

The Different Types of Liquor & The 7 Most Commonly Used Spirits Behind the Bar



Crafty Bartending

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Before we get to the different types of liquor, let's take a look at **what liquor is and some of the more confusing terms**:

Liquor Vs Spirits Vs Liqueurs

- Liquor is a distilled alcoholic beverage and it's made by distilling fermented beverages. Fermentation is the process of turning sugars into alcohol. And distillation is the processes of removing water (and other stuff) from the fermented beverage to concentrate its alcoholic content.
- Spirits are the same as liquors.
- Liqueurs are different to liquors. Liqueurs are liquors that have had some element of sweetener added to them. They're also often flavoured with various fruits, herbs, spices, etc.

Here are the 7 most commonly used spirits behind the bar:

1. Vodka

- Vodka is defined as a neutral-flavoured, clear spirit. That basically means that vodka is supposed to be virtually tasteless, odourless, and clear (like water) in colour.
- But vodka does have **very subtle** flavours that are distinguishable between brands. Some are peppery, some are creamy, and others have hints of citrus or grain.
- Vodka is extremely versatile in cocktails because it mixes well and showcases off other ingredients' flavours and aromas.

2. Gin

- Like vodka, gin is a clear spirit and it also mixes well with other ingredients. But what makes gin different is that it's flavoured with various botanicals to give gin its distinct taste.
- For gin to be gin, it needs to be a spirit that's distilled from grains or malt, and it **MUST** be flavoured with the infamous Juniper Berry. That's the aroma & flavour people most commonly associate with gin. But gin is often flavoured with other botanicals alongside the juniper berry.
- London Dry Gin is the style of gin your most likely to use behind the bar. It's also considered to be the best quality. There are other styles, but you won't use them as often. All categories of gin have to be bottled at a minimum of 37.5% ABV.

3. Whisky or Whiskey?

- Whisk(e)y is a spirit that's distilled from fermented grains. Whisk(e)y is different to vodka because whisk(e)y is aged/matured in wooden barrels for a period of time after distillation. The wooden barrels impart flavours, aromas, and colour onto the whisk(e)y that you just don't want with vodka.
- Whisk(e)y is spelled differently is because different countries have chosen to spell it differently. Fortunately, there's an easy way to remember the differences:
- Countries that contain the letter e in their name, spell **whiskey** with an e. *Ireland & America* spell *whiskey* with an e. Countries without an **e** in their name spell **whisky** without the e. *Japan, Scotland, Canada, & Australia* all spell *whisky* without the e.
- **Scotch** comes from Scotland and it's made from malted barley. For scotch to be called scotch, it **MUST** come from Scotland and the whisky must also be aged/matured in wooden barrels in Scotland for a minimum of three years.

- **Irish whiskey** comes from Ireland, it's can be made from malted or unmalted barley, and it must also be aged for a minimum of 3 years in wooden barrels for it to be called whiskey. Irish whiskey is made to be 'cleaner' and smoother (with less flavour) than Scotch. However, the Irish Whiskey landscape is changing so we're likely to see new styles of Irish whiskey develop.
- **Bourbon** must contain a minimum of 51% corn in the mash, it must be spend some time in new charred-oak barrels, and it must be distilled to an ABV of no more than 80%. They're generally bottled at around 40% after ageing. Corn gives whiskey a sweeter taste and smoother texture.
- **American Rye Whiskey** must contain a minimum of 51% rye in the mash, it must spend some time in new charred oak barrels, and it must be distilled to an ABV of no more than 80%. They're generally bottled at around 40% after ageing. Rye gives whiskey a peppery taste.

4. Rum

- Rum is a spirit distilled from sugarcane or molasses (thick dark brown juice obtained from raw sugar, most rums are made from molasses). Rum is often aged in wooden barrels, but because rum is predominantly made in the Caribbean, rum laws aren't as strict as whisk(e)y laws.
- Rum matures quicker in the barrel than whisk(e)y because it's made (and matured) in tropical/warmer climates.
- There are 4 styles of rum you need to know about: **White rums** are clear and they're designed to have the least flavour among the different types of rum. **Medium-bodied dark** rums are fuller in flavour and are generally gold in colour. **Full-bodied dark** rums are generally darker than medium-bodied rums and they're well-aged in wooden barrels. **Spiced rums** are rums that have been flavoured with various spices

5. Tequila

- Tequila is made from distilling fermented blue agave juice and for tequila to be called tequila, it **MUST** come from the region of Tequila in Mexico. The blue agave is a really beautiful plant that's native to Mexico.
- There are 2 main classifications, **Mixto** and **100% Blue Agave**.
- **Mixto** is the stuff that you used to drink back in college and uni. It must be made from a mash with no less than 51% of the blue agave plant.
- The **100% blue agave** tequila is the best quality tequila on the market and it must be made from 100% blue agave. It has 5 categories, blanco, Joven (gold), reposado (means rested in Spanish), anejo, and extra-anejo. These categories indicate how long the tequila has been aged in wood.
- Blanco is aged for less than 60 days and is white in colour. Joven is similar to blanco except it's gold in colour (due to the addition of caramel). Reposado is aged between 60 days to 1 year and is yellow in colour. Anejo is aged for a minimum of 1 year (often more) and is gold in colour. Extra-anejo is considered the best quality tequila and must be aged for a minimum of 3 years.

6. Brandy

- Brandy is a distilled fermented fruit beverage. Technically any distilled fermented fruits are brandies. But the majority of the time, brandy is made by distilling fermented grapes (essentially, it's like distilling wine).
- The French are the best known for their brandy. Cognac (grape brandy), Armangac (grape brandy), and Calvados (apple brandy), are all very popular brandies coming out of France.

7. Vermouth

- Vermouth technically isn't a liquor. It's a fortified, aromatised wine.
- Fortification means that the wine has been strengthened (or fortified) in terms of alcohol content, by adding a liquor to it. In the case of vermouth, brandy is the liquor that's used to strengthen the wine up to around the 20-25% ABV mark.
- Aromatisation is the process of flavouring the wine by infusing it with various herbs, spices, roots, bark, and flowers.
- There are 2 styles of vermouth that you need to know about. **Sweet (Italian) vermouth**, used in cocktails such as the Negroni and the Manhattan. And **Dry (French) vermouth**, used in the infamous Dry Martini cocktail.

8. The Rest

- There are a whole host of other liquors/spirits that get used behind more sophisticated bars. Pisco, cachaca rum, mezcal, grappa, absinthe, and ouzo are all great examples.
- But they're hardly used in comparison to the 7 listed above. So make sure you learn about the above 7 first!