

going with the grain

The mash bill for whiskey usually includes standard, familiar grains: corn, wheat, rye and perhaps a dash of barley. However, a small but growing number of distillers are experimenting with heirloom and other uncommon grains, expanding whiskey's range of flavors.



Koval Whiskies

Chicago artisan distillery Koval is among the leaders in the alt-grain scene, crafting aged and white whiskeys from local spelt, millet and oats. Each is a purebred; for example, the spelt whiskey contains no other grains.

“We enjoy working with unique grains,” says Sonat Birnecker Hart, president of Koval Distillery. Her husband, Robert, who serves as Koval’s distiller, is from Austria, where “it’s not unusual to have a small-batch distiller working with unusual grains,” Hart says.

The aged Raksi Millet is a particularly intriguing specimen, with its rich vanilla and nut-like tones. But expect to see other spirits made with unusual grains.

Utah’s High West Distillery recently released High West Silver, an unaged whiskey made from 85% oats and 15% barley malt. Meanwhile, New York’s Blue Hill at Stone Barns hired Hudson Valley distiller Tuthilltown to make a bespoke aged Spirited Spelt and moonshine-like Spirited Emmer Wheat. The heirloom grain spirits will only be available at Blue Hill restaurants. —K.N.