

Clearly, white whiskey is changing for the better

BY JOSH NOEL

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When white whiskeys first turned up on liquor stores shelves and cocktail menus a few years ago, they seemed, at best, playful alternatives to vodka and the familiar barrel-aged brown stuff. But in recent years, a surprising thing has happened: White whiskeys got good.

Increased production paired with a wider array of grain bills — that is, the ingredients from which the whiskeys are made — has resulted in the spirit becoming various combinations of smooth, luscious, spicy and creamy. They have developed complex layers and flavors and, depending on the white whiskey, have become primo sippers or cocktail ingredients.

David Perkins, owner of High West Distillery in Park City, Utah, says white whiskeys “should be looked at no differently than blanco tequila.” And he should know: he distills a smooth, creamy white whiskey made of oats and recently spicier, bolder white rye.

“They have their anejo and blanco,” Perkins says of tequila. “Whiskey has its anejo. Why can’t whiskey have its blanco?”

First a word of explanation: All whiskeys and tequilas are initially white. Spending time in barrels adds color and flavor to both spirits. In the tequila lexicon, the most barrel-aged version is called anejo (or extra anejo if you’re feeling bold). In the whiskey world, the most barrel-aged is simply considered whiskey. End of story. Or it was until now.

These days, distilleries like High West are tweaking recipes to maximize and vary their white whiskeys. Perkins, for instance, considers his oat whiskey



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In the last few years, the best white whiskeys have developed complex layers and flavors.

Three to try

MBR Black Dog Kentucky Corn Whiskey Distilled from corn smoked in a tobacco barn, this is earthy, rewarding and complex enough to be reminiscent of mezcal or scotch. You’d do yourself a disservice to mix this with anything more than a few drops of water.

High West Silver Western Oat A luscious body (thanks to the oat, which usually makes for a luxurious spirit) is backed up by a smooth, clean finish. A fine mixer or worth drinking straight. The High West rye is also worth your time for a bolder example of the style.

Koval Rye Chicago Spicy and bold (which ryes usually are), but smooth. Another one that would work mixed or straight.

“the Grace Kelly of our lineup ... beautiful and smooth” and useful for mixing in cocktails. The rye, he said, “is meant to be sipped on its own, no ice, no mixing.”

“It is complex and bold and the Charles Bronson of

our lineup,” Perkins says. “You may like him, and you may not.”

Charles Bronson in a bottle? Just goes to show how far white whiskeys have come.

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