

AN EAST BAY WINTER WHISKEY RAMBLE

BY SERENA BARTLETT

Several months ago, while checking out a new nightclub in Oakland with a fellow writer, I ordered a Maker's Manhattan, a caramel-color mix of bourbon whiskey and sweet vermouth. The fiery-red maraschino cherry lighting up the bourbon in my glass seemed to ignite our conversation about how whiskey had evolved in the New World during colonial times. Immigrant distillers, like immigrant cooks, brought their traditions, but used the ingredients that were most readily available—here in America that meant grain, which favored whiskey production. One creative and wildly popular American innovation was bourbon, which gets its distinctive taste from aging in charred barrels (an accidental discovery).

To learn more about what whiskey became in America, you could head off into some “holler” in Appalachia where moonshiners are still making mash the old-fashioned way, but there's plenty to learn right here in the East Bay.

Where to Learn

Start with a visit to the distillery at Alameda's old Naval Air Station, where you can taste a fine, locally made single-malt whiskey while chatting with the Bay Area's most knowledgeable folks on the topic of distilling. St. George Spirits, at 2601 Monarch St. in Alameda is open Wed–Sat noon–7p.m. 510.769.1601, www.stgeorgespirits.com

Where to Taste

A great place to taste a range of whiskeys is *À Côté*, located at 5478 College Ave., Oakland. At this chic, small plates eatery, bartenders are well schooled on the fine distinctions between their many whiskey offerings.

Learn to taste by ordering a flight of bourbons or a short list of American whiskeys. Invite some friends to share and compare. Start by tasting the spirits mixed two-to-one with water (or with two ice cubes). Water mellows the alcohol and makes it easier to taste the complex flavors. You may find you like it up, over rocks, or mixed with water. Make sure you're tasting (not downing!) and take the time to get to know the drink before mixing it with a lot of other stuff. 510.655.6469; www.acoterestaurant.com

Where to Buy

Visit Ledgers Liquors, 1399 University Ave., Berkeley for a full tour up and down the whiskey isles. The knowledge and selection here is stupendous and you'll also find brandied cherries for a real Manhattan, peach and orange bitters for those swanky classic cocktails. 510.540.9243, www.ledgersliquors.com

For the best catalog of craft-distilled spirits, visit Caddell & Williams, at www.caddellwilliams.com.

Stiffest Whiskey Well Drink

Tuesdays and Thursdays with Treis behind the bar means devilishly strong 7x7's or whiskey 7's at Lost Weekend Lounge, 2320 Santa Clara Ave., Alameda. Between 2 and 8 p.m. all well drinks are a mere \$2 for Seagrams and middle-of-the-road whiskey. Stuff your pockets with quarters for the rockin' jukebox. 510.523.4700

Illustration: Daniel Ling



Best Sidecar in Style

Bartendress Maria at Air Lounge, 492 9th St., Oakland mixes the perfect citrus-y whiskey sidecar. I ask for 1792 or another deep caramel bourbon with some spicy undertones. The gorgeous surroundings and well-dressed crowd make it an ideal place to relax in style. 510.444.2377, www.airoakland.com

Best Whiskey Sour at a Speakeasy

Sneak into the secret hideout known as Townhouse Bar and Grill, 5862 Doyle St., Emeryville, and bring your undercover crew for a round of the finest sour around. This spot has some real neighborhood history, plus there are never any pre-made drink mixes hidden behind the bar. 510.652.6151, www.townhousebarandgrill.com

Best Whiskey in a Dessert

Visit Caffè Delle Stelle, 1532 N. Main St., Walnut Creek for some old style romance with a boozy dessert. As I look my sweetie in the eyes, we share a whiskey-doused tiramisu and semifreddo. 925.943.2393

Best Use of Whiskey in Food

Special wine dinners, holiday feasts, and the regular Sunday "Farmers Market Dinner" bring the community together at Essanay Café, which is tucked away in Fremont's Niles district at 37533 Niles Blvd. The prix fixe menu varies each week, but one favorite that regularly turns up is the smoked bacon wrapped filet mignon with organic spinach in a whiskey reduction. Look for whiskey reductions in many of their meat dishes and remember to come back on a Tuesday night for open mic performances. 510.792.0112, www.essanaycafe.com



AMERICAN WHISKEY 101

Bourbon is named for its origin in Bourbon County, Kentucky, but legitimate production is not restricted to Kentucky. Must consist of at least 51 percent corn, with the remainder consisting of either wheat and rye or malted barley. Aged in new, charred oak barrels for at least two years beginning at no more than 125 proof and being distilled to no more than 160 proof. Diluted with water and bottled at 80 proof or more.

Sour Mash is a quality-control technique implemented by a doctor and whiskey distiller in 1835 that provided increased uniformity in bourbon production. He took a portion of the previous day's mash and added it to that day's mash so the character of the final drink was more consistent.

In America, there are more distilleries making bourbon than any other type of whiskey. Mainstream examples: Early Times, Jim Beam, Wild Turkey, Old Kentucky, Maker's Mark, Old Grand-Dad, Kentucky Gentleman, Rebel Yell (good bargain). Recommended: Basil Hayden's (no-nonsense and spicier than most), Knob Creek (its woody flavor comes out with water.) Baker's 107 (elegant, vanilla notes with a clean finish), Woodford Reserve, Bulleit, 1792, Eagle Rare Single Barrel.

An **American Single Malt Whiskey** will come from a single distillery and a single malt made of barley, but unless it is marked "single cask" it's been blended with other barrels from the same year. Malt is procured in a pot still, the same implement used at the first historical men-

tions of whiskey in Ireland in the early 1400s. Examples: Charbay, Templeton Rye, St. George, Old Potrero, Notch, Wasmund's, Peregrine Rock, Woodstone Creek, McCarthy's, Compass Box.

If it's called **American Blended Whiskey** it's a blend of different barrels that have each undergone various aging times. At least 20 percent of the blend must be straight 100-proof whiskey, and the rest may include grain spirits or other whiskeys. Examples: Seagram's 7, Kessler.

Tennessee Whiskey is similar to bourbon, but before being put in new charred oak barrels for four years of aging, it's filtered through a thick layer of maple charcoal, a process that originates in Lincoln County, home of the original Jack Daniel's distillery. Examples: George Dickel, Jack Daniel's.

Rye is whiskey made from at least 51 percent rye produced at no more than 160 proof and aged in charred oak barrels. The "straight rye" designation applies only to rye that's been aged at least two years. Examples: Wild Turkey Rye, Old Overholt, Rittenhouse Rye. Rye is a popular grain with moonshiners.

Corn Liquor or **Corn Squeezin's** are made from a mash of at least 80 percent corn, distilled to no more than 80 proof. During a typical six-month aging (in uncharred oak barrels) the whiskey takes on a brighter color and the harsh flavor is reduced. Examples: Catdaddy, Old Oak, Old Gristmill, Dixie Dew, Georgia Moon.

SERENA'S WILD WEST COAST WHISKEY DRINKS

Bourbon Glüg

On a fall trip to the coastline of Washington State, I discovered that the traditional Scandinavian glüg, a mulled wine that often sees the addition of such stronger spirits as aquavit, brandy, or vodka, tastes fabulous when fortified with whiskey. A few friends and I procured ingredients at a farm stand in the small town of Copalis Beach and made a heaping pot of it to warm us up after a day of clamming.

1 gallon apple cider
¾ bottle of an inexpensive spicy red wine
8 ounces berry jam
3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
½ cup maple syrup
1 cup cranberry sauce or ½ a bag of frozen whole cranberries
2 cinnamon sticks
5 or 6 whole star anise
2 oranges, chopped into rounds
⅓ cup toasted pecans
Bourbon to taste (we used Bulleit)

Pour the wine and apple cider into a large stockpot over medium heat. Add remaining ingredients except for half of the toasted pecans and the whiskey and simmer for at least a half hour before the first mug is served. Keep on low heat and serve warm throughout the evening. Add a splash of whiskey and a few pecans before serving. I like to garnish with a fresh slice of orange.

The Hot Vegan Pancake

Everyone knows that breakfast is the best meal of all, and if they don't, tasting this morning-inspired cocktail will remind them. This drink was concocted in Portland, Oregon, during a round-table discussion about the role of comedy in America's current state of affairs. Since we had so many vegans among us, I thought I'd make a drink to suit everyone's tastes.

For each drink, combine:
6 ounces vanilla soymilk
1½ teaspoons maple syrup
1 shot whiskey

Either heat the soymilk on the stove before heating the other ingredients, or microwave each mug of soymilk for about a minute and a half. This drink is also tasty on the rocks.



California Julep

I learned about this combination from the restaurant manager at Oakland's di Bartolo, a knowledgeable chap with many innovative drink ideas up his sleeve. You may need to wait until next summer to make it, but some of us planned ahead and cut up a locally grown watermelon into cubes and tucked them into the freezer.

4 cups frozen watermelon cubes
1 bunch fresh spearmint
Juice of one lime
½ cup simple syrup
Whiskey

Place the frozen watermelon cubes in a mixing bowl and use a hand blender to mix until textured but smooth. Stir in simple syrup and blend. Muddle the mint in each glass and sprinkle with lime juice. Fill each glass with the watermelon mixture and leave room for a healthy float of whiskey.

A natural born contrarian, Serena has lived and traveled in more than 25 countries. She is an award-winning author of several GrassRoutes urban eco-travel guidebooks that feature insider tips to the most tantalizing businesses and activities that give back to the community, environment and local economy. An active spokesperson for lively, inspiring and tasty ways to tread more lightly on the