



WHY BARLEY IS STILL KING IN THE DISTILLING INDUSTRY

While craft beer continues to grow in popularity among American drinkers, up until 2019, the spirits industry experienced its ninth-straight year of growth. From flavorful bourbons to smooth vodkas, more consumers are opting to spend their disposable income on premium spirit options, which is why more than 1,800 craft distilleries currently operate in the United States alone. To produce the best possible libations, distillers need top-quality ingredients, and grains are at the top of the list. Here's a look at some of the qualities a distiller looks for when he or she is buying grain for the next batch, and why barley still reigns supreme above other grain options.

Distilling Starts With Brewing

The evolution of the distilling industry is a natural follow-up to the craft beer movement, as the two processes have a lot in common. To produce a spirit, distillers first steep their grains in warm water to create a substance called mash, which is then inoculated with yeast to produce a substance called "low wash," or "distiller's beer." This low-alcohol liquid is then run through a still until it reaches the levels of purity and potency desired by the distiller.

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Other Types of Grains Used in Distilling

Yeast needs fermentable sugars to produce alcohol, and you can get them from any starch, including leftover baked goods. While barley is one of the most common grains used by distillers, the ingredient list of your favorite spirit could include a few other starches:

- Wheat, which provides a smoother and sweeter flavor
- Oats, for a more cereal-like taste
- Rye, which produces spicy notes such as the "Kentucky hug" found in bourbon
- Corn, quinoa, rice, faro, spelt, triticale, sorghum and other grains

Depending on the spirit you're drinking, government regulations could dictate the amount of each grain present in the recipe. Bourbon, for example, must contain at least 51 percent corn to meet the legal qualifications for that designation.

Unmalted Grains

When barley or any other grain is used directly after harvesting, it is considered "unmalted." While some distillers choose to use these types of grains, they do present problems. In order to create the sugar yeast needs to create alcohol, the grain's starch needs to be converted through an enzymatic process. Since an unmalted grain doesn't have the necessary enzymes to carry out this conversion, distillers need to add them during the mashing process.

Malted Grain Varieties

While barley isn't the only type of grain that can be malted, it's one of the more common candidates for this process. Grains are treated with water and allowed to start germinating, but the growth is stopped before it goes too far. The germination produces the enzymes needed to turn



starches into fermentable sugars, but it also provides a few additional benefits:

- Roasted aroma and taste
- Rich colors
- A husk that helps clarify the mash
- More efficient extraction of starches

When it comes to distilling ingredients, each distiller has his or her own preferences, which is why there's such a large market for specialty barley varieties. Here are a few of the more popular variants and the benefits that come with each one.

AC Metcalfe

This Canadian strain is one of the most popular varieties grown in North America. Despite having only been trademarked in 1997, this crop accounts for nearly a quarter of orders by brewers and distillers. This type of grain is known as 2-row, which refers to the arrangement of kernels when viewed along the axis. Growers prefer this crop because it's exceptionally hearty, produces a high yield and malts well.

Copeland

Another type of 2-row barley, Copeland hit the market in 1999 and currently enjoys the second-highest popularity among distillers and growers. This grain has a higher yield than AC Metcalfe, but it doesn't contain as many proteins and enzymes.

Tradition

For distillers looking to use 6-row grains, Tradition is the most common variety that accounts for more than 70 percent of sales. Since the 6-row structure produces higher enzyme levels, it's popular with distillers who want to use more adjunct grains such as rye, corn or rice.



Choose the Right Grain

Now you know a bit more about different types of barley used in the craft spirits industry, you'll be better prepared to pick the right products for your distillery. No matter if you're establishing a new distilling operation or looking for a change in suppliers, turn to Great Western Malting for access to top-quality malts and other grains.

