

The best affordable liquor, according to experts

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Lauren Schumacker Apr 29, 2019, 10:38 AM



Not all great alcohol has to break the bank.

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- Setting up a home bar can be expensive.
- So it pays to know which more affordable bottles are the best out there.
- We asked bartenders and experts for their recommendations for cheaper, but great, alcohol.
- They recommended types of mezcal, rum, and bourbon, among others.
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Whether you're trying to set up a bar in your home, make your favorite cocktail more affordable, or find a cheap but nice gift for a friend or family member, knowing which bottles of liquor you can buy without breaking the bank is good information to have. Booze can get expensive

quickly, so INSIDER turned to the experts - bartenders, bar managers, and beverage directors - for their take on the best cheap liquor you can buy.

Melinda Cooper, a bartender at [Brasserie by Niche](#) in St. Louis, said that doing a bit of research into how the spirits were made or what tools were used during the production process can potentially tell you a lot more about the quality of the product than just looking at how much it costs. Schroeder would agree with that.

"Look for the producer's name on the label, the name of the town where it's made, and ideally the size of the lot produced," Schroeder said. "Something that comes from a 300 L lot stands the real chance of being more interesting than something from a 5000 L run."

Luckily, in most cases, there are great bottles to be found at prices that won't cause you to start nervous-sweating. Whether you're a gin drinker or you prefer whiskey, you have some very solid options.

It's worth noting that we listed prices when available, but they can vary wildly based on where you are.



Though you may be tempted to try and get a flashy alcohol, for rum, it's best to keep it simple and delicious.

"[Plantation 3 Star](#) is a great rum to keep around. It's simple, crisp, fresh and works its way into plenty of my batched punches during the summer," Marina Holter, co-head bartender at [The Whistler](#) in Chicago, told INSIDER.



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If bourbon, specifically, is your drink of choice (or, at least, your spirit of choice), you're probably regularly on the hunt for something that's great, but not too pricey.

"[Very Old Barton](#) (~\$10) is a bourbon I normally keep in my liquor cabinet. I became fond of it when working in a whiskey-centric bar and it has still held a place in my heart. It's cheap enough that I don't fret making a whiskey sour for an acquaintance, and nice enough to shoot with friends," Holter added.

"Another of my current favorites on a budget is [Missouri Spirits Bourbon](#)(~\$30)," Cooper said. "Straight out of Springfield, Missouri Bourbon is just that - 100% Show Me State down to the paper for the label and glass in which it is bottled. It's at the higher end of cheap, but still, for

\$28-\$30 you're can get a deliciously smooth, cocktail-friendly bourbon that both tastes great and looks great on the shelf."

"I've been clamoring for affordable bourbon! There are a few out there that never cease to stay cheap, but a lot of newer offerings just get closer to that \$30-40 range," Laurent Lebec, the brand beverage director at Big Star in Chicago, told INSIDER. "I was blown away by Old Forester's new rye whisky (~\$30): 100 proof, bold and with a magnificent mouthfeel that's lush far beyond its four years of age. The larger addition of barley to the mash bill pushes some baked bread, toasted sweet nut and caramelized notes to the front that balance out some of the spice from the rye. I have been recommending it to anyone who'll listen."

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"My 21-year-old self picked up a bottle of Prairie Organic Gin (~\$19) for a house cocktail years ago and I still grab it today for parties. I find it refreshing to use an option different than the normal finds. It's dry and herbaceous therefore lending itself to a multitude of drinks," Holter said.

Cooper loves CH London Dry Gin from CH Distillery in Chicago. "For \$20, give or take, you get a gin that is handmade from organic Illinois grain which holds up in a cocktail just as well as by itself on the rocks with a twist."

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Mezcal is one variety that presents some challenges when it comes to finding low-priced options that are still delicious.

"Of all the various types of liquor one could try to acquire for \$25, mezcal probably presents the greatest challenge," Jay Schroeder, the beverage director and partner at Quiote and Todos Santos in Chicago, told INSIDER. "Blended scotch, American whiskey, gin, rum, even the venerable category of cognac all have rock solid value offerings. Mezcal becomes tricky because the cost of the plant, the taxes levied by the Mexican government, and the cost of crossing the border all add up in a very real way."

It's not impossible though. Schroeder said that there are a few options that you have if you're looking for an affordable mezcal.

"Thankfully, agave Espadin offers solid values in the category, as this particular type of agave plant has been subject to cultivation and there exists a thriving open market for agave supply," Schroeder added. "That being said, the best values in the mezcal world exist in Espadines that are geared towards cocktail usage.

"For those willing to spend just a bit more, the lineups of Espadines from Alipus (\$49), Nuestra Soledad, and Del Maguey (~\$30) all offer great pound-for-pound value. At the cheaper end of the spectrum exist the cocktail boys - Banhez (~\$40)- which is an ensemble of Espadin and Barril, Siete Misterios Doba Yej (\$40), and Del Maguey Vida (~\$33)."

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Cooper said that Lunazul Blanco (\$25-30) is an excellent choice. "Not too crazy, not too cheap, Lunazul is a hand-crafted, award-winning, 100% agave product hailing from a family rife with history in the art of making tequila," she explained.

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