

Wine & Spirits

spirits



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Just as October partakes of both summer and winter, our crop of new spirits this month is divided between aestival and autumnal, southern and northern, cane and grain. Let's begin by tipping our hat to the season past. On every other acre between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, the Western Hemisphere supports a sugar plantation. Lately it's been hustle hustle hustle on seemingly all of them, the liquor industry having collectively decided that rum is the new vodka. As with any boom, much of the new activity is pointless, and there are lots of forgettable new white rums.

But some more interesting products are getting their chance, too. Most of these are made from sugarcane juice, rather than the usual molasses. In Martinique, on the Cancer side of the Tropics, they're called *rhum agricole*, and recent months have brought three new entrants to consider. There's **Depaz**, a characteristically dry and grassy amber rum from one of Martinique's most venerable producers, with pleasantly funky vegetal notes that really wake up a Daiquiri. In a strikingly similar bottle, there's **Grand'Kaz**, a blend of one- to three-year-old rums that shares Depaz's dryness but adds a smooth, clean and elegant finish; a sipper, and a delight. Finally, there's the **J.M. Réserve Speciale**. This long-aged beauty is both smooth and sprightly, mellow and rich, yet still lively.

Twenty-five thousand miles to the south, where the Tropic of Capricorn cuts through Brazil, cane-juice rums travel under the name "cachaça" and form a popular and varied tribe. Recently, we've been seeing a lot more of them here (see *W&S* August '06), and that's a good thing. Among the very latest arrivals is **Cabana**, which is twice distilled and has an appealing, flinty brininess that adds backbone to a Caipirinha. The new **Água Luca**, on the other hand, is a marvelously sensuous dram, sweet, vegetal, heady and long. You can mix it, you can sip it, you can rub it on your temples. Be creative. (Or just make Caipirinhas—damn good ones.)

But Caipirinha season has to end sometime. For the chill that lies ahead we've got *secale cereale*, a hardy Near Eastern grass that thrives in cold climates and whose seeds are customarily converted into thick, flavorful bread—and, more importantly, booze. That booze can be as thick and flavorful as the bread, but it can also be clean and light. If you ferment rye, the grain in question, distill it to a high degree of purity in a modern column still and filter the resulting liquid through charcoal, you get vodka. And if you use 100 percent organic rye and supervise the whole process pretty closely, going green all the way, you get **Square One Vodka**: lively, smooth and suave, with a long wave of pure grain sweetness to ride home on.

If, however, you distill your rye in an old-fashioned pot still, with all its inefficiencies, and put it in a once-used charred oak barrel and let it sit in a quiet corner of San Francisco for 11 years, you just might end up with something like **Old Potrero Single Malt Hotaling's Whiskey**, a pungent, massive whiskey whose initial heat resolves into a wild-honey sweetness.

And if you mix that rye with corn and barley before fermenting it, distill it and barrel it up for a whopping 21 hot Kentucky summers and cold Kentucky winters, you just might end up with something like Heaven Hill's new **Rittenhouse Very Rare 21 Year Old Straight Rye Whiskey**, a very long name for a very, very big whiskey. Normally, I don't care for very old American whiskeys—after ten or 12 years in oak, I find the wood overpowers the grain. In this case, the original rye was bold enough to stand up to the oak, making for a massive, layered whiskey that skirts the edge of woodiness without ever falling over (and it makes a truly memorable Old-Fashioned). —DAVID WONDRIKH

Depaz Blue Cane Rhum Agricole, \$42, Kobrand, NY

Grand'Kaz Martinique Original Amber Rum, \$30, Del Note Imports, Inglewood, CA

J.M. Réserve Speciale, \$50, Clément USA, NY

Cabana Cachaça, \$35, ABB Partners, Montecito, CA

Água Luca Cachaça, \$25, Excelsior Imports, Atlanta, GA

Square One Vodka, \$35, Square One Organic Spirits, Novato, CA

Old Potrero Hotaling's Whiskey, \$60, Anchor Distilling Co., San Francisco, CA

Rittenhouse Very Rare 21 Year Old Straight Rye Whiskey, \$150, Continental Distilling Co., Bardstown, KY