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YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW BOOZE COULD BE MADE WITH THESE INGREDIENTS

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In this era of boozy experimentation, distillers are pushing the envelope of traditional spirit definitions in an effort to differentiate themselves from one another. Terms like *craft* and *artisan* get bandied about with glee, but frankly, they mean very little as descriptors. What does resonate is the source of the distillate, which is most often a type of grain. Going against the grain—literally—is one way to stand out in a very crowded world.

Not only do unusual distillates create a new style of spirit—you hear the word *mouthfeel* bandied about a lot—they also offer the opportunity to showcase local ingredients in a hyper-regional manner. These are seven of the recent trendsetters that have created spirits from nontraditional ingredients with distinctive results.

1. APPLES: BULLY BOY ESTATE GIN



Brothers Dave and Will Willis grew up making apple cider on their family farm. Cider begat hard cider; hard cider begat apple brandy. When the boys grew up, they channeled their enthusiasm into Bully Boy Distillers, a name derived from a eulogy on a framed picture of a horseshoe they found in their family’s farmhouse basement.

“The apple brandy, which is made in-house, adds texture and mouthfeel to the [corn-based] neutral grain spirit; neutral grain tends to be thin,” says Dave, the co-owner and head distiller, of their apple base. “It also acts as a binding agent, bringing together the different botanicals and filling in the gaps between flavors and aromas.” Along with the apple brandy made from fruit sourced on the farm, Bully Boy gin includes local juniper, pink peppercorn and hibiscus, defining its New England origins.

2. SUGAR CANE: DRY LINE GIN



Making gin from sugar cane makes a lot of sense when you realize the focus of the man behind the distillate. “As a rum distiller first and foremost, the notion of crafting a sugar-cane-based gin came naturally to us,” says Dave Roberts, Jr., the co-owner and head distiller at South Hollow Spirits. “We’ve found that cane fermentations come off very clean from the still and offer a unique balance between the spirit itself and the added botanicals—something that cannot be found in traditional molasses distillates. The cane sweetness balances the bite from the juniper and lemon peel, giving Dry Line gin a richer body and mouthfeel than typical gins.”

3. GRAPES: CALIVORE BIG SUR GIN



As a college student, Aaron Bergh secretly distilled booze in his dorm room. The campus police didn’t appreciate this much and asked him to move off campus. Undaunted, Bergh continued to experiment, and a few years later, Calivore Spirits Co. was born. Bergh, who is only 24, approaches his work with a very millennial mindset, determined that his products tell a story and embrace the bounty of California where they’re made.

“I chose to make Calivore Big Sur gin from grape instead of grain because it produces a tastier, better quality spirit,” says Bergh. “The grapes add a slight hint of fruit to my gin and give it a silky mouthfeel that’s absent in grain-based spirits. Not only that, but I’m a strong believer in sustainability and crafting spirits from as many locally sourced ingredients as possible. Why import grain thousands of miles from the Midwest when the best wine grapes in the world are practically in my backyard? Like my wine-barrel-aged Blonde rum, my gin is a reflection of California wine country.” Adding botanicals sourced from the Big Sur area further enhances the locavore profile.

4. RICE: KIKORI WHISKEY



As a whiskey drinker, Kikori founder Ann Soh Woods started searching for “a more subtle and brighter tasting whiskey.” Unable to find something that satisfied her, she decided to create her own. Rice was a logical choice for her. While still technically a grain, it has a softer profile than cereal grains like wheat, rye and barley. “Rice is a staple of Japan and Asia, and I knew it could offer the aromatic flavor profile I was looking for,” says Woods. “I was seeking floral notes on the nose and a crisp, clean taste on the palate that would lend itself to being a base for a variety of cocktails.”

While rice whiskey is essentially aged shochu, no one in the U.S. is clamoring for shochu. Japanese whisky, on the other hand, is in high demand, and Kikori, made from Japanese-sourced rice, has made a solid showing.

5. SWEET POTATOES: CORBIN CASH VODKA, WESTERN DRY GIN AND BLENDED WHISKEY



Vodka is often made from potatoes, but sweet potatoes? And for that matter, sweet potato gin? And **whiskey** too? Absolutely. Corbin Cash owner Dave Souza, whose family has been farming in California's San Joaquin Valley for almost 100 years, wanted to find a way to move beyond mere farming. The answer was right in front of him in his fields of sweet potatoes. The blended whiskey uses an 80/20 split of sweet potatoes and rye, creating a **bourbon**-like style. The gin and vodka have a gentle sweetness to them.

"Using sweet potatoes as a distillate lends a creamier mouthfeel to Corbin Cash spirits than you're likely to find in other spirits in the vodka, whiskey and gin categories," says Souza. Not only is Souza's approach well-conceived, so too are his farming methods. The spring water used in the distillation process is recycled back onto the farm, and the spent mash is used as fertilizer or cattle feed.

6. HONEY: **WIGLE LANDLOCKED SERIES**



If you can make rum from molasses and sugar cane, it stands to reason that you can make it from other sugar-based products. Of course, the legal definition of rum only allows for the former two distillates. But the folks at Wigle decided to experiment anyway, arriving at an intriguing notion of using honey. Not only did this feed into the company's commitment to local ingredients and the owners' history of beekeeping but also the role of rum in early America.

"When we started the Landlocked lineup in 2012, we had been making whiskey and gin for about a year," says co-owner Meredith Meyer Grelli. "We wanted to make a rum that represented the regional agriculture and flavors of the mid-Atlantic. Pennsylvania is one of the country's largest producers of honey, and my husband, Alex, and I had beekeeping in our background. During our beekeeping days, we fell in love with the fall buckwheat honeys that Western Pennsylvania produces as bees collect nectar from buckwheat flowers and knotweed along the rivers."

Using this honey, they created a mead base that led to a **brandy**-like distillate with floral/fig undertones. Three iterations have been produced, each offering a distinct profile ranging from brandy-like to spiced rum. The Landlocked name is a nod to the location in which it's produced.

7. APPLES: COPPER & KINGS ALLEY CAT AND STRAY CAT GINS



Not only does owner Joe Heron make brandy in Louisville, Ky. (aka bourbon country), he makes gin. His unconventional, but synergistic, choice of location is reflected in his Stray Cat and Alley Cat gins, which were small-batch experiments. The creation starts with an unaged apple brandy that's then aged in various barrels, including Serbian juniper, ex-bourbon or referred cognac, among others. The spirit is aged between 12 and 24 months, thus creating something of an Old Tom character.

"We are far more interested in intensity than anything else," says Heron. "We're looking for a full-bodied, robust spirit with a luscious mouthfeel and viscosity.... Apple brandy as a base gives a nice crispness in brandy terms (relative to grape brandy) without losing the suppleness of brandy overall."