

The best by a long shot



When it comes to rye, these thoroughbreds lead the field

There was a time when rye merited a place on your mantel – its name engraved on a metal plate slung around the neck of a crystal decanter. It was *the* American whiskey, appropriately enough distilled by our founding father himself, George Washington. Cocktails, most famously the Manhattan, were created to showcase the bold, spicy taste of this American original.

But rye's popularity never quite recovered after prohibition and the corn-based, sweeter bourbon became heir to the whiskey throne. Rye began vanishing from the liquor landscape, remembered only in Bogart movies and the "American Pie" lyrics ("Them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye..."). But now there's a rye renaissance. Demand is outpacing the limited supply of the spirit that, by law, needs a minimum of 51 percent rye aged in oak barrels. Out of the gate we have nine, well-aged contenders that are best savored neat. All are 750 mL bottles and each is rated on a 10-point scale. Let's go to the races...

SELECTIONS BY EVANGELOS MIHELIS & HARRIS SIEGEL PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB COGLIANESE

Hirsch Selection 22
This journeyman was a favorite coming in for good reason: Its pedigree is the critically acclaimed 21-year-old with an extra year in the barrel. A spearmint nose, with a complex vanilla-charcoal flavor profile. The line on this is when it's gone, it's gone forever.
Price: \$135
Rating: 9.7

Vintage 23
This dark copper liquid dazzles the tastebuds – and the eyes. A spicy start develops into a steady gallop of molasses and then finishes strong with just a hint of clove.
Price: \$125
Rating: 9.7

Sazerac 18
Part of the annual Buffalo Trace Antique Collection. This and the "Saz Jr." are a can't miss daily double.
Price: \$60
Rating: 9.2

Classic Cask 21
The 630 bottles created by this independent bottler, famous for their single malts, are sadly all but gone. Though small in physical stature – a veritable Seabiscuit of the field – there's a big kick to the long, spicy palate. Before you start, add a few drops of spring water and then hold on for an intense ride.
Price: \$130
Rating: 9.1

Van Winkle 13 Family Reserve
Across the board, the Van Winkle products are a great bet and this rye is no exception. Hints of citrus, cocoa and honey. Definitely worth claiming.
Price: \$40
Rating: 9.5

Michters 10
One of the younger ryes on our race card is smooth and mellow – a result of storing the barrels at the top of the rickhouse and heating the room. Not overly complex, but the most sippable.
Price: \$90
Rating: 9.2

Black Maple Hill 23 Single Barrel
The finish down the backstretch is tantalizingly long and bold. We're told by the distributor only one year's supply remains. Don't miss out on this champion.
Price: \$120
Rating: 9.9

Old Potrero 19th Century
A mash of 100 percent rye malt and a distillery located outside of the Bluegrass state make this entry unique. The copper pot-stilled Californian has a musty, smoky, Johnnie Walker-type taste. A dram to savor in the comforts of your luxury box.
Price: \$70
Rating: 8.9

Rittenhouse 21
A bourbon-like palate with orange and toffee notes highlight Heaven Hill's non-chill filtered rye.
Price: \$160
Rating: 9.4

