



2026 AMERICAN CRAFT SPIRITS COMPETITION

JUDGING PROTOCOLS

Welcome to the 12th annual American Craft Spirits Competition! Judging will take place on January 27 & 28, 2026 at Cotton & Reed in Washington, D.C. ACSA takes great pride in conducting a rigorously professional judging program in accordance with the following protocols.

Receipt and Classification of Spirits

All received spirits are stored in a locked room at Cotton & Reed. Access to the staging area is limited, without exception, to the ACSA, Judging Chairs, the stewards, and relevant ACSA and Cotton & Reed staff.

SPIRIT DEFINITIONS BY CATEGORY

For the complete list of the TTB definitions by category, please refer to chapter four of the TTB's Beverage Alcohol Manual, Chapter Four.

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"

Scratch and Third Party.

Definitions

1. Made from Scratch (Craft-Distilled): 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 (Craft- Produced): a spirit that is either distilled in-house and blended with 3rd party spirits or 3rd party spirits blended and bottled.

d. Whiskey

i. Categories

1. Bourbon Whiskey
2. Rye Whiskey
3. Wheat Whiskey
4. American Single Malt/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

ii. Sub-Categories

1. Un-aged
2. Aged- two years and under
3. Straight, under four years
4. Straight, four years and over

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)

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)

Procedures and Process

JUDGING PANELS

Each judging panel is composed of three to five experts, carefully selected to represent diverse perspectives within the spirits industry—including retailers, mixologists, distributors, educators, journalists, reviewers, and distillers. To ensure impartiality, distillers or consultants with a vested interest in a category will not be assigned to evaluate those entries. Whenever possible, panels include both specialists with deep expertise in a specific spirit type and generalists qualified to evaluate a wide range of categories. All spirits are assessed on a 100-point scale, with scores tallied for each entry within a flight. Flights are presented to judges simultaneously, with watch glass tops to preserve integrity and consistency during evaluation.

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.

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 may be a modified mean at the chairs discretion: discarding the lowest score **

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.

New Double Gold Recognition

Beginning this year, Double Gold medals will be awarded in eligible whiskey categories that receive a minimum number of entries. Please note that not all whiskey categories will qualify for Double Gold consideration; eligibility will be determined based on the total number of submissions received in each category.

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 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.

The annual Innovation Award, created to showcase true creativity, honors an innovative, remarkable spirit that is not commonly associated with a flavor profile in a known spirits category.

JUDGING CHAIRS

The role of the Judging Chairs is to oversee all judging operations and to see that all functions are performed smoothly and efficiently. The Judging Chairs' 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, offering detailed instruction, competition standards, and answers any questions judges may have. Finally, the Judging Chairs are barred from entering their own spirits.

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

CLOSING

At the end of the competition all remaining bottles will be packaged and removed from Cotton & Reed and transported and held at a secured bonded facility. The spirits are then transported to the 2026 American Craft Spirits Convention & Expo in Sacramento, CA.

Tasting notes, medals, and non-medal tasting notes will be shipped directly to the entrant following the convention, if not picked up in person at the convention.