



Absolut is today often considered just another bland mega-distiller. Big mistake. In their latest flavored vodka, **Absolut Ruby Red Grapefruit Vodka** the Swedish powerhouse has established a mass market benchmark for high quality flavored vodka. Tangy and pungent with grapefruit pith and zest, this Ruby Red variety is balanced, zesty and filled with fresh grapefruit aromas and flavors with evidently little added sweetness so common in other flavored vodkas. An absolute winner. (Absolut Spirits Company)

Two years ago, there were two or three cachaças available in the U.S.; today, we've got a lot to choose from. One of the better known is **Água Luca**, which won a silver medal at the most recent San Francisco Spirits Competition. Fruit and fire on the nose with some raisin notes, it's tingly and cinnamon on the palate, with a strong herbal quality. Creamy, with a slight smokiness on the finish and a slight bite. (Excelsior Imports)

Most cachaças are known for their heat—**Leblon Cachaca** is likely to be remembered as filling the room with the aroma of Bananas Foster. Sure, there's some lychee and tropical fruit here, but for me, it's all cooked, mashed and sweetened bananas, not always a good thing in distillation but perfect here. Sweet and creamy, clean and balanced on the palate, Leblon finishes dry, tingly and fresh. (Leblon USA)

Portland, Ore.-based House Spirits, makers of Medoyeff Vodka,

collaborated with mixology consultant Ryan Magarian to create the Dutch-influenced **Aviation Gin**. Clean and crisp on the nose, with coriander poking through as a high note, Aviation is citrusy and soft, with touches of cardamom, anise and sweet orange peel emerging, and very little bite, even at 84 proof. A welcome expansion of the gin spectrum. (House Spirits)



The Beckmann family once had a piece of the Cuervo empire, but now they own 12 percent of the agave in Mexico. They're back in the U.S. market with **La Certeza Reposado Tequila**, an estate-grown, distilled, aged and bottled range of three tequilas. The reposada is an elegant sipping spirit, with the agaves aroma swaddled in vanilla and caramel. Smooth and slightly tangy with a slight smokiness, the reposado has a drying sweetness on the finish. Persistent and tangy. (Mohawk Distilling Products)

Why aren't any Dominican rums broadly successful in the U.S.? I don't have the answer, but here's one that stands out. **Ron Barcelo Imperial Rum** is an aged, limited release blend, this one bottled in 2003. With a nose of clove, cinnamon and vanilla, in the mouth

there's a touch of brown sugar and some roasted pineapple and ripe bananas. Smooth, subtle and sippable. (Heartland Distributors)

If 2006 is the year of Brazilian cachaças and rum agricoles from Martinique, then **Depaz Blue Cane Rum Agricole** is at the head of the class. Lush with fresh crushed sugar cane and pineapple aromas, Depaz tastes of fruit, smoke and what the world of tasting calls umami—earthy, complex, enticing and mouth-watering, all of which fits Depaz perfectly. Smartly introduced with a cane syrup product that is both a complement and a fantastic replacement for simple syrup in tropical drinks. (Kobrand Corp.)

In this latest Balvenie expression—**Balvenie New Wood 17 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky**, a limited release that takes Balvenie aged in traditional oak barrels and ages it further in American oak that is toasted and charred—the new oak vanilla puts a lid on Balvenie's classic mellow, fruity and custardy nose. It brings new tannins to the mix, putting more structure in a spirit often thought of as the perfect pairing with an overstuffed leather chair. This, on the other hand, is an aperitif whisky—clean, assertive, tangy, tingling and long lasting. (William Grant)

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