the Czech Republic. Dark lagers are made with roasted barley. Bock beers, Oktoberfest, and Steam Beer are all bottom fermented, lager type beers. Lagers tend to have a greater malt character with less of a hops aroma.

Ales are top fermented beers. Ales are (generally) more about hops than malt, they are more vinous and aromatic and tend to be higher in alcohol. Originally (or at least, famously) they are British as opposed to the Germanic lagers. Stout, Barley Wine, Bitter, and Porter are all ales.

Belgium is up there with Germany, Great Britain and Kalamazoo as the great beer producing regions. We sell a few Belgian beers, all of which have strong flavors from sweet and smoky to fresh and fruity. I have no clue if they are top fermented or bottom fermented or neither. We just need to know that, to connoisseurs, Belgian beers are a kin to Scottish whisky, the most diverse and interesting area of production.

Questions

If you have questions on anything we sell, just ask me. If I don't know the answer, then we can find out together. Joe Fuller and Jackson are the cigar experts, we can call Bell's with any beer question, I should have the wine covered, Joel knows his brown liquor and gin, Kitty Bennett from Import and Liz Farley from Left Bank are very sharp on all their products. Stay tuned for the Great Maduro Staff Quiz, coming soon!

