

MARKET INTELLIGENCE ON WINE, SPIRITS AND BEER

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# MARKET WATCH



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# Simple Sophistication

*Whisk(e)y-based cocktails receive top billing as the popularity of classic recipes continues to rise*

BY SALLY KRAL

While the cocktail craze of the last decade has been a boon to spirits sales across the board, whiskies appear to be reaping the most benefits, as evidenced by the overwhelming prominence of Manhattans and Old Fashioneds on cocktail menus nationwide and the subsequent shortage of rye whiskey across in the country. “The resurgence of cocktails has increased whisk(e)y’s popularity tremendously,” says Bob McCoy, beverage programs liaison for Eastern Standard Kitchen & Bar in Boston. “In some instances, the demand has outweighed the supply, and for companies that didn’t see it coming, they’ve got warehouses of empty bottles.”

But that’s not to say that whisk(e)y’s prominence stands to suffer—fortunately for whisk(e)y enthusiasts, these brown spirits are far from extinct. Whiskies of all styles and origins can now be found on the back bar in myriad venues worldwide, particularly those specializing in classic cocktails in which whiskies truly shine.

## Strong Backbone

Ask any bartender about whisk(e)y and the praise is sure to be high and grand. The spirit has long been a reliable and favorite choice for drink slingers honing their cocktail-making craft. “Whiskies add a certain character to drinks that you can’t get very easily with other spirits,” notes Hunter Vick, bartender at Rye House in New York City. “Rye is strong and spicy; Bourbon is mellow, mostly smooth and slightly sweet; and Scotch can be malty, sweet, full of spice, or smoky and peaty. Whisk(e)y is always the star in a drink.” Rye House’s Roberto cocktail (\$14), created

by bartender Robi Gonzalez, blends Smokehead Islay single malt Scotch whisky, Ron Zacapa Centenario rum, demerara sugar, The Bitter Truth Chocolate bitters, Regan’s No. 6 orange bitters and Fee Brothers Orange bitters. “The smokiness of the Scotch is essential in this cocktail,” Vick explains.

When it comes to cocktail building, whiskies offer a strong presence and taste profile, lending to a plethora of pairing options. “Whiskies tend to have a much stronger backbone than many other spirits and therefore can stand up to stronger flavors in cocktails. As opposed to something like vodka, which conforms to the other ingredients in a drink, whisk(e)y can be enhanced without losing its distinct character,” says Lucia Gonzales, head bartender at Prizefighter in San Francisco and West Coast ambassador for Campari America’s “Women & Whiskies” program. Her cocktail The Brennan (\$15) is made with Bowmore 12-year-old single malt Scotch, Averna amaro, Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters and a pinch of salt.

Nicola Riske, brand activation manager for The Edrington Group, which owns such whiskies as The Macallan, Highland Park, The Famous Grouse and Cutty Sark, notes that whisk(e)y’s aging process makes it work well in cocktails. “Some whiskies

have been aged in Sherry-seasoned casks, offering rich dried fruit and Sherry notes. Others have been aged in ex-Bourbon barrels, offering coconut, citrus and fresh fruit flavors. The wood in which a whisk(e)y is matured is going to influence that spirit heavily and create an array of choices for a bartender making a cocktail.”



Mixologist Elad Zvi’s Apples and Bourbon blends apple-infused Maker’s Mark Bourbon, Aperol, thyme, honey, lemon and bitters.



**LEFT:** The Dale Cooper at Rye House in New York City comprises Rittenhouse rye, Averna amaro and house-made coffee syrup. **RIGHT:** The Fig Manhattan at Pêché restaurant in Austin mixes Old Overholt Straight rye, Dolin Rouge vermouth, cherry vanilla bitters and fig foam.

Erik Adkins, bar director for Slanted Door Group, which owns San Francisco whisk(e)y bar Hard Water, adds that “whisk(e)y has a really bold character and can handle a lot of layering of other strong flavors without getting lost.” Indeed, whisk(e)y can often be found in drinks that feature bold and bitter ingredients like amaros, liqueurs and vermouths. Hard Water’s Cocktail à la Louisiane (\$11) is one of the bar’s most popular drinks, featuring Rittenhouse 100 Proof rye whiskey, Carpano Antica sweet vermouth, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, Duplais Verte absinthe and Peychaud’s bitters. “It’s a classic New Orleans cocktail in the Manhattan family with a rich herbal profile,” Adkins says.

Freddy May, brand ambassador for Hudson whiskey, agrees that whisk(e)y plays well with myriad ingredients while maintaining its integrity in the glass. “There are many sets of flavors that traditionally work well with whiskies,” he says. “Stone fruits like peach and apricot, teas like Earl Grey and chai, amaro and Sherry for adding a unctuous and viscous quality, and the flavors of apple and whisk(e)y were born together.”

On the bitter end of the spectrum, the Hudson Americano blends Hudson Manhattan rye with Campari aperitif, cranberry juice and club soda. At Rye House, the Dale Cooper (\$12) features Rittenhouse rye, Averna and house-made coffee syrup. Playing off whisk(e)y’s sweeter and fruitier notes,

meanwhile, Maker’s Mark enlisted Los Angeles bartender Matt Wallace to create the Fancy Bourbon Punch, which mixes the Bourbon with Fantinel Prosecco, sugar, lemon, orange, green tea and grated nutmeg for a lighter, citrusy drink.

## Flavor Range

Phil Olson, bar manager at Longman & Eagle in Chicago, has noticed calls for whisk(e)y drinks on both ends of the flavor range. “Whisk(e)y is an extremely broad spirit, which obviously lends itself to varied styles of cocktails. We see lots of success with brown and stirred drinks that are similar to Manhattans in style but with vermouth swapped out for other liqueurs, and we also see people looking for something whisk(e)y-based that’s bright with fruit or citrus.” The bar’s Slam Piece (\$8), created by bartender James Deia, features Old Grand-Dad 114 Proof Bourbon, Averna, The Bitter Truth E\*\*X\*\*R herbal liqueur, St. Elizabeth Allspice Dram and Regan’s No. 6 orange bitters. On the brighter side, Olson’s own Kitty Greene (\$8) is made with James E. Pepper 1776 rye whiskey, demerara syrup, fresh lime juice, ginger ale and Angostura bitters.

As Hudson whiskey’s May described, the flavors of apples and whiskies marry well together. Beam’s master mixologist Bobby Gleason created the Maple Cider, featuring Jim Beam Maple Bourbon, apple cider and lemon sour, while Miami



Scotch in developing the Cutty's Vanilla Collins, which blends the brand's Prohibition Edition whisky, fresh lemon juice and homemade vanilla syrup.

## Simpler Times

Cocktail recipes like Littrell's that use minimal ingredients are on the rise, especially when making drinks with whiskies, which already bring strong and layered flavors to the table. "The best way to use whiskies is in simple, stirred cocktails," Rye House's Vick says. "These drinks allow you to taste more of the spirit and its subtle notes and characteristics. You don't have to add a lot to a good whisk(e)y to make a really good cocktail."

And it's not only mixologists who feel this way; consumers too are flocking to simple drinks that don't attempt to mask the base spirit. At Longman & Eagle, Olson says "by far our most popular cocktail is our Old Fashioned (\$8), which blends Buffalo Trace Bourbon, Angostura Orange bitters,

(FROM LEFT) *The Kitty Greene* at Longman & Eagle in Chicago highlights James E. Pepper 1776 rye; *Kathy Casey's Bellini Manhattan* features Maker's Mark; and the *Cocktail à la Louisiane* at Hard Water in San Francisco uses Rittenhouse 100 Proof.

mixologist Elad Zvi developed the Apples and Bourbon cocktail for Maker's Mark. The drink comprises apple-infused Bourbon, Aperol aperitif, thyme, honey, lemon juice and Urban Moonshine Organic Maple bitters.

Eastern Standard's McCoy says using a classic whisk(e)y-based cocktail recipe as a jumping off point is a great way to create variations. "For example, the Whiskey Sour balances the spirit with citrus and sweetener, so I could play off the barrel notes of the whisk(e)y by incorporating cinnamon, vanilla or a spiced syrup for an added depth of flavor," he explains. New York City-based mixologist Jamie Littrell did just that for Cutty Sark blended

Fee Brothers Cherry bitters, Fee Brothers Old Fashioned bitters and sugar. I think consumers don't want drinks that hide whisk(e)y—they want to be able taste it." At Eastern Standard, McCoy contends that the restaurant's most called-for drink is their simple Whiskey Smash (\$10), mixing W.L. Weller Reserve Bourbon, simple syrup, lemon and mint. For a slight twist on this classic cocktail, Beam's Gleason developed the Honey Smash, made with Jim Beam Honey Bourbon, lemon and mint. Similarly, The Famous Grouse blended Scotch whisky enlisted Los Angeles bartender James Burton to create the Black in Fashion, featuring The Black Grouse, smoked sugar and Angostura bitters.

## Whisk(e)y-Based Cocktail Recipes

### DALE COOPER By Hunter Vick

#### Ingredients:

2 ounces Rittenhouse rye whiskey;  
¾ ounce Averna amaro;  
¼ ounce coffee syrup<sup>1</sup>;

#### Recipe:

Combine all ingredients in an ice-filled mixing glass. Stir and strain into a coupe glass.

<sup>1</sup>Combine 2 parts water and 2 parts raw sugar in a pan over high heat and stir until the sugar dissolves. Add 1 part finely ground coffee beans. Heat until just before boiling, then immediately remove from heat and keep covered for 2 to 3 hours, then strain through coffee filters.

### KITTY GREENE By Phil Olson

#### Ingredients:

2 ounces James E. Pepper 1776 Rye whiskey;  
½ ounce fresh lime juice;  
½ ounce demerara syrup;  
Dash Angostura Orange bitters;  
Splash ginger ale;  
Orange peel.

#### Recipe:

Combine whiskey, lime, syrup and bitters in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake. Strain into an ice-filled Collins glass and top with ginger ale. Garnish with an orange peel.

### BELLINI MANHATTAN By Kathy Casey

#### Ingredients:

1½ ounces Maker's Mark Bourbon;  
¾ ounce Martini & Rossi sweet vermouth;  
½ ounce peach purée;  
Dash Liquid Kitchen Golden Era Cocktail bitters;  
Splash Alfred Gratien Brut Classique Champagne;  
Maraschino cherry.

#### Recipe:

Combine whiskey, vermouth, peach purée and bitters in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake. Strain into a flute glass, add a splash of Champagne and garnish with a maraschino cherry.



LEFT: *The Black in Fashion* combines *The Black Grouse*, smoked sugar and Angostura bitters. RIGHT: *Eastern Standard's Whiskey Smash* blends W.L. Weller Reserve Bourbon, lemon and mint.

The popularity of drinks made with few ingredients has been important to the success of Suntory's Japanese whiskies, which are marketed primarily in the form of a classic Highball. "The Highball cocktail emulates the ideals of our founder and the pioneer of Japanese whisky, Shinjiro Torii: to create a refined way of enjoying whisky so that the drinker still appreciates the complexity and harmony of the spirit within the drink," says Gardner Dunn, East Coast brand ambassador for Suntory. The company's Hakushu Highball simply blends Hakushu 12-year-old single malt whisky with sparkling water and a mint sprig.

At Prizefighter, Gonzales has her own take on the Japanese Highball with the Honeyed Highball (\$15), featuring Hakushu 12-year-old, honey syrup, club soda and The Bitter Truth Aromatic bitters. "Cocktails that enhance the flavor profile of the individual whiskies, rather than trying to cover them up, are more valued now," Gonzalez notes. "People are learning to really appreciate the sweetness, spiciness and smokiness of whiskies, and bartenders are finding ways to subtly enhance that experience without overwhelming the drink."

## Calls For Classics

Rye House's Vick has noticed that today's consumers, thanks to their growing interest in cocktail history, have become more knowledgeable about whiskies and therefore more appreciative of the distinct flavors that different brands and styles offer. "More than ever, people come into the bar asking for specific brands in specific cocktails because they're learning more," he adds. Hard Water's Adkins also notes this trend. "People are really into tasting whiskies neat and comparing them. I hope the trend of making cocktails that are simple and spirit-forward and that have a sense of place will continue."


For whisk(e)y, a sense of place is an innate feature, as the spirit has rich history—from Europe to the United States to Japan, whiskies and traditional whisk(e)y-based cocktails have

a story to tell. "I think that people are getting back to liking flavor, and that pre-Prohibition cocktail style delivers," says Larry Miller, bar manager at Pêche restaurant in Austin. Among Pêche's best-selling cocktails are the Blood & Sand (\$12), a classic recipe that features Dewar's blended Scotch, Heering cherry liqueur, Dolin Rouge sweet vermouth and fresh orange juice. The Fig Manhattan (\$12) blends Old Overholt Straight rye whiskey, Dolin Rouge, house-made cherry vanilla bitters and fig foam.

Demand for historic cocktail recipes shows no signs of slowing down. "Consumers keep going back to the classics—they want to enjoy a simple and well-made

cocktail," Edrington's Riske says. "With the rising trend of brown spirits and whiskies in particular, classics like the Old Fashioned and the Manhattan are now the go-to drinks for everyone, proving to be more popular than the Cosmopolitans and Mojitos that we used to see. Bartenders are taking these classics and putting their own twists on them, often playing with different bitters or liqueurs."

At Rye House, one such twist is a smoky variation on the Old Fashioned called the Jimmy Stewart (\$14), created by bartender Amanda de la Nuez. It comprises Balcones Brimstone Texas Scrub Oak Smoked corn whiskey, Grand Marnier orange liqueur, honey syrup, Angostura bitters, and a blend of Fee Brothers and Regan's Orange bitters. At Eastern Standard, the Narragansett (\$12) offers a new take on the Manhattan with Michter's rye whiskey, Carpano Antica Formula vermouth, Pernod absinthe and Regan's No. 6 orange bitters. For Maker's Mark, celebrity chef and mixologist Kathy Casey created the Bellini Manhattan, blending Maker's Mark with Alfred Gratien Brut Classique Champagne, Martini & Rossi sweet vermouth, peach purée and Liquid Kitchen Golden Era Cocktail bitters.

The possibilities for creating new and unique variations on classic whisk(e)y cocktails are seemingly endless. As long as mixologists continue to explore the spirit's intricacies and consumers remain inquisitive and experimental, whiskies will stay on top of the cocktail scene. "I don't see the popularity of whiskies going away anytime soon and I'm sure that whisk(e)y-based cocktails will evolve as new generations of bartenders come forward," says Prizefighter's Gonzales. "I hope they will continue the current trend of using cocktails to enhance consumer appreciation of whisk(e)y's distinct aromas." 

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PHOTO (LEFT) BY HOWARD WISE; (RIGHT) COURTESY OF EASTERN STANDARD