



2027 American Craft Spirits Competition

JUDGING PROTOCOLS

Welcome to the 13th Annual American Craft Spirits Competition! Judging will take place on November 17 & 18, 2026 at Thornton Distilling Company. 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 Thornton Distilling Company. Access to the staging area is limited to the ACSA Judging Chairs, the stewards, and relevant ACSA and Thornton Distilling Company staff.

Spirit Definition 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](#).

- For purposes of the competition, spirits are organized into Categories and Sub-Categories to facilitate fair and meaningful judging.
- ACSA Categories and Sub-Categories are informed by and generally aligned with TTB classes, types, and standards of identity; however, they are competition classifications and are not intended to directly replicate TTB classifications. Categories may be combined, divided, or further defined where appropriate for competition and judging purposes.
- TTB standards of identity and the product's approved label/COLA, where applicable, will serve as guidance in determining the appropriate competition classification, along with the definitions and eligibility requirements established within these competition protocols.
- In the event that a competition Category or Sub-Category differs from a TTB class or type designation, the definitions and requirements contained within these competition protocols will govern placement for judging purposes.
- ACSA competition classifications do not supersede or modify any applicable TTB regulatory, labeling, or standards-of-identity requirements.

I. Whiskey

A. Sub-Category

1. Bourbon Whiskey
2. Rye Whiskey
3. Wheat Whiskey

4. American Single Malt
 5. Corn Whiskey
 6. Light Whiskey
 7. Flavored Whiskey
 8. American Whiskey
 - II. **Rum**
 - III. **Brandy**
 - I. **Gin**
 - II. **Vodka & Grain Spirits**
 - III. **Specialty Spirits**
 - IV. **Ready to Drink (RTD) Cocktails**

All spirits will be asked for proof and age.

Procedures and Process

Judging Panels

Each judging panel consists of three to five industry experts selected to provide a balanced range of perspectives, including distillers, retailers, mixologists, distributors, educators, journalists, reviewers, and other qualified industry professionals. Whenever possible, panels include a mix of category specialists and experienced generalists. Judges will not be assigned to evaluate categories in which they have a vested interest.

Entries are organized into flights based on relevant product characteristics, including category and sub-category, spirit profile, proof, production method, age, and other distinguishing attributes when appropriate. The goal is to create thoughtful, comparable flights that allow spirits to be evaluated fairly alongside their peers.

Flights are presented simultaneously and covered with watch glasses to preserve aroma and maintain consistency. Judges conduct a sensory evaluation of each spirit, considering nose, palate, finish, and overall balance, including cleanliness, length, depth, and complexity. Each entry is evaluated on a 60–100 point scale, with judges recording scores, tasting notes, and comments for each spirit.

Following each flight, scorecards are collected by a steward and delivered to the staging room for tabulation and recording. Medal results are entered into the master competition record, and tasting notes are collected and organized for distribution.

All scores, medal results, and tasting notes remain confidential until the official announcement of competition results

Medal Scoring

The scoring of spirits is based on a 60–100 point system with the points allotted to criteria uniquely weighted to appropriately match each individual spirits category. Judges will award silver, gold and double gold medals for spirits based on the average panel score. All spirits that medal are presented to a panel of judges for certifying 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 in 2027, ACSA will award silver, gold, and double gold medals based on the following average scores:

- Silver: Overall score of 80–89
- Gold: Overall score of 90–100
- Double Gold: Every judge at the table awarded the spirit a score of 90 or higher.

Important: At the discretion of the Judging Chairs, a modified mean may be used, allowing the lowest score from the panel of judges to be discarded. The judges are also permitted to upgrade a medal based on the spirit's overall quality and merit.

Best of Class

Once judging of the flights are complete, the staging room staff will compose a flight of each Best of Class. 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 Class flight. Best of Class will be drawn from gold medal spirits first.

Best in Show

The Best in Show will be selected from the full slate of Best of Class winners across every category. The entire pool of judges will convene to rate this flight blind and rank the spirits in the flight. The top-ranked spirits will be named Best in Show.

Innovation Award

The Innovation Award can be awarded in any of the spirits categories. The Innovation Award, was 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.

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 Thornton Distilling Company and transported and held at a secured bonded facility. The spirits are then transported to the 2027 American Craft Spirits Convention & Expo, taking place February 17-18, 2027 in Chicago, Illinois.

Awards will be presented during the Awards Ceremony at the 2027 American Craft Spirits Convention & Expo. Award-winning spirits will also be featured during the Grand Tasting. Entrants who do not attend the convention will have their tasting notes and medals, if applicable, shipped directly to them following the event.