

Rye Whiskey “The American All-Star”



Rye whiskeys have a long and storied history in the United States and prior to Prohibition, it was our nation's whiskey of choice. George Washington distilled rye at his home in Mount Vernon and it was at the whiskey at the center of the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791.

For more than century its production centered in and around Pennsylvania and Maryland, areas where large numbers of Scottish and Irish immigrants settled and applied their collective knowledge and expertise in distillation. Following World War II, however, sales of rye whiskeys went into a protracted slump, a decline that reflected the steady rise in popularity of soft blended whiskies and light mixable spirits. By the 1970s, rye whiskeys had all but disappeared from American bars.

Fortunately that trend has reversed and the bold, exuberant flavors of American ryes have again attracted a broad-based following. It's easy to understand why after a sip or two. They're whiskeys broad shoulders and a lot of personality, a character no doubt molded from our collective national self-image.

Noted journalist and whiskey authority Lew Bryson can shed some light on how much the category is growing. “I recently spoke with master distiller Craig Beam at *Heaven Hill*. They distill a great deal of rye whiskey. He told me that about five years ago they used to mash and distill rye once a year. Now it's once a month. In my book that's a bona fide resurgence.”

Heaven Hill is not alone. Many of the major producers are now marketing at least one label of rye, which must be made with no less than 51percent of its constituent ingredients being rye, the balance typically being malted barley and corn. If your whiskey-loving clientele is looking for a singular taste experience, suggest they set their sights on American Straight Rye Whiskey.

Fueling its revival is the ongoing cocktail renaissance and the rise of the mixologist. As the earliest rendition of American whiskey, rye was almost exclusively used as the foundation of 19th century cocktails that called for whiskey.

“We're in a time in which authenticity in cocktails is in high demand,” observes Angus Winchester, drinks expert and master

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mixologist. “Today bartenders scour vintage drink recipe guides searching for long-forgotten classics. Eventually that pursuit instills them with deference for rye whiskey. It was prominently featured in cocktails of the golden era; not just as a result of being in wide supply, but because the whiskey imbues cocktails with incomparably intense flavors.”

Brian Miller, head bartender at cocktail haven *Death & Company* in New York says that he’s yet to find another whiskey able to match the brilliance of rye’s spicy notes in a cocktail.

“Until a year or so ago, few bars carried more than one label of rye, if any at all. Now people are clamoring for a broader selection of ryes, especially when it comes to brands affordably priced. There are legions of enthusiasts out there who like to sip cocktails popular in bygone eras.”

American rye whiskeys are surprisingly affordable and mixable, much to the delight of a new generation of mixologists. Let the games begin.

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