

The end of the rainbow

This liquid gold awaits you at the end of your Irish journey

Ever wonder what fortunes lie over the rainbow? This St. Patrick's Day, the treasure trove is sure to include a few of these gems from the Emerald Isle. Of the thousands of distilleries that once dotted Ireland, only three remain: Bushmills, Midleton and Cooley. These three, however, produce the entire spectrum of whiskeys: single malts, grains, blends and pure pot stills. Though whiskeys from Ireland and Scotland are often lumped together, the difference is as noticeable as the spelling of the spirit itself (the Irish opt for the "e" in whiskey while the Scots forgo the extra letter). Overall, Irish whiskey tends to be smoother, sweeter and less smoky than scotch – and most times you don't need a pot of gold to afford a quality dram. Unless noted, all are 750 mL bottles and each is rated on a 10-point scale. Happy hunting.

SELECTIONS BY EVANGELOS MIHELIS & HARRIS SIEGEL PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF COLSON

Connemara 12 (Peated Single Malt)

Lovers of Islay scotch will recognize the smoky flavor of this 12-year-old named for the region where it's produced. The potent taste is achieved by drying malted barley above peat fires. Although common in Scotland, this method is used solely by this distillery in Western Ireland. Combine that with a light texture, sweet undertones and a nose reminiscent of pipe smoke and you have an uncommon find. Price: \$100 Rating: 9.2

Bushmills 21 (Single Malt)

The silver medal in our pot of gold is born of three woods. Matured first in bourbon, then sherry and finally Madeira casks, each wood imparts flavor to create a dazzlingly complex dram. For those without ample Krugerrands, Bushmills offers four less expensive alternatives. Price: \$100 Rating: 9.6

Midleton Very Rare (Blend)

Each bottle is numbered and signed by the master distiller. The taste of this blend varies by vintage, but the result is consistently impressive. The trademark minty, grassy and herbal flavors are worthy of accolades. Price: \$125 Rating: 9.1

Knappogue Castle '51 (Pure Pot Still)

Pure gold! Unlike its sweet brethren, the dry spiciness of this old-timer from a now-defunct distillery makes it noteworthy. A single malt is still produced at a new location, but this gem distilled five decades ago is history. Price: \$600 Rating: 9.8

Michael Collins (Single Malt)

The slight smokiness of "The Big Fellow" may fool those who prefer the gold of a single-malt scotch. Price: \$40 Rating: 9.0

Clontarf Trinity (3 Expressions)

Trinity offers uniquely packaged 200 mL samples from the Clontarf line: the blend, the single malt and the reserve. Each expression is as distinct as the bottle. Price: \$35 Rating: 8.7 avg.

Jameson 18 (Blend)

Jameson's top-of-the-line merges three whiskeys – resulting in a rich, complex spirit. Sherry casks house the blend for 18 years before finishing in bourbon barrels. Price: \$75 Rating: 9.4

Tyrconnell (Single Malt)

Tyrconnell is named for the colt that won the Irish Classic as a 100-to-1 longshot in 1876. Odds are you'll find this gentle elixir a perfect spring restorative. Hints of citrus on the nose give way to an appropriately long finish. Price: \$30 Rating: 8.5

Redbreast 12 (Pure Pot Still)

If you had to sum up Irish whiskey with one bottle, this is it. Flowery yet "assertive," this 12-year-old is the only import that uses the pure pot still distillation process (a mash of malted and unmalted barley). This small bottle has won big kudos, too – including back-to-back overall trophies at the International Wine & Spirits event. Price: \$45 Rating: 9.4

Tullamore Dew Crock (Blend)

Indulge in this triple-distilled offering with a wee drop of spring water or over a few ice cubes. If you can find it, the distinctive ceramic gift packaging makes up for the lack of complexity of its contents. First produced in the early 19th century, Tullamore also offers a more robust 12-year-old in its range. For those trivia buffs, the "dew" is actually the initials of former owner Daniel E. Williams. Price: \$35 Rating: 8.2

