

# Luscious Liqueurs

*A quick trip through a cornucopia of good taste*

*By Shelly Grant, Healthy Drinking Magazine*

At a time when food industry marketing gurus delight in sending consumers on a dizzying treasure hunt searching nutritional information boxes for the "lowest," "lightest" and "fastest," liqueurs quietly remain one of the biggest values and the best tastes on the market.

Once considered a sleeper item relegated to special occasion service in single-use, pony glasses after a heavy Continental meal, liqueurs have crept into an impressive seventeen percent of spirits sales in America. Moreover, the rapid rise in popularity of gourmet cuisine and emergence of shooters as the "in" cocktail of the 90s has expanded the liqueur consumer base to include the elusive Generation Xers. Even the family-oriented Boomers are into cordials. The overhaul of liqueurs' image is an offshoot of the same trend resulting in the "diner-style" restaurant boom and the unashamed use of real butter, all reflecting a consumer preference for flavor, inimitable character, consistent dollar value and familiar tastes.

With liqueurs, there is more in every bottle than meets the eye. The benefit of a liqueur lies in the intensity and complexity of taste achieved by combining minimally aged, congenere-free distilled spirits, sugars (from a low of 2.5 percent to as much as 40 percent) plus many flavoring ingredients.

Most of the top selling liqueurs fall into the following categories: simple fruit concentrates; single herb concentrates; nuts, beans and kernels and cream-based liqueurs; a few remain in the special category of mixed botanical.

Liqueurs made of blended herb, spice and plant extracts have rich individual histories often stemming back to their development by monks and alchemists in the 15th century. Much attention has been drawn to the curative and medicinal properties of spirits.

Since the middle ages, liqueurs or cordials (from the latin word corda or heart) have been taken as health elixirs, aids to digestion. The French still call

them "digestif." Many early liqueurs were considered both life extenders and aphrodisiacs and they quite likely contributed positively to both.

The unique, pungent and savory flavor characteristics of botanical liqueurs only hint at their long list of naturally derived flavor ingredients. As example, the ingredient list exceeds 27 items for Benedictine (France), 50 for Jaegermeister (Germany), 75 for Strega (Italy) and 130 for Chartreuse (France). Blended liqueurs have exceptionally consistent and rich flavor qualities

## Top Sellers

Kahlua  
Bailey's Irish Cream  
Grand Marnier  
Jagermeister  
Carolans  
Malibu  
De Saronno Amaretto  
Emmets Irish Cream  
Yukon Jack  
Rumple Minze  
Romano Sambuca  
Kamora  
Goldschlager  
Frangelico  
Drambuie

stemming from hundreds of years of blending mastery – longer than some of the great French wine houses. This not only makes them inimitable in taste but also excellent for culinary use. Blended liqueurs allow cooks and chefs a means to incorporate intense flavoring ingredients not normally found in even the most professional kitchen.

Every master chef knows that intensifying and balancing flavors is essential to elevate any cooking to a cuisine. Reduction of fat and animal produces in cooking creates a need for new flavor enhancement techniques to

excite the most demanding palates

Liqueur flavors are obtained by a variety of procedures: percolating (as with coffee), macerating (as with tea steeping), infusing (as in marinating) and/or distilling - or often all of the above. In one or many ways, the flavors pass into the base spirit. So the uniqueness in each liqueur depends upon the method of flavor extraction, length of aging, the base spirit and other secondary flavors. Benedictine uses French brandy with very strong flavors of its own. These selections create differences between different brands of the same primary flavor. The chemical properties of the flavor ingredient usually determine the method of flavor extraction.

Fruits are often macerated (crushed and steeped) allowing access to the delicate fruit concentrates and the intense flavors just below the skin of the fruit. On the other hand, coffee liqueurs are percolated out of the bean.

The base spirit in a generic liqueur is most often and inexpensive neutral grain spirit but proprietary brands often use regionally produced spirits such as brandy, bourbon, or even tequila because of their flavor profiles. The more complex the list of ingredients, the more likely the chance that the product will need some aging before sale. Almost all of the blended liqueurs, whether botanical mixtures or citrus (especially orange blends), are aged at least three years with some French liqueurs aged up to 15 years just like the famous brandies.

French, German, Spanish, Dutch and Italian culinary traditions have all produced similar variations on botanical mixture liqueurs -anisettes and orange liqueurs as example. The differences between similarly flavored cordials is a testimony to style and tradition.

The number and proportions of secondary flavoring agents remain guarded trade secrets. For the culinarian, blended liqueurs offer many unique opportunities to access rare herbs and plants not otherwise available.

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# LUSCIOUS LIQUEURS

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Until recently, North American liqueur production has been confined primarily to its most lucrative segment: fruit liqueurs. However, a few of the largest American liqueur producers have introduced exotic new flavors which have made strong first sales impressions. Product development is slowed because ingredients that are tasty by themselves fail to harmonize with other ingredients for overall flavor integrity. The short-lived Hot Tomato liqueur is an example of a popular taste that failed to make the cut.

## Benedictine

D.O.M. (To God, most good, most great) has appeared on every bottle of Benedictine liqueur since French monks created this unmatched blend in 1510. Hundreds of firms have attempted through the centuries to imitate its delicate flavors, but none has succeeded.

Although the liqueur market is highly competitive, a few new products stand out for their cooking savvy. Canton Ginger Liqueur from China imported by Charles Jaquin et Cie, TQ Hot a tequila-based citrus and capsicum flavored liqueur by Hiram Walker and DeKuyper's Lime Lizzard Liqueur show great promise as unique proprietary brands.

The production of liqueurs designed for culinary applications is complicated by esthetics and marketing considerations. As with wine, the merit of a cooking liqueur depends upon many factors the most important of which are taste without food, taste with food and taste in food.

In classical cuisine, chefs used liqueurs in both baking and cooking applications. Liqueurs are used for everything from meat marinades to tableside flambe desserts such as Bananas Foster and Cherries Jubilee.

Over the past five years, a new generation of chefs have developed innovative, nutritionally attentive menus using liqueurs. New recipes respond to consumer dietary demands, ease of application and to cost effectiveness.

Unlike the ingredients from which they are made, liqueurs are more

## Absinthe

Artemisia Absinthium or Absinthe is one of the most historically celebrated liqueurs - a great testimony to the potency of herb and plant extracts. This anise flavored, 138 proof, wormwood-distilled liqueur contained over 16 herb concentrates. It was first developed by a French doctor to combat malaria. Due as much to the social threat posed by its fashionable cult usage by Parisian artists as to its cumulative narcotic effect. Absinthe was deemed unsafe and eventually banned in the United States in 1915. A few countries still produce it today.

concentrated, consistent and resistant to dilution. For the professional this translates into a quick, easy and cheap way to enhance the flavor quality and add a distinction to their creations. For the home cook, this translates into a time saving device.

Hiram Walker, distributor of Kahlua, the number one selling liqueur in America, has become one of the leaders

in culinary education.

Other major North American liqueur distributors include Paddington Co. (Bailey's Irish Cream), Bacardi (Benedictine), Charles Jaquin et Cie (Chambord) and United Distillers Glenmore (Amaretto di Amore), Heublein Co. (Southern Comfort) and Schefflein and Somerset (Grand Marnier). These firms have focused attention on culinary liqueur usage. Each company offers a variety of menu ideas from appetizer to dessert with recipes developed by legendary and award-winning chefs such as James Beard.

Mainstream, non-culinary periodicals such as Newsweek, the New York Time Magazine, Better Homes & Gardens, Southern Living and Black Enterprise have featured articles on cooking with spirits. These articles emphasize a format including readily accessible ingredients and clear explanations which respond to the cooking needs of settled professionals.

Liqueurs provide a cost-effective means for home cooks to add variety to their daily fare. Any home cook can become a chef with the right splash!

## Tips for Cooking with Liqueurs

- Liqueurs can be the simplest cooking ingredient. Here are a few pointers from professionals for home chefs.
- As with all high-proof liquids, add them to saute pans or cooking vessels by means of any type of measuring cup or spoon to prevent flames from igniting the contents of the bottle. Virtually all the alcohol in liqueurs evaporates at the simmering point (approximately 185°F) leaving the flavor in the cooked item.
- Liqueurs used uncooked, as in salad dressings, may also be simmered to create an alcohol-free dish. If using liqueurs as an uncooked seasoning to soups, salads or desserts, use sparingly since the product is highly concentrated.
- Strong flavored liqueurs (especially anisette, botanical mixtures, herb and berry flavors) are excellent for use with savory or sweet cream sauces.
- While cream-based liqueurs are now created to be heat-stable at room temperature, these products will darken in color without refrigeration.
- Use herb, spice and plant base liqueurs sparingly to accent intensely flavored or savory sauces. Honey based whiskey liqueurs make excellent marinades for all grilled items.

# Liqueur Guide

Not sure what to buy? A culinary liqueur collection is just as important as a well-rounded wine cellar. From the basics to the extravagant, here is a guide to the major generic and proprietary liqueurs by flavor categories with recommended uses.

## The Basics

Orange	Curacao, Triple Sec	Chicken or pork marinates; seafood ceviche; citrus or fruit souffles
Mint	Peppermint Schnapps, Creme de Menthe	Salads, East Indian or Middle Eastern cuisine; semi-sweet chocolates
Coffee	Creme de Mocha, (generic) Kahlua (Mexico), Tia Maria (Jamaica), Caffè Lolita (Mexico), Kamora (Mexico)	Lamb, venison, aged red meat and game glazes; barbeque sauces; orange, vanilla, cinnamon, molasses, all chocolate foods
Almond	Amaretto (generic), Di Saronno	Pan fried fish (halibut, trout, etc.); all chocolate foods, berries, cherries
Irish Cream	Bailey's, Carolan's, Emmet's, Saint Brendan's (Ireland)	Rabbit; sweet potato, yam, cinnamon, cardamon, coffee, all nuts

## The Home Gourmet

Flavored brandy	Apricot or Blackberry (generic)	Poultry or pork marinate, deglazed sauces
Chocolate	Creme de Cacao (generic), Godiva (Canada) Vandermint (Holland)	All nuts, souffles, spices
Cherry, Raspberry	Framboise (France), Kirschwasser (Germany)	All types of chocolate, salad dressings, almonds
Hazelnut	Creme de Noisette, Frangelico	Game and poultry glazes. salad dressings. cheeses
Honey or Wiskey	Drambuie (Scotland) Irish Mist (Ireland)	Marinate or sauce base for white meats, firm-fleshed fish, barbeques

## The Professional

Botanical liqueurs	Benedictine (France), Chartreuse (France), Jaegermeister (Germany) Liqueure Stega (Italy)	Soups, poultry, fish and crustaceans, meat or game sauces; combine with brandy or aged sherry, mushrooms; Chinese cuisine
Blackcurrant	Creme de Cassis (generic)	Any item containing berries, fruit coulis, fruit sauces, prune or plum, chicken or white meat glazes, savory, sweet or spicy conserves or relishes, dark chocolate
Citrus blend	Tuaca (Italian), Grand Marnier (French)	Similar to simple orange liqueurs; souffles, mousses, chocolate, coffee
Elder/Anise	Anisette (generic), Sambuca, Galliano	Vegetable soups, cream-based herb sauces; fatty, firm-fleshed fish

## The Connoisseur

Pear or apple	Poire William (French), Calvados (French)	Pork sauces; aged cheeses, walnuts, specialty French desserts
Caraway	Kummel (Holland)	Cheeses, salt-cured fish, dried or aged meats
Melon	Midori (Japan)	Fruit soups, shellfish (shrimp and scallops)