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BarProfits' Top Twenty Best New Vodkas, Rums and Tequilas

Vodka is America's spirit of choice and its 30-year march up the charts shows no signs of abating. According to the Beverage Information Group, vodka sales grew a healthy 4.7 percent last year. Not surprisingly, the category dominates consumption figures. Vodka now accounts for nearly 30 percent of all spirits sold in the country.

The bulk of the category's growth is taking place in the upper echelon brands. Sales of super-premium and ultra-premium vodkas jumped a combined 22.9 percent last year, nearly eclipsing the gains posted by the entire category. Lesser brands didn't fare as well. Premium vodkas rose 12 percent, while economy-priced brands rose a modest 2.4 percent.

While vodka continues to dominate on-premise spirits sales, it's once seemingly insurmountable lead is shrinking. Now firmly in second place, rum is enjoying seven years of increased growth. No surprise as it has all of the prerequisites for broad-based popularity. Rums are made in a broad range of styles, from clear, light-bodied, and semi-dry to dark, full-bodied and full-flavored.

Rum is also an exceptionally mixable spirit, equaling vodka in that respect. But unlike vodka, rum has an irresistible taste and a savory aroma that lifts it head and shoulders above any other light liquor. In most cocktails, vodka's characteristics go unnoticed, while rum is always a primary contributor.

Interest in handcrafted tequilas is also eroding vodka's market share. For the past two decades, the category has grown from barely a blip on the screen to 6 percent of the American spirits market. Equally noteworthy is the rate which the category continues growing. Tequila sales on-premise rose 10 percent in 2007, although its sales growth dipped 4.7 percent in 2008.

Smart money says rum and tequila will continue their rapid ascent up the charts. The attraction is clear. Rums hails from exotic places and their relaxed persona

are a welcome break from austere vodka. As for 100% agave tequilas, ounce for ounce they're comparable in quality and allure to malt whiskey and well-aged cognac, yet have easy-going, laid-back attitudes that Americans can easily relate to.

Best New Vodkas/Tequilas/Rums

Despite the economic downturn and unlike the fate of lesser brands, on-premise sales of top-shelf spirits remain robust. It's further evidence that Americans have grown savvy and more discerning. As they say, life's too short to drink cheap whiskey.

As long as demand continues unabated, distillers will continue releasing new brands of vodka, rum and tequila with which to tempt aficionados and novices alike. Picking the winners out of the steady stream of new entries—especially in these hotly contested segments—is key to profitable backbar management.

To streamline the process, here's our Top Twenty Best New Vodkas, Rums and Tequilas. Salud! —RP

● **45TH PARALLEL VODKA** — Made in New Richmond, Wisconsin near the Minnesota border, the artisanal spirit is triple-distilled in small batch using premium locally grown corn. It contains no additives or artificial flavorings. The vodka has a faint citrus aroma and a silky impressively long finish. Equally breathtaking is 45th Parallel Referent Horseradish Vodka, an all-natural, small batch spirit infused with Wisconsin-grown horseradish.

● **BLUE ICE ORGANIC WHEAT VODKA** — Handcrafted and USDA certified organic, this classy vodka is made at the Distilled Resources facilities in Rigby,

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Idaho, and is quadruple-distilled using Idaho winter wheat and pristine spring water drawn from a 200-foot deep aquifer. The 80-proof spirit is then rigorously filtered for essential purity. The wheated version of Blue Ice is sleek and delectable with floral and zesty citrus notes and a long, clean finish. It's a solid performer.

● **BRUGAL EXTRA VIEJO GRAN RESERVA RUM** — This elegant spirit makes it easy to understand why sipping rums are so popular. Comprised of a blend of older reserves, Brugal's top-shelf añejo immediately commands attention with its mouthwatering bouquet with notes of raisins, toasted oak and pipe tobacco. Its textured, seemingly weightless body delivers a payload of long-lasting flavors including roasted coffee, hot cocoa and hints of nutmeg and anise. Priced in the mid-\$20s, Extra Viejo is a shining example of affordable luxury.

● **CASA NOBLE SINGLE BARREL REPOSADO TEQUILA** — Breaking with tradition, all of the Casa Noble tequilas are triple-distilled in alembic stills at the La Cofradia Distillery in the town of Tequila. Limited quantity Casa Noble Reposado is aged 364 days and drawn from a single French White Oak barrel. The tequila strikes a balance between the fresh, spirited character of blanco tequila and the mellow refinement of their limited reserve añejo.

● **CLEMÉNT CUVÉE HOMÈRE RHUM** — Crafted at the Clément estate in Martinique, the ultra-premium Rhum Agricole is an artisanal blend of vintage eaux de vie from the past fifteen years. Its constituent rums were matured in French Limousin oak and re-charred in ex-bourbons barrels. Cuvée Homère is absolutely mesmerizing in the glass, a shimmering spectacle of bronze and gold highlights reminiscent of Paradis cognac. The bouquet features an aromatic array of tropical fruit, cut cane and fresh baked goods. From start to finish, Cuvée Homère is an exquisite museum-grade gem.

● **COLD RIVER MAINE POTATO VODKA** — Handcrafted Cold River from

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Freeport, Maine is a sensational pot-distilled spirit made from locally grown potatoes and underground spring water. It's a flavor-imbued vodka with a delightful dash of sweetness on the finish. As good as it is, Cold River Blueberry Vodka is bound to grab the headlines. The vodka is an 80-proof homage to Mother Nature with a voluminous bouquet and a finish like the holy chorus of blueberries. Great stuff.

● **DOUBLE CROSS VODKA** — This ultra-premium import is distilled in Slovakia from estate-grown winter wheat and aquifer-fed spring water. It is filtered seven-times through a proprietary series of devices to render the spirit essentially pure. The vodka has a delicate citrus and floral bouquet, a lush velvety textured body and a warm finish layered with peppery, citrusy flavor. Double Cross is a sophisticated treat.

● **GRAN CENTENARIO LEYENDA EXTRA AÑEJO TEQUILA** — Gran Centenario has extended its world-class range of tequilas with the release of Leyenda Extra, an añejo aged an average of four years in French Limousin oak barrels, after which the Maestro Tequilero adds in older reserves to complete the blend. The extra añejo is a masterful achievement. It has a dark amber color with a medium-weight body and a vanilla, clove and oaky bouquet. The palate starts spicy yet finishes long and relaxed.

● **LA CERTEZA AÑEJO TEQUILA** — Ultra-premium La Certeza is a range of small batch tequilas distilled from estate-grown agaves at the Tierra de Agaves distillery. La Certeza Añejo is aged in both American white oak and French Limousin barrels. For all of its accolades, the añejo is easy going and accessible to nearly any palate. The well-aged spirit is generously aromatic and loaded with lingering semi-sweet flavors.

The firm has also introduced Lunazul, a line of 100% agave tequilas competitively priced well below what their quality would normally dictate. The Lunazul Reposado is deliciously balanced between vanilla, fruit and spice, while the Blanco has a peppery palate with a sweet agave finish.

● **MOUNT GAY 1703 OLD CASK SELECTION** — Priced just under \$100, this ultra-sophisticated spirit is a blend of

rums ranging in age from 10 to 30 years drawn from the impressive Mount Gay cellars. Its bouquet alone is worth the price of admission, which means that its lingering finish of oak, caramel, ripe banana and spiced fruit is thrown into the deal for free. This seductive barrel-aged rum is best presented in a snifter.

● **PARTIDA ELEGANTE EXTRA AÑEJO TEQUILA** — This handcrafted gem is a dramatic example of what can be achieved when patience and expertise melds with unbridled passion. Distilled from estate-grown agaves and matured in oak for 36 to 40 months, this ultra-premium has a dark amber hue and an enticing bouquet of caramel, baking spices, and vanilla. The medium-weight body bathes the palate with waves of captivating spicy flavors that gradually subside into a memorable finish.

● **PRICHARD'S PRIVATE STOCK RUM** — Handcrafted in Kelso, Tennessee, Prichard's Private Stock Rum is every bit as mesmerizing as those from the islands. Master distiller Phil Prichard creates his flagship rum using Louisiana sugar cane molasses and limestone-filtered spring water. It's distilled in copper pot stills and aged for six years in small, charred American white oak barrels. Prichard's is an unqualified joy—highly aromatic and chock full of long-lasting flavors, including honey, spice, vanilla and barley malt.

● **PUEBLO VIEJO ORGULLO AÑEJO TEQUILA** — This affordable pleasure from Tequila San Matías de Jalisco was released to commemorate the destilería's 120th anniversary. Pueblo Viejo Orgullo Añejo features a wafting bouquet of vanilla, honey and ripe red fruit and a leisurely finish loaded with dry, spicy flavors.

● **PYRAT CASK 1623 RUM** — An ultra-premium, pot-still rum brimming with high-ester character and taste. It's crafted from a blend of nine barrel-aged alembic rums distilled in the Caribbean. Cask 1623 has a luminescent, deep amber hue and lush, smooth body. The bouquet is soft and enticing with the aromas of vanilla, chocolate and oranges. The palate slowly builds in intensity revealing layers of spicy flavors.

● **SINGLE ESTATE TEQUILA OCHO** are vintage-dated, estate-delineated, 100% agave tequilas distilled in the highlands of Los Altos. Each bottling showcases the agave from an individual estate. For instance, the agaves used to make the 2008 Tequila Ocho Añejo were cultivated in the

heat and humidity of El Vergel Estate, which is at a different altitude and miles away from the red soil of the Carrizal Estate, where the agaves for the 2008 Plata were grown. Few brands better demonstrate the profound affect of terroir. Viva la difference!

● **SOL DE MEXICO AÑEJO TEQUILA** — This sensational tequila from the highlands derives much of its distinctive character from being aged in different types of oak—ex-bourbon barrels, previously filled cognac casks or new French or American oak barrels. The amber hue tequila has a luscious texture and honey, herbal and fruity aromas. The extended finish is saturated with peppery spice and semi-sweet vanilla and cocoa notes. Surprisingly luxurious.

● **SQUARE ONE BOTANICAL VODKA** — Rest assured you've not tasted a spirit like this. It's distilled in Idaho from organic rye and infused with 8 aromatics, an unconventional blend of pears, rose petals, chamomile, lavender and lemon verbena. Unlike many gins that over-accentuate juniper, Square One Botanical is balanced with surgical precision. The vodka has light pear and floral notes and the lingering flavors of chamomile, citrus and dried herbs.

● **TANTEO CHOCOLATE JALAPEÑO TEQUILA** — Ultra-premium Tanteo Chocolate Jalapeño Tequila is a handmade, 100% agave silver tequila infused with jalapeños and blended with natural cocoa flavoring. It has delectable cocoa and fruit aromas with lightly peppered notes. The tequila generates little sizzle upon entry, and then quickly fills the mouth with the irresistible flavor of creamy milk chocolate and a precise dose of peppery heat. The finish is long, warm and satisfying.

● **VERMONT GOLD VODKA** — This artisanal vodka from St. Johnsbury, Vermont is pot distilled entirely from the sap of local maple trees. Aromatic and warming, the handmade vodka is light-bodied, satiny smooth and finishes on a dime. Vermont Limited Release Vodka is distilled entirely from early-run maple sap, which is highly sought after for its quality and delicate flavor.

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