

# 10 Obscure Liquors to Challenge Your Home Bar Game

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Kick up your bar game with these 10 unsung liquors.

The renewed interest in all things mixology has done more than open up the palates of consumers eager to enjoy a perfectly made and precisely measured Manhattan or Old Fashioned. The movement has also spurred on huge growth in the number of unique spirits, liqueurs and cordials which are available, and the ways they're utilized, whether for time-honored, tradition-heavy craft cocktails, or bold and original creations.

While some of these distinct spirits are brand new, others stretch back centuries. "We've almost become archeologists," says Derek Brown, the Washington, D.C.-based bartender, author and spirits expert. "We're looking back at the past and trying to discover these old liquors from specific areas and specific cultures, and I think it's beautiful and really cool."

Below, 10 need-to-know liquors popping up at bars across the United States. Some may shed light on a piece of history, a country of origin, or even a different way to enjoy an alcoholic beverage. "Drinking in general is one of the most salient ways you can get to understand a culture," Brown continues. "So that's half the fun."



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# 10 UNUSUAL SPIRITS TO KNOW



## 1) Ancho Reyes (\$40)

*Origin: Mexico*

Ancho Reyes, dubbed "The Original Ancho Chile Liqueur," dates back to the Reyes family in the 1920s. It's made by soaking and macerating dried poblano chilies, known as ancho chilies, in a neutral cane spirit. Expect a true, deep heat, along with a range of spice and herbal notes. Ancho Reyes can be used in place of tequila, mezcal, whiskey or rum; anything in need of a dark spirit with a spicy, earthy kick. Of all the spirits listed here, it's potentially the most prominent at bars right now.

[Facebook/AnchoReyes](#)



## 2) Batavia-Arrack (\$30)

*Origin: Indonesia*

Batavia-Arrack hails from the Indonesian island of Java, where it's pot-distilled from sugarcane and fermented red rice. In general, arrack or "arak" may refer to spirits from across South and Southeast Asia made from fermented, distilled sugarcane, grain, fruits or coconut flower sap.

Despite its Indonesian heritage, Batavia-Arrack became popular in 18th century Sweden by way of the [Swedish East](#)

[India Company](#). From there, it somewhat surprisingly found its way stateside, too. Batavia-Arrack was a common ingredient in 19th century American cocktails, especially punches, and appears in Jerry Thomas's 1862 *How to Mix Drinks* guide.

Image from [Haus Alpenz](#)



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### 3) Bonal Gentiane Quina (\$20)

*Origin: France*

Bonal Gentiane Quina is a French aperitif wine which dates back to 1865. It's made with herbs found near the Grande Chartreuse Mountains (near Grenoble in Southeast France), such as gentian and bitter cinchona bark. Bonal, bottled at 16 percent ABV, uses French fortified wine, or mistelle, as a base. Use it in cocktails in place of vermouth, or enjoy Bonal on its own. Expect a highly herbal, bitter flavor profile, backed by red fruits.



### 4) Carpano Antica Formula (\$32)

*Origin: Italy*

Consider this is a catch-all representative of the massive surge in the domestically available vermouths. Carpano Antica is made by Milan's Distillerie Fratelli Branca, which produces a few other known labels: Fernet-Branca and Punt e Mes, for starters, along with Carpano Bianco, Dry and Classico.

Count Eduardo Branca counts Antica Formula and its 220 year history as the centerpiece, calling it The King of Vermouths. "It's the most unique and unmistakable," he explains. "The taste is refined and the vanilla scent is so pleasing. Mixologists like to use Antica Formula because it makes cocktails smooth and it adds an elegance."

[Facebook/CarpanoAntica](#)

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### 5) Chareau (\$33)

*Origin: California*

Chareau is **the newbie on this list**. The all-natural debutante hails from California and is made from aloe vera, cucumber, eau de vie, lemon peel, and other such light and botanical flavors. It can be enjoyed on its own or in any number of cocktails, especially appropriate at this time of year. Try pairing Chareau in drinks with herbal and fruit flavors, from thyme, basil or mint, to cucumber or lemon.

Photo courtesy of Chareau



### 6) China-China (\$45)

*Origin: France*

Bigallet Viriana China-China, or simply "China China," is a bitter French liqueur first produced in 1875. It's made by triple-distilling a neutral spirit which has been flavored with both sweet and bitter orange peels, along with other spices and botanicals. Bottled at 40 percent ABV, China-China can be consumed as a digestive, on ice or in a spritzer, or as a substitute for other bitter liqueurs used in cocktails, like vermouth and amaro.

Photo from [Difford's Guide](#)



### 7) KRONAN Swedish Punsch (\$23)

*Origin: Sweden*

Batavia-Arrack reappears here in the form of KRONAN Swedish Punsch, which actually uses that spirit as its base. The story goes that sailors aboard those Swedish East India Company ships carrying Batavia Arrack would mix it into a grog with spices and sugar during their voyages. It's one of many unique spirits which Minnesota-based importer Haus Aplenz and owner Eric Seed have reintroduced to the market here.

Facebook/Kronan

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### 8) Palinka

*Origin: Hungary*

Palinka dates to the 14th century. It's an all-natural fruit brandy that was at one point touted as a medicinal remedy and, like whiskey, it became known as "The Water of Life" or "Aqua Vitae Retinae Hungariae." Palinka is strictly regulated, with a protected designation of origin. It must be grown, distilled and bottled in Hungary, and other standards include that it's free of added ingredients beyond fruit and water, and that it's bottled at a minimum of 37.5 percent ABV.

New Jersey's Satis Bistro offers Palinka as an aperitif, or incorporated into cocktails. Their popular Gypsy Dance drink, for instance, mixes the sour cherry Palinka from Agardi Distillery.

Photo by Satis Bistro

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### 9) Raki (\$25)

*Origin: Turkey*

Raki is an anise-flavored spirit popular in Turkey. Think of it as Turkey's answer to Ouzo. Raki is most commonly served with ice and water, and consumed alongside food. When Raki is mixed equally with water it surprisingly produces an opaque, milky liquid that's called "lion's milk." At Ankara, a new, authentic Turkish restaurant in Washington, D.C.,

Raki is offered solely in this traditional fashion, however, it can be found elsewhere in cocktails as well.

Photo by Berkay Demirkan/Design Medialand

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### 10) Starka Vodka (\$30)

*Origin: Poland, Lithuania*

Starka vodkas hail from Eastern Europe as far back as the 15th century. Traditionally, it's made by aging a rye vodka in oak wine barrels, buried underground at a child's birth and meant to be kept until his or her wedding night.

Three Oregon distillers collaborated for a "Starka Project" in 2014, each creating their own twist. For instance, Big Bottom Distilling ages its Starka in Zinfandel barrels, which the distillery previously used to finish bourbon. Starka

vodkas could be used in cocktails as replacements for anything from traditional vodka, to rum or whiskey.

Photo courtesy of Big Bottom Distilling

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