

Crafted With Care

American craft spirits, and cocktails featuring them, tell a unique story

BY SALLY KRAL

Though still considered the “little guy” in the overall spirits market, the U.S. craft spirits industry has grown over the past couple decades from a niche segment to a bustling category with newcomers joining each year. “It used to be that people were all about brand recognition and the large brands with big marketing budgets really had a hold on the spirits industry and market—there were smaller craft distillers back then, but it was a much more limited and difficult market for them to break into,” says Stephanie Reading, bar manager of Birdie G’s in Santa Monica, California. “Then came the craft beer revolution, which is when people started to recognize the real value in smaller, more local craft brewers. This really changed the way the public looked at the beer industry and what beer could be, which I believe helped open the doors to questioning what spirits could be, and thus ushered in the influx of small American distilleries that we’re experiencing today.”

Jacky Li, the director of outlets for The Ameswell hotel in Mountain View, California, attributes the growth of the U.S. craft spirits industry to the changing preferences of American drinkers. “I think it really stems from people demanding more from the products that have long been considered staples in the bar industry,” he says. “Consumers grew tired of seeing the same brands at every bar, and so people started experimenting with



Craft spirits shine in cocktails like the Liberty Bell Libations (pictured) from Birdie G’s in Santa Monica, California, which features Aviation American gin.

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While the big names in the spirits industry aren’t going anywhere, the wide range of U.S. craft spirits on the market today offer a lot to keep consumers and bartenders excited. “Craft distilleries are popping up all over the country, giving the category the same kind of regional feel that we’ve been seeing in craft beer over the last 15 years,” says Natalie Newberry, lead bartender at Henley in Nashville, Tennessee. “Bartenders now have a much more expansive palate of U.S.-made spirits to choose from when creating cocktails.”

Indeed, there’s more out there now than ever before, and these smaller distilleries continue to push the envelope with their unique products. “Master distillers across the nation are not only attempting to improve the quality or taste of a traditionally made spirit by using different water sources or sourcing local artisan ingredients, but many are experimenting with new distillation methods or nontraditional ingredients and flavor profiles, really broadening the idea of what these spirits can be,” Reading says. “And as the American craft spirits category has grown in recent years, so have the drinks made with them. The American palate has evolved and with all these new small-batch spirits on the market comes an unlimited possibility for new and exciting cocktails.”

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PHOTOS BY (LEFT) LINDSEY HUTTRER; (OPPOSITE) ALEXANDER STEIN



Local craft spirits are a good selling point for bars and restaurants. At Roger in The Ameswell hotel in Mountain View, California, the Moffett Mule (pictured) uses Tahoe Blue vodka, which is made with Lake Tahoe water.



On Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, Lucky Rooster Kitchen + Bar uses Bulrush gin, which is made on the island, in the A Violet 75 (above left), while the Sutler's Fizz (above right) from Winston-Salem, North Carolina's The Katharine uses Sutler's gin, from the town's first legal distillery in 200 years. At Audubon in Boston, the Patio Crusher (top right) uses St. George Spirits Green Chile vodka.

Drink Local

Almost all of the spirits on the Birdie G's beverage menu are craft and small-batch, the majority of which are U.S. brands, according to Reading. "I love supporting the underdog—the smaller guys really doing a great job and producing products worth pushing," she says. "What matters the most to us is that, with a little guidance on our part, all of our guests leave with an increased appreciation, understanding, and hopefully love for small-batch spirits."

Thankfully, today's consumers are very open to new, interesting cocktails and spirits, Reading adds. "People aren't just looking to get drunk on sweet cocktails masking cheap booze. Instead, they want a story and experience that comes with the drink they order or the spirit they sip on," she says. "They want to know where the wheat comes from or why the botanicals are sourced in a particular area and how this affects the spirit, just as much as they want to know that the juice in their drink is freshly squeezed, the honey is locally sourced, and the fruit is from a farmer's market." Her Liberty Bell Libations (\$16) features Aviation American gin, house-made wildflower honey

syrup, lemon juice, muddled red and yellow bell peppers and black peppercorns, and a pinch of salt, while her Oh My Darling (\$16) comprises Star Keeper gin, Carpano Bianco vermouth, Cointreau orange liqueur, Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters, and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters. "Aviation gin out of Portland, Oregon finds a home in quite a few of our gin-based drinks due to its mellow botanicals and approachable price point," Reading notes. "Even more locally, the Spirit Guild is a Los Angeles craft brand I really enjoy working with. Their Vapid vodka and their Star Keeper gin are distilled from California-grown clementines, which imparts wonderfully subtle citrus notes into their products."

There seems to be a craft distillery in just about every U.S. city these days, offering bars and restaurants ample opportunity to highlight their community's offerings on their beverage menus. At The Katharine Brasserie & Bar in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, bartender Justin Rankin's Sutler's Fizz (\$14) mixes Sutler's gin from Sutler's Spirit Co.—Winston-Salem's first legal distillery in 200 years—as well as house-made hibiscus syrup, fresh lemon juice, and Bouvet Signature Brut

Champagne. At Lucky Rooster Kitchen + Bar on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, A Violet 75 (\$12) blends Bulrush gin, Rothman & Winter Crème de Violette liqueur, house-made lemon syrup, fresh lemon juice, and La Marca Prosecco. "I've always loved Bulrush gin, made here locally on Hilton Head Island," says bartender Monica Collins, who made the drink along with bar manager Jenn Hodges. "Supporting local distillers is important to the spirits community as well as our small business community. Our guests love a story and are enthusiastic about trying new things."

Li of The Ameswell appreciates that smaller local distilleries tend to have interesting stories to tell. "At The Ameswell's bar and restaurant Roger, one of the goals I have is for guests to come in and inquire about the California craft spirits we carry and for us to be able to tell their stories of how they started and how they ended up doing what they do," he says, adding that Tahoe Blue vodka, which is made with water from California's Lake Tahoe, is very popular with guests. At Roger, the Moffett Mule (\$15) is available on tap and features Tahoe Blue, house-made ginger syrup, lime juice, sparkling water, and Angostura bitters. It was created by San Francisco-based mixologist Greg Lindgren, who developed the cocktail program for The Ameswell.



The Oh My Darling (left) from Birdie G's is made with Star Keeper gin, which is distilled from California-grown clementines, while the Wrap Your Lips Around This (right) from Lucky Rooster uses Savage & Cooke Service rye whiskey, finished in Cabernet Sauvignon barrels.



"Bartenders can often act as the bridge between products and consumers," Henley's Newberry notes. "If we find a spirit we like, we're going to scramble to make a cocktail with it to play with its flavor profile and see what kind of accents and supporting ingredients will work with it." She adds that there's a lot of interest in Belle Meade Bourbon and Nelson's Green Brier Tennessee whiskey among guests, as the distillery where these spirits are produced is less than ten minutes from Henley.

American Craft Spirit-based Cocktail Recipes

OH MY DARLING By Stephanie Reading

Ingredients:
2 ounces Star Keeper gin;
¾ ounce Carpano Bianco vermouth;
¼ ounce Cointreau orange liqueur;
2 full droppers Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters;
2 dashes Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters;
Orange peel.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine gin, vermouth, liqueur, and bitters. Stir and strain into a Nick & Nora glass and garnish with an orange peel.

MOFFETT MULE By Greg Lindgren

Ingredients:
2 ounces Tahoe Blue vodka;
¾ ounce ginger syrup¹;
¾ ounce lime juice;
Dash Angostura bitters;
1 ounce sparkling water;
Mint sprig.

Recipe:
Pour vodka, syrup, and juice into a Collins glass. Add crushed ice and use the paddle side of a bar spoon to mix the ingredients. Top with more crushed ice and bitters. Garnish with a mint sprig.

WRAP YOUR LIPS AROUND THIS By Monica Collins

Ingredients:
1½ ounces Savage & Cooke Lip Service rye whiskey;
½ ounce Cocchi Cocchi Vermouth di Torino;
½ ounce Cappelletti aperitif;
3-4 drops Peychaud's bitters;
Flamed orange peel.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine whiskey, vermouth, aperitif, and bitters. Stir and strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube. Garnish with a flamed orange peel.

¹Heat 4 quarts water on the stovetop, then add 8 quarts white sugar and stir until sugar dissolves. Let cool, then stir in 3 quarts ginger juice.



Mixologists enjoy American craft spirits because they tend to put twists on traditional offerings. At Washington, D.C.'s 1310 Kitchen & Bar, the "Blonde Ambition" Madonna (top), a pomegranate Moscow Mule, highlights Wheatly vodka, while the Old Fashioned (above) showcases Belle Meade Bourbon and house-made vanilla syrup.

"The Nelson's Green Brier story is pretty unique as well: It's run by two brothers who brought their ancestors' distillery back to life," she says. Bartender Benjamin Rouse's The Old Bell (\$15) mixes Belle Meade Bourbon, Licor 43 liqueur, Lustau Amontillado Sherry, Pernod absinthe, and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters. "We're also big fans of Castle & Key gin from Kentucky," Newberry adds. "It has a really cool origin story rooted in place and history, and it makes for killer gin concoctions." Rouse's Henley G&T (\$12) blends the gin with house-made cucumber shrub, house-made pink peppercorn tincture, lime juice, and The Bitter Truth Tonic bitters.

Familiar, Yet Unique

One of the defining characteristics of U.S. craft spirits is that there are very few rules or strict guidelines for making them, leaving a lot of room for distillers to have fun and experiment. "American craft spirits have grown to have a varied selection of brands that don't have to conform to the customary standards of making a spirit," says Wilfredo Castillo, bar manager at 1310 Kitchen & Bar in Washington, D.C. "They can be made from a wide range of ingredients and aged in all types of barrels from Bourbon to wine, and so they often have surprising notes that can only elevate a cocktail. I've enjoyed seeing how they can bring some fun to a classic recipe." His Old Fashioned (\$12) blends Belle Meade Bourbon, house-made vanilla syrup, Angostura Orange bitters, and a splash of club soda, while his "Blonde Ambition" Madonna (\$12) is a pomegranate Moscow Mule comprising Wheatly vodka, lime juice and pomegranate juices, simple syrup, and Fever-Tree ginger beer.

"American craft spirits tend to take traditional categories like Bourbon or London Dry gin, and then twist them a bit, creating new expressions that don't necessarily fit within the rules of the original style," Newberry says. "Adding unexpected botanicals that at times eclipse the flavor of juniper in a gin, or finishing a Bourbon in wine, Sherry, or Cognac casks—American craft spirits tend to pay homage to a style and then do something completely original." At Lucky Rooster, Collins' Wrap Your Lips Around This (\$14) features Savage & Cooke Lip Service Rye whiskey—made by Napa Valley winemaker and distiller David Phinney and finished in Cabernet Sauvignon barrels—Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, Cappelletti aperitif, and Peychaud's bitters. "This cocktail is a riff on the Boulevardier and perfect for fall and winter," Collins says. "Using Lip Service, you get a nice rye spice

with a smooth finish from the Cabernet barrels." At Birdie G's, Reading's Meet me Under the Cherry Tree; the Great American Legacy (\$17) comprises Angel's Envy Bourbon, which is finished in Port casks, as well as Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, Cherry Heering liqueur, lemon juice, and the syrup from a jar of Luxardo Maraschino cherries.

"From sourcing the raw ingredients to the distillation process and choice of stills themselves, American craft distillers really take pride in taking the time to create something truly theirs: uniquely American and beautifully executed," Reading says. "Of course, there's Bourbon and rye, the tradi-

tionally American spirits that have rich history, but it doesn't stop there. Many distilleries these days are even dabbling in creating American versions of traditionally non-American spirits such as amari, absinthes, and even single malts. I'm always impressed with the products produced by St. George Spirits out of Alameda, California, which has an entire line of artisanal spirits all created in copper pot stills and run the gamut from vodka and gin to fruit brandies and liqueurs to absinthe and Japanese-style single malt." At Audubon in Boston, the Patio Crusher (\$13) mixes St. George Green Chile vodka, Aperol aperitif, fresh lemon juice, simple syrup, and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters, and at Red Horse by David Burke in Rumson, New Jersey, former corporate mixologist Chris James' West Meets East (\$16) features Baller Single Malt Whiskey, which is St. George's California take on Japanese whisky, Akashi-Tai Shiraume Ginjo Umeshu sake, Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth, and Angostura bitters.

"I love to use American craft spirits because so many of them are using innovative ways to create something different from what's been traditionally available for many years," says Al Thompson, bar director for the Washington D.C. venues Hanumanh and Thip Khao. "For so much of cocktail history Americans have taken what other countries have made—wine, vermouth, Cognac—and made them shine through cocktails. In this era, I think it's equally important to highlight all the wonderful American-made craft spirits in cocktails." He adds that he favors Barr Hill gin, which is produced by Caledonia Spirits in Montpelier, Vermont, and is unique for its base of locally sourced raw honey. At Thip Khao, his Waxing Gibbous (\$15) comprises Barr Hill gin, dill-infused Dolin G n py des Alpes liqueur, fresh lemon juice, house-made ginger mulberry syrup, and egg white. Also unique for its sourcing of local ingredients, Ocean Organic vodka from Hawaii is a brand Collins enjoys using at Lucky Rooster. "The distillery uses 30 species of Polynesian sugar cane and is desalinated with deep ocean mineral water off the Kona coast of the Big Island," she says. Her Pimento Lost in the Ocean (\$14) blends Ocean Organic and Dolin Dry vermouth, garnished with pimento cheese-stuffed olives.

"I think the American craft spirits category is just going to continue to grow and the lines between spirits will blur as distill-



In Nashville, Henley highlights craft spirits with a story. The Old Bell (pictured) features Belle Meade Bourbon, which is made at Nelson's Green Brier Distillery—just ten minutes from the bar—by two brothers reviving their ancestor's distilling legacy.

ers keep pushing the limits and taking risks," Reading says. "Vodkas are no longer solely 'neutral grain spirits' as the category was defined before, but now encompass what could be considered unaged brandies or even rums. Aperitifs and digestifs aren't just Italian, Pisco doesn't only come from Peru or Chile, and even Japanese-style single malts are being created by American craft brands—and being created well. I think we'll see broadening categories and even new ones develop as American distillers continue to experiment, and with it will come a new wave of craft cocktails that push the boundaries of what we traditionally know both in flavor and technique." **mw**