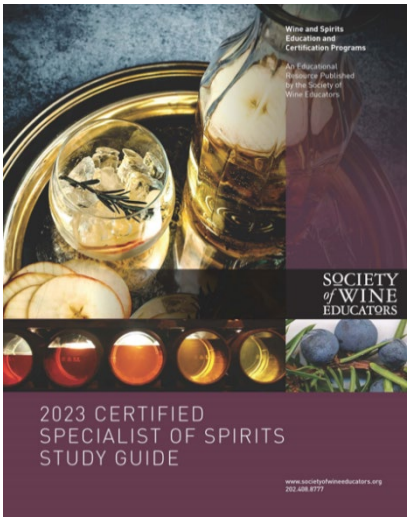
Addendum regarding: The 2023 Certified Specialist of Spirits Study Guide, as published by the Society of Wine Educators



Note: This document outlines the substantive changes to the 2023 Study Guide as compared to the 2022 version of the CSS Study Guide. All page numbers reference the 2022 version. Please note that in addition to the information noted below, all tables concerning top-selling brands of particular classes of spirits have been updated to reflect the most current statistics available.

Page 18: the following information was added:
The Char Factor: Exposing the inside of wood barrels to heat and/or flame—toasting and charring—are technically known as types of thermal degrading. The level of toast and/or char has a great deal of influence on the aging processes that occur inside the barrel.

In terms of barrel production, toasting is a slow process during which the barrels are gently heated, resulting in a light-to-dark brown interior color. In addition to their use with some types of spirits, toasted barrels are typically used in wine production. Aging in toasted oak barrels can impart some nuttiness, a slight sweetness, and light aromas such as vanilla, coconut, caramel, and toffee to a spirit (or other product) held within the barrel.

In the process of charring, a barrel is exposed to direct flame in a very short and very fast burn. Charring generates a layer of active carbon which is useful for filtering certain (typically undesirable) compounds and can yield significant color and unique phenolic substances to the spirits resting in the barrel. New, charred oak barrels are widely used in the production of American whiskeys, while used American whiskey barrels often find their way to distilleries of all kinds all over the world.

Charring can be done in a variety of ways and for a range of durations in terms of the time the barrel is exposed to flame. However, the following standards are often observed:

- Level 1 char: 15-second burn
- Level 2 char: 30-second burn
- Level 3 char: 45-second burn
- Level 4 char: 55-second burn; this char level is sometimes referred to as alligator char due to the cracked, shiny appearance of the inside of the barrel (which might be compared to the texture of alligator skin). Level 4 char will provide the deepest color and the spiciest flavor profile to the spirits resting inside the barrel.

Oak Alternatives: Oak is by far the most common type of wood used in barrels destined for the aging of spirits. However, alternative types of wood—to include acacia, ash, chestnut, cherry, and mulberry (among others)—are sometimes used as well. Please note that—in many cases—oak is specifically required per the product specification of a particular product, as it is for Scotch Whisky and Bourbon; this is one of the main reasons why alternative types of wood are not more widely used.

Page 18: the section under the heading "Colorings and Other Additives: was updated to read as follows:
While many spirits get their color naturally via the maturation process, other spirits are allowed to contain coloring agents. Such coloring agents—often derived from caramel—are added in order to create consistency in a product's appearance. In addition, some spirits—typically liqueurs— may contain a distinct coloring agent designed to give the spirit a fanciful hue such as bright red, green, or blue.

In addition to coloring agents, certain spirits and spirit types are allowed to contain other post-distillation additives such as sugar, glycerin, acids, extracts, and/or other flavorings. The (potential) use and legalities concerning such additives are quite specific as to spirit type and will be covered in the chapters that follow.

Page 20: the following information was added to the section on the definition and labeling of distilled spirits:
Specialty Spirits: Certainly, there are many distilled spirit products on the market that fall outside of the well-known and strictly defined categories of spirits—such as vodka, whiskey, and rum—as they are defined in various countries and regions. These products are often labeled using a slightly different set of requirements and product categorization; examples include flavored vodka versus "original" vodka and gin liqueur as opposed to a more typically defined gin. Truly unique products—particularly those that "defy definition" or fall between established product categories—may (upon regulatory approval) be bottled under an alternative category such as *vodka-specialty*, *grain spirit*, or the more generic *specialty spirit* or *spirit drink*. It is always a good idea to take a close look at the fine print on the label.

Page 21: the following information was added: The sensory evaluation of spirits (spirit tasting) may be described as *organoleptic evaluation*. The term *organoleptic* refers to the chemical and physical properties of a substance that affect the senses. Thus, when one is conducting an organoleptic (sensory) evaluation of a spirit—or wine, food, or other substance—one is drawing attention to and describing the product in terms of its aroma, taste, texture, flavor, (and anything else one might experience).

Page 22: the following information was added to the section on the *appearance* aspect of the sensory evaluation of spirits: When discussing color, we often start with identifying the spirit's *hue,* or *color identity*. This is the term used to describe the color's placement on the spectrum known as the *color wheel* and gives the color its name—such as red, blue, green, gold, amber, or tawny. Another aspect of color is *depth*, which technically refers to how much visible light can travel through a given

object (or—in the case of distilled spirits—a liquid). Items or liquids that allow a good deal of light to travel through have some degree of transparency and may be described as *pale* (or some variation thereof). Items (or liquids) that allow less light through are not as "see-through" and may be described with terms such as *medium*, *deep* or *opaque.*

Page 30: the definition of EU vodka has been updated to include the following information:

- It must be based on ethyl alcohol of agricultural origin—defined in the EU as a naturally-produced (non-synthetic) alcohol initially distilled to 192° (96% abv)—derived from potatoes, cereals, and/or other agricultural raw materials.

Page 120: the following was added to the information under the heading *Rhum Agricole:* It should be noted that the term *rhum agricole* (or *agricultural rum*) is strictly regulated in the EU, where it may only be used in conjunction with the product name of an established geographical indication (GI). However, outside of the EU, the term is often used informally to refer to any type of sugarcane juice-based rum.

Page 121: the following information was added to the section regarding rum from Martinique:
Rhum de Sucrerie de la Baie du Galion GI: Martinique produces molasses- and cane syrup-based rums in addition to its famous rhum agricole; in fact, many of the island's best-known distilleries produce many different styles of rum. The island even has a protected geographical indication for a single distillery and the molasses-and cane syrup-based rum produced there: the *Rhum de Sucrerie de la Baie du Galion GI*. The appellation's name refers to an area known as *Galion Bay* (la Baie du Galion), referring to a spot on the Galion River where the *Sucrerie et Distillerie le Galion* was established in 1865—and survives to this day.

The Rhum de Sucrerie de la Baie du Galion GI is approved for three styles of molasses- or cane syrup-based rum: *blanc* (white), *brun* (aged for at least six months in oak barrels) and *grand arôme*. Grand arôme is an unaged, highly aromatic, and rarely seen version of high-ester rum produced with *vinasse* (residuals left over from previous distillations, such as those referred to as *dunder* in Jamaica).

Page 145: the following section was added to chapter eight:
Agave Spirits beyond Mexico: The agave plant—in all its amazing diversity, encompassing a wide range of species and varieties—is native to a large swath of the world, including the southwestern United States as well as Mexico, Central America, and parts of South America. In addition, agave has been successfully transplanted to many other parts of the globe.

Several regions of the Americas—to include Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, and the southwestern United States (among other areas)—produce their own traditional agave-based spirits. In the United States—notably Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona—several producers are crafting and marketing agave-based distillates as well as distillates based on members of the *Dasylirion* plant group. At present, few of these products—legally

classified as *Agave Spirits* or *Specialty Spirits*—are distributed beyond their region of production.

In South America, the Republic of Ecuador has designated a traditional agave spirit—*Miske*—as a distinctive product of Ecuador, defined by a recently-approved denomination of origin (DO).

Agave farms and distilleries are in the production and planning stages in other parts of the world as well, including Australia, India, and South Africa. It will be interesting to watch as these projects develop.