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Case Study | White Dog's Day

FOOD

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White whiskey is a novelty with the built-in prestige of history.
William P. O'Donnell/The New York Times

Case Study is a bimonthly posting on all things alcoholic by Toby Cecchini, T's spirits columnist.

The first time I tasted an unaged whiskey spirit was many years ago in Ireland, where I was taking a tour with a master distiller. As what appeared to be water poured from

the still's brass spigot, I asked if it was drinkable. He bid me stick my hand in a get a taste. "I can just stick my hand into it?" I asked. "Isn't that what's going to be your whiskey?" He replied, "Lad, it's 78 percent alcohol; 'ere's nothin' can live in that!" Right. I braced myself for what I thought would be a blast of kerosene. I was far more shocked by the aromatic sweep of fruit and cereal that wafted from my fingertips. It was so delicious, I couldn't understand why they wouldn't just sell it like that. He said dismissively, "Ach, it's a bit fancy, don't you think?" I still wonder what that meant.

It wears different names depending on who's making it. In Scotland, where it's made with pure barley, it's called "new-make spirit." The Irish have long called it "poitín" or "potcheen." And down in bourbon country, where corn, wheat and rye rule, it's known as "white dog." You could call it moonshine, but that term smacks of illegality and Nascar-proof potions bristling with methanol and worse. These fresh spirits from the heart of the distillation run, heady with the aromas of spring and a warm dollop of malt, could only be moonshine in a tux.

Ever since that experience in Ireland, whenever I've visited a whiskey distillery, I've asked to taste the raw spirit as it comes from the still. The responses have ranged from near outrage to flattered admiration, while I frequently find myself debating whether I like the new-make better than the ensuing aged whiskeys. I've long complained that there is (or should be) some kind of market for this vibrant young version. After all, if you put grapes or other fruit through the same process and call it eau de vie, connoisseurs beat a path to your door. And when you begin poking into the history of whiskey on its home turf, you'll discover that it was long consumed only as a white spirit: the introduction of wood aging came about much later, most likely as a fortunate accident of storage and shipping.

These days, though, my complaints — plural — are being answered. With the rise of the craft distilling scene in America, there are now several "white whiskeys" to be had and several more on the way. What seems at first glance like a hopeful cast into the market by untested novices with no aged spirit to peddle is anything but. Christian Krogstad of [House Spirits](#) in Portland, Ore., which makes both a white whiskey and a more traditional aged brown from pure barley, points out that given the manipulation of wood these days, by using small, heavily charred barrels or even

chips that maximize contact with the whiskey, anyone can make a fully developed, wood-aged brown whiskey in a matter of months.

“It’s a very deliberate choice to put new-make out,” he said. “Those subtle, fruity esters get nixed out by the filtration effect of contact with charred wood in a barrel. We half-jokingly call it ‘barley eau de vie.’” As with wine aging, ephemeral fruit and floral traits are transformed into a deeper set imposed by the wood: caramel, vanilla and leather. But where wine has always offered a choice of either to imbibers, those who might favor that fresh hit of flowers and cereal in their whiskey have been snubbed until now.

Brian Ellison of [Death’s Door Spirits](#) in Madison, Wis., says his White Whisky, based on a hard red winter wheat, has been compared to a reposado tequila, which seems appropriate not just for its viscosity, fruit and spice but also because new-make is an acquired taste. The first sip (remember that first tequila shot?) may leave you far from shore, wondering whether you love or hate it.

The spirits specialist Max Watman, whose book on new-make whiskeys, “[Chasing the White Dog](#),” is due out Feb. 16 from Simon & Schuster, avows that these are likely always going to be small, niche spirits, largely potable intellectual exercises for savvy whiskey buffs. “Some people will roll their eyes, in the same way that you can view all these different bottlings or caskings of existing whiskeys either cynically or enthusiastically,” he says. “But it’s a new avenue of exploration, which I find awesome: a totally different expression of a spirit we already love.”

Ellison, who concurs that not having to age whiskey is far less costly for a vest-pocket distillery trying to vie with the big names, is elated that the acceleration of cocktail culture is driving these maverick spirits from whiskey-nerd secret to common parlance. For cutting-edge bartenders, who are constantly on the prowl for esoteric flavors and old-school validity to exploit, white whiskey is a novelty with the built-in prestige of history. Mixed in a sour, House Spirits’ new-make plays a lot like genever, with some of the agility of a gin or vodka but with an unexpectedly creamy, almost carob-like depth.

Neyah White, the mind behind the bar at [Nopa](#) in San Francisco, offers four white whiskeys and three white dogs, which he classifies by whether they are cut with water

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or not. He makes a featherweight “White Manhattan” using the Death’s Door White Whiskey and a corresponding white sweet vermouth, the Dolin blanc.

For purists, though, the best way to enjoy them may be the most obvious: either neat in a small chimney glass, as you would Cognac, or over one large piece of ice. As with aged whiskeys, the addition of a small measure of cool water can smooth them out and allow them to blossom aromatically. I favor the barley-based whiskeys, particularly with new-make, but with more emerging all the time, I will take my own advice when tasting these quirky spirits: keep your mind open and taste each three separate times. You may find yourself taken by the dog’s bite.