

Aged Offerings

Older whiskies bring depth and sophistication to the cocktail glass

BY SALLY KRAL

Chicago restaurant Big Star boasts a wide selection of high-end and rare American whiskies, including numerous single barrel expressions that can only be found there. “The other afternoon a group of gentlemen who were in town from Kentucky and had heard of our list came in while doing a bar crawl of aged Bourbons,” beverage director Laurent Lebec says. “They sat down—remember, it’s about 1 P.M.—and shared pours of the Buffalo Trace Antique Collection, the latest Four Roses Small Batch, and more, while joyfully comparing notes.” Lebec adds that this wasn’t as common in previous years as it has become now. “Our guests are driven and educated about spirits in a new way,” he explains. “It’s been highly enjoyable to watch.”

The growth in enthusiasm and education about high-end whiskies is influencing the way mixologists approach cocktail-making. “A lot of brands are vying for spots on the menu, which has made it more common to see all types of spirits in cocktails,” says Jake Strawser, co-owner of Billy Club, a restaurant and bar in Buffalo, New York. “And with it being more common to see higher-end whiskies on menus, people are then more apt to try them in cocktails.”

Though there are some in the field who are still hesitant to mix an 18-year-old Scotch with any ingredients other than ice, others are embracing consumers’ excitement about these spirits and their willingness to spend a little more for a unique drinking experience. “I believe that consumers’ palates have become more sophisticated due to their exposure to more upscale dining and drinking venues,” says Shawna Wright, bartender at The Whiskey Ward in New York City. “They want to satisfy their refined tastes, which has led to greater demand for high-end whiskies and more complex cocktails.”



The Rosemary’s Baby at Reserve 101 mixes Old Forester 1870 Original Batch Bourbon, house-made honey apricot cordial, lemon juice, and rosemary.

Keep It Classic

Benjamin Schiller, beverage director for the Chicago-based Fifty/50 Restaurant Group, isn’t opposed to using top-quality whiskies in his cocktails, but recognizes certain guidelines when using them. “I’ve only come across a few immutable rules that apply to tending bar, and the practice of excluding good whiskey from cocktails isn’t one of them,” he says. “There does, however, seem to be an unspoken convention that as age statements and price tags increase, the bartender’s role as a mixer decreases.” For these “special occasion” whiskies, Schiller adds, the focus should be on very simple, classic recipes. “The ‘less is more’ approach is a safe trail to tread. Manhattans and Old Fashioneds are the most popular at the moment, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

At Billy Club, the Napa Cask Manhattan (\$12) features Miró sweet vermouth, Angostura bitters, and the locally produced Tommyrotter Napa Valley Heritage Cask Straight Bourbon, a limited offering priced at \$70 a 750-ml. The drink was created by Billy Club co-owner Dan Hagen, who notes that his guests are particularly drawn to local high-end products, even if they come with a higher price tag. “In Buffalo, we’re seeing a shift in the buying habits of consumers, albeit in a much slower fashion than in larger markets,” he notes. “Consumers seek out something that is interesting or different, and we see a lot of support for brands coming out of the Buffalo region.”

Maurice DiMarino, beverage director for San Diego-based Cohn Restaurant Group, notes that although he doesn’t think it’s monetarily feasible to have an entire cocktail menu at a top-tier price point, featuring one such drink or devoting a section of your menu to these drinks can be successful. “At our downtown venue, Bluepoint Coastal Cuisine, the bar team



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The King’s Reward has a base of Dalmore 12-year-old single malt Scotch, while The Lily & The Thistle incorporates Glenlivet 15-year-old. The New Yorker mixes a house-aged blend of Hudson’s Baby Bourbon, Manhattan Rye, and New York Corn whiskies.

makes a barrel-aged cocktail with three different expressions of Hudson Bourbon, which is a fairly expensive brand, especially for a cocktail menu,” he says. “But they do really well with that drink, and they charge accordingly.” The drink, called The New Yorker (\$16), is a twist on the Manhattan comprising a house-aged blend of Hudson’s Baby Bourbon, Manhattan Rye, and New York Corn whiskies, as well as Dolin Rouge vermouth and house-made blueberry bitters.

“I believe that great taste can be found across the board from the low end to the high end—though I always relish a guest calling for a Pappy Van Winkle Old Fashioned or a Parker’s Heritage Manhattan,” Big Star’s Lebec says. “There’s depth and complexity to older spirits that can be transportive in a different way than younger Bourbon. My favorite high-end

mixer is Booker’s—it’s younger compared to a lot of aged spirits, but old enough that it retains the base character of the corn.” His Booker’s Bourbon Manhattan (\$18) mixes Booker’s with Cinzano 1757 Rosso and Dolin Dry vermouths and Angostura bitters.

H. Joseph Ehrmann, proprietor of San Francisco bar Elixir, approves of using simple cocktail builds when considering aged whiskies. “Some cask-strength American whiskies can work very well in an Old Fashioned or other simple serves where the inherent flavors of the spirit are simply enhanced by a touch of sweet and spice or bitters—I usually use our private barrels for these types of drinks,” he says. His Old Fashioned (\$14) features Wild Turkey Kentucky Spirit Elixir Private Select Bourbon, simple syrup, and Angostura bitters, while his Whiskey Sour



PHOTO BY QUY TRAN

PHOTOS BY (LEFT) QUY TRAN; (TOP RIGHT) ADRIAN BARRY

(\$13) comprises Elijah Craig Elixir Private Select Bourbon, lemon juice, simple syrup, and egg white.

Lebec's George T. Stagg Antique Old Fashioned (\$20) features the 2017 Stagg release, Demerara simple syrup and Angostura bitters. "Our Bourbons with higher price tags tend to be older, with more wood characteristics and deeper, richer sweetness," Lebec says. "The aromatics are often complex, spanning the gamut from citrus to stone fruit to dark chocolate. Due to the beauty of the base spirit, we usually recommend an Old Fashioned. The sugar adds texture and the bitters complement the Bourbon's bouquet."

Balancing Act

At Reserve 101 in Houston, the bar team doesn't shy away from using top-notch whiskies in cocktails. "We've always believed in using premium brands in our cocktails and listing them on the menu so guests know what they're getting," says co-owner Mike Raymond. "The beauty of these spirits is that they have a deep range of flavors that makes them extremely versatile—but as with any cocktail, balance is the most important factor to keep in mind." His King's Reward (\$12) comprises Dalmore 12-year-old Scotch, Cynar amaro, and Bittercube Blackstrap bitters, served with a side of house-made sea salt tincture, while bartender Leslie Krockenberger's Rosemary's Baby (\$12) blends Old Forester 1870 Original Batch Bourbon, house-made honey apricot cordial, lemon juice, and fresh rosemary.

"When using high-end whiskies, it's necessary to consider the balance of sweet and sour or sweet and bitter characteristically



At Big Star, the Booker's Bourbon Manhattan blends the high-end whiskey with two types of vermouth and Angostura bitters.

found in classic whisk(e)y cocktails," The Whiskey Ward's Wright says. "However, I've recently been using herbal liqueurs such as Green and Yellow Chartreuse, as well as amari, to create unique flavor profiles in high-end whisk(e)y cocktails." Her O'Peat cocktail (\$15) blends Myers's rum with Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch, Green Chartreuse, and maple syrup.

Wright adds that the rest of the ingredients in a cocktail featuring a top shelf whisk(e)y should be of similar quality. "For example, when mixing a classic Manhattan, the sweet vermouth used should be top of the line, and if using citrus in a high-end whisk(e)y cocktail, the juice should be freshly squeezed that day," she says. The bar's Guardian Angel Sour (\$14) blends Angel's Envy Port Barrel Finished Bourbon, Aperol aperitif, agave syrup, and fresh lemon juice. Billy Club's Strawser shares Wright's

sentiment. "If you're going to make the investment and use a quality whisk(e)y, it's important to build that up with other quality ingredients," he explains. "There's nothing more disappointing than seeing a beautiful whisk(e)y in a cocktail with a lackluster supporting cast."

At New York City bar Highlands, beverage director Andrey Kalinin's The Lily & The Thistle (\$21) comprises Glenlivet 15-year-old French Oak single malt Scotch, Maker's 46 Bourbon, brown sugar, and The Bitter Truth Drops & Dashes bitters. "To complement whisk(e)y in a cocktail, I like to use honey, natural sugars, different bitters, and fortified wines," Kalinin says. His Fine Smash (\$16) blends The Macallan 10-year-old Fine Oak single malt Scotch with house-made

heather honey syrup, fresh Meyer lemon juice, mint leaves, and club soda, while his Blood & Sand Vol. 2 (\$17) mixes Glenmorangie Quinta Ruban 12-year-old single malt Scotch, Cherry Heering liqueur, Dolin Rouge sweet vermouth, Fonseca Ruby Port, and fresh blood orange juice. "Single malt Scotch is my favorite to play with because it's always a fun challenge to pair it with the right ingredients," Kalinin adds.

Respect The Base

Even when using the finest complementary ingredients, there's still some resistance to making cocktails with top-tier whiskies within the bartending community. "I think people are more apt and have the pockets to experience cocktails with expensive whiskies, but this sometimes comes at the detriment of the actual spirit," says Justin Goo, general manager at San Francisco bar Bourbon and Branch. "Cocktails evolved because the spirits available were of inferior quality and bartenders were trying to make them more palatable. When you use certain top-quality whiskies in a cocktail, it masks all the nuances and deliciousness that you could have had if you enjoyed it neat or on the rocks."

Cohn Restaurant Group's DiMarino notes the literal cost of incorporating these whiskies into a cocktail menu. "Sometimes the whisk(e)y at the base will be so manipulated that it doesn't show through, so why spend \$50 on a bottle that you're just going to cover up in a cocktail when you can use one that's only \$10?" he asks. Goo adds that if he's tasked with creating a cocktail with a high-end whisk(e)y, he usually reaches for rye. "It has a spiciness that stands out when you add other ingredients," he says. "In the past I've used Lock Stock & Barrel rye whiskey to make a high-end Old Fashioned."

Elixir's Ehrmann affirms that the only time to mix cocktails using fine aged whiskey is when the drink enhances what's already in the spirit. "If the inherent complexities that make the spirit so valuable are lost in the mix, then there's really no sense in using it," he says. "Make sure you can taste or otherwise leverage the whisk(e)y's unique properties. This could include using a small amount as a modifier rather than the principal spirit, like as a spray over the surface of the drink or a rinse in the glass."

At Bar Argos in Ithaca, New York, the Bagpipe Mariachi (\$11) comprises Pueblo Viejo Blanco Tequila, house-made apple-fennel shrub, house-made celery bitters, lemon juice and a Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch float that lends smoky and peaty aromas. At The Whiskey Ward, Wright's



The Blood & Sand Vol. 2 (top) includes Glenmorangie Quinta Ruban 12-year-old single malt Scotch, while the Napa Cask Manhattan (above) features Tommyrotter Napa Valley Heritage Cask Straight Bourbon.

Late Hit (\$15) mixes Glenfiddich 12-year-old, Q ginger beer, lemon juice, and a Laphroaig 10-year-old float. "Currently, my favorite high-end whiskies to use in cocktails are the Glenlivet and Glenfiddich 12-year-old Scotch whiskies, as well as Laphroaig 10-year-old," Wright says. "Glenlivet and Glenfiddich are classic, smooth single malt whiskies that mix well with other high-end, fresh ingredients, and Laphroaig has a rich, bold flavor that adds a delicious smoky taste to a cocktail."

At The Fifty/50 Restaurant Group's bar The Sixth, Schiller's Smokey Bloke (\$14) features David Nicholson 1842 Bourbon, Laphroaig 10-year-old, Brovo Jammy sweet vermouth,

house-made spicy maple syrup, and house-made saffron bitters, and the drink is garnished with vanilla and oak smoke from a smoking gun. "Cocktails highlighting inherent barrel notes such as oak, vanilla, leather, Demerara, dried fig, tobacco, and baking spices have been the most well received," Schiller says. His Weston (\$13) features W.L. Weller 12-year-old Bourbon, house-made coffee syrup, Peychaud's bitters, and a house-made pipe tobacco tincture. "Weller 12-year-old is a delicious wheated Bourbon full of vanilla, cream, cocoa, and baking spice notes that allow it to shine in classic and modern cocktails alike," he adds.

Billy Club's Strawser believes that as bar programs continue to highlight top-shelf whiskies, using these spirits in cocktails will become the norm, saying, "I think the days of bargain ingredients in cocktails are over, especially as consumers become more aware of the quality out there." mw

Upscale Whisk(e)y-Based Cocktail Recipes

BOOKER'S BOURBON MANHATTAN By Laurent Lebec

Ingredients:
2 ounces Booker's Bourbon;
¾ ounce Cinzano 1757 Rosso vermouth;
¼ ounce Dolin Dry vermouth;
Dash Angostura bitters;
Lemon peel.

Recipe:
Combine Bourbon, vermouths, and bitters in a mixing glass with ice. Stir until diluted to taste. Strain into a chilled rocks glass over fresh ice. Garnish with a lemon peel, expressed and inserted.

THE LILY AND THE THISTLE By Andrey Kalinin

Ingredients:
1 ounce Glenlivet 15-year-old French Oak single malt Scotch;
1 ounce Maker's 46 Bourbon;
1 brown sugar cube;
2 dashes The Bitter Truth Drops & Dashes bitters.

Recipe:
Place sugar cube and bitters in a mixing glass and muddle until dissolved. Fill the mixing glass with ice and add whiskies. Stir and strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube.

LATE HIT By Shawna Wright

Ingredients:
2 ounces Glenfiddich 12-year-old single malt Scotch;
1 bar spoon Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch;
1 ounce lemon juice;
Splash Q ginger beer;
Lemon peel.

Recipe:
Combine Glenfiddich, lemon juice, and ice in cocktail shaker. Shake and strain into an ice-filled Zombie glass. Top with ginger beer and Laphroaig. Garnish with a lemon peel.