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100 TOP VALUE

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SPIRITS

A Year of Surprises

BY JACK BETTRIDGE

I've been struck in recent years by the way the constant expansion of the spirits sphere introduces truly new flavors and formulations. This list represents some of the novel characters that have impressed me this year and changed their categories for the better.

BOURBON

JIM BEAM SIGNATURE CRAFT TRITICALE BOURBON

A year that saw Bourbon still booming had a parade of innovative releases, with new wood treatments, a spate of older whiskeys and a trend for high proof. The Jim Beam Signature Craft Harvest Collection (\$50/375ml) went as far as to toy with the essential grain makeup: Four of the six 11-year-old releases substituted other grains for the usual secondary component of rye, but the biggest step off the dime was utilizing triticale, a rye-and-wheat hybrid developed as a feed grain. It has been tried recently in craft whiskey a dozen years ago, when this whiskey was distilled, it was unheard of. Master distiller Fred Noe describes it as making a sandwich with a piece of rye bread on one side and softening wheat on the other.



traditional Scotch flavors and notes associated with Asia, such as sandalwood and incense.

RUM

PLANTATION PINEAPPLE STIGGINS' FANCY RUM

Flavored spirits have seen great growth for years. What modern drinkers might not be considering when downing vodkas with quirky new additives is that there exists a tradition of doctoring rum with local fruits, herbs and spices. Plantation Pineapple Stiggins' Fancy Rum (\$30) represents at once a more simplistic and a more involved approach. The recipe, which harks to 19th-century England, calls for cutting the rinds off sweet Victoria



CALVADOS

HENRI BERNARD BEUDIN 18 YEAR SINGLE CASK CALVADOS

The combination of new artisanal, domestic apple brandies and a trend toward rediscovering cocktails with apple-based alcohol has spelled the return of a drink that in colonial times was, well, as American as apple pie. Let us not forget, apple-based alcohol traces back to the Roman Empire. The Calvados apple brandy region, in Normandy, is France's appellation of choice. With the designation come age minimums (the youngest is in cognac at two years) and other restrictions that put the region par with those other two French brandy regions: Cognac and Armagnac. Calvados makes excellent aperitifs, digestifs and mixers. Stateside, it's best known for the venerable Boulard brandies, but smaller producers are starting to make a stand. This Beudin selection (\$130/375ml) from a farmer-producer is distilled in a small column still and aged in good quality wine casks. It shows all the nuance and complexity needed to spark a fresh look at the entire brandy category.

BLENDED WHISKY

SUNTORY HIBIKI JAPANESE HARMONY

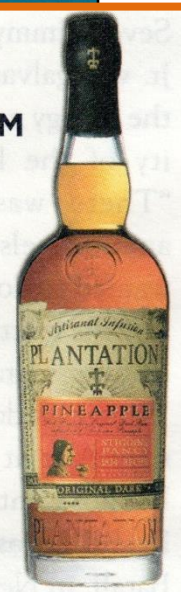
For a few decades now, single malts have seemed to be the connoisseur's way to enjoy Scotch, while blends were reserved for unwanted guests. Scotland itself has been working hard to disabuse us of that notion, and this year, we got a strong reminder of the artistry of blending from Japan. The highline Suntory Hibiki



RUM

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freshier first-run casks but to the rarer vessels. The latter are often disparaged as having been worn out by previous use, but

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