



## 2023 ACSA JUDGING OF CRAFT SPIRITS COMPETITION

### SPIRIT JUDGING PROTOCOLS

Welcome to the 10th Annual ACSA Judging of Craft Spirits Competition on January 9th & 10th, 2024 at Ironton Distillery & Craffhouse in Denver, CO. ACSA takes great pride in conducting a rigorously professional judging program in accordance with the following protocols.

#### **Stage One: Receipt and Classification of Spirits.**

All received spirits are stored in a locked room at Ironton Distillery. Boxes remain sealed until two days prior to the judging whereupon the backroom organizing team opens the boxes and sorts the categories in the staging area. Access to the staging area is limited, without exception, to the ACSA, Judging Chairs, the stewards, and relevant ACSA and Ironton Distillery staff.

#### **SPIRIT DEFINITIONS BY CATEGORY**

For the complete list of the TTB definitions by category, please refer to the TTB's Beverage Alcohol Manual, Chapter Four, available [HERE](#) in PDF format.

#### **1. Spirit Categorization**

- a. A "Spirit Category" is defined as the "parent" spirit type, with most categories having multiple sub-categories.
- b. Categories and sub-categories shall be as defined by the TTB in Title 27 of the Code of Federal Regulations and must be backed by the TTB-approved COLA.
- c. **"Made from Scratch" vs. "Third Party"**
  - i. All spirit entry categories shall consist of two make-categories within: Made from Scratch and Third Party.
    1. Example: Bourbon Whiskey will award up to three medals to both the Made from Scratch and Third Party-Distilled, totaling up to six medals in the category of "Bourbon Whiskey".
  - ii. Definitions
    1. Made from Scratch: a fermented mash/wash that is produced exclusively by original distillation, aged and bottled in-house without any 3rd party spirits being added or blended into the product at any time.
    2. Third Party Distilled: a spirit that is either distilled in-house and blended with 3rd party spirits or 3rd party spirits blended and bottled.
- d. **Whiskey**

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- i. Categories
    1. Un-aged
    2. Aged- two years and under
    3. Straight, under four years
    4. Straight, four years and over
  - ii. Sub-Categories
    1. Bourbon Whiskey
    2. Rye Whiskey
    3. Wheat Whiskey
    4. Malt Whiskey
    5. Corn Whiskey
    6. Light Whiskey
    7. Blended Whiskey
    8. Flavored Whiskey
    9. Hopped Whiskey
    10. Cask Strength (100° or greater)
    11. Other
- e. Rum**
- i. Sub-Categories
    1. Un-aged Rum Molasses Base
    2. Un-Aged Rum Fresh Cane Base
    3. Un-Aged Rum Other Sugar Cane Base
    4. Aged White Rum (Charcoal Filtered)
    5. Aged Rum Molasses Base
    6. Aged Rum Fresh Cane Base
    7. Aged Rum Other Sugar Cane Base
    8. Spiced
    9. Flavored Rum
- f. Brandy**
- i. Sub-Categories
    1. Fruit Brandy
    2. Grape Brandy
    3. Eau de Vie
    4. Grappa
    5. Un-aged
- g. Gin**
- i. Sub-Categories:
    1. London Dry
    2. Old Tom
    3. Genever (any spirit which is distilled over juniper that has not been distilled to 90 proof prior)

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4. Contemporary
5. Aged Gin

## h. Vodka & Grain Spirits

- i. Sub-Categories:
  1. Flavored Vodka
  2. Unflavored Vodka

## i. Specialty

- i. Sub-Categories
  1. Absinthe
  2. Bottled Amaro Cocktail
  3. Flavored Liqueurs
  4. Cream Liqueurs
  5. Historical Spirits
  6. Aquavit
  7. Other

## j. RTD (Ready to Drink Cocktails)

### Stage Two: Procedures and Process

#### Rules:

- Smoking is not allowed at any time during the competition.
- No perfume/cologne can be worn.
- Clothing must be free of residual odor (from smoking, perfume/cologne, or poor hygiene).
- Judges are expected to be professional at all times during judging. Protocols are to be followed as well as specific instructions from the judging chairs.

**Judging Panels:** The judging panels consist of a minimum of three and a maximum of five bench judges. The judges are picked to provide a mix of experience between various areas within the spirits industry—retailers, mixologists, distributors, educators, and journalists/reviewers. Distillers or consultants with a vested interest in a spirit will not be able to preside over flights in that category. Whenever possible, judges with an expertise in a certain type of spirit are placed on the panels, as well as generalists who are qualified to judge a variety of classes of spirits. An overall score from 1-100 will be tallied for each spirit within the flight. Flights of spirits will be delivered to the panels in unison, with watch glass tops.

Judges will perform a sensory evaluation of the spirits and enter their perceptions on the score sheets provided. The nose, palate, finish, and balance of spirits will be evaluated in terms of cleanliness, length, depth, and complexity. Tasting notes and judges' comments will be entered onto the score sheet and collected immediately after that flight is tasted. Rude, sarcastic, or unconstructive comments by judges will not be tolerated.

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Each panel will be provided with distilled water, neutral crackers, raw almonds, place-mats, spit buckets, score sheets, pencils, a pencil sharpener, and water glasses. The utmost care will be taken to ensure that when stewards are pouring the spirits into the glasses, the liquid level in each glass is always uniform so that the judges will be able to accurately assess them.

When the outcome of a flight is determined and tallied by the Judges, the scorecards will be delivered to the staging room by a steward, where the scores will be recorded and copied. The recorder shall enter the medals into the master spreadsheet of entries and compile a complete list of medalists. Tasting notes from the judges will be gathered and sorted for distribution, but results and tasting notes will be considered confidential and held in secret until after the awards are announced.

**Scoring:** The scoring of spirits is based on a 100-point system with the points allotted to criteria uniquely weighted to appropriately match each individual spirits category. Consideration of these points will speak to the overall quality of the spirit within its category and against its peers. This feedback will also generate meaningful information for the producers themselves.

Spirits will then be assigned a medal based on the average score determined by the following benchmarks:

- 70-79 = Bronze
- 80-89 = Silver
- 90-100 = Gold

\*\* The scoring method used by the panel of judges will be a modified mean:discarding the lowest and highest score \*\*

The bottom portion of the score sheet asks the judges for input regarding the best qualities of the spirit, and also asks how the spirit can be improved.

**Awards:** Judges will award gold, silver and bronze medals for spirits based on the average panel score. All spirits that medal are presented to a panel of judges for certifying of that medal rather than simply allowing an average to be the final decision on an award. If there is a majority concern of the medal standing of a product in relation to the average score, the spirit may be certified by elevation to a higher medal or conversely, declassifying to a lower medal or in some cases, no medal at all. This is to account for outlier judges that can tank or inflate an average score.

## **Stage Three: Best of Class, Best in Show, and Best of Innovation**

Once judging of the flights are complete, the staging room staff will compose a flight of each Best of Category Spirit. Flights will be composed of the top scoring spirits in each category. Judges will not be informed of the previous score or medal assignment of the spirits making up

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the Best of Category Spirits flight. Best in Category Spirits will be drawn from gold medal spirits first. However, if a particular category lacks any gold medal awards, then the top silver, or bronze, medalists will be drawn.

- Example 1: Gin has nine gold medalists. The top six scores will be drawn for the Best of Category flight.
- Example 2: Vodka has four gold medalists, and nine silver medalists. Only the four gold medalists will be drawn for a Best of Category flight.
- Example 3: Rum has zero gold medalists, but eight silver medalists. The top six scores from the silver medalists will be drawn for the Best of Category flight.

The scoring of Best of Class and Best in Show will be based on a 100-point system focused on overall quality assessment of the spirits. Points will be allotted to Appearance, Balance, Length/Finish, Integration, Complexity, Concentration, Age Appropriateness, Evolution in the Glass, and having that little ‘something extra’ we will call Finesse.

The judging panel for each category will consider this flight to determine a Best of Class. If the results are conclusive on the first vote, then the results will be recorded. If the results are inconclusive, the judges will use ranked scoring, allowing three points for first place, two points for second place, and one point for third place. The spirit that receives the highest score will be named Best of Class.

There will be a Best of Class recorded for each of the classes and for each of the two divisions, craft distilled and craft produced spirits. The Best of Innovation also will be awarded in each of the spirits categories.

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## **Judging Director**

The role of the Judging Director is to oversee all judging operations and to see that all functions are performed smoothly and efficiently. The Judging Director’s various duties include determining flights, tallying scores, answering judge’s questions, assigning alternate judges to panels, and checking in on judging panels for completion of flights. The Judging Chairs run the calibration seminar that opens the judging, it offers detailed instruction, competition standards, and answers any questions judges may have. FINALLY, the Judging Chairs are barred from entering their own spirits.

## **Stewards**

Each panel will have a dedicated steward who will operate as a liaison between the judges and the staging room. Any requests from judging panels will come through these stewards. Another dedicated steward will serve each panel from the staging room, ensuring that flights are properly

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poured and ready when it is time to change flights. These stewards will assist each other when available.

Stewards are responsible for seeing that glasses are cleaned after every flight, ensuring that enough dry glasses are available for successive flights, clearing the glasses away after each flight, and cleaning the spit buckets. Stewards also make sure that the judges are well equipped with water, crackers, and almonds.

## **Recorder**

The recorder will receive the score sheets from and log the average scores, Best of Categories and medals earned. The recorder will compile a list of the full names of distilleries and spirits receiving medals and determine the Best of Category.

Score sheets with tasting notes will be scanned for archives and possible distribution to the distillers.

Tasting notes will be kept grouped by flight in the order that the flight was served.

Stickers will be placed on each score sheet showing the full name of the product and distillery and at the same time covering over the medal recommendations from each judge. Each medal-winning bottle will have an appropriate sticker placed on it to demonstrate the medal awarded.

## **Closing**

At the end of the competition all remaining bottles will be packaged and removed from Ironton Distillery and transported and held at a secured bonded facility. The spirits are then transported to ACSA's Annual Distillers' Convention & Vendor Trade Show in Denver, CO.

Tasting notes, medals, and non-medal tasting notes will be shipped directly to the entrant following the convention.