



# The Subtlety of Smoky Spirits

By Bryen Dunn, Photos courtesy of Iron Smoke Whiskey, Kurt Brownell, Corey Vance, Ardbeg Distillery, & Corsair Distillery

There are many ways of flavoring alcohol, but there are only a few methods that can concoct a natural aroma and taste directly through the fermentation process, rather than with artificial additives. Recall that alluring smell of a campfire brought to life through your taste buds when cooking over a wood-burning cookery. Now imagine your favorite cocktail created in much the same manner. Smoked whiskeys paved the way for what is now an emerging trend with other alcoholic spirits as well. The earthier aroma and essence make them almost a meal in itself.

Ardbeg has been making whiskey for nearly 200 years, reaching this milestone in 2015. The distillery is on the island of Islay, off the west coast of Scotland, where the origins of whiskey began. Barley grains are dried over a peat fire, before brewing and distilling them into liquor. This drying process imparts a smoky flavor to the grains, which is prevalent throughout the production, ending up with a truly distinctive taste experience. Today, Ardbeg still lays claim to the smokiest whiskey in the world, measured by Phenol Parts per Million (PPM). Their flagship Ardbeg 10 Year Old measures between 50 and 65 PPM, while non-smoky or non-peated whiskey would be below 5 PPM.

Ardbeg 10 Year Old is extremely well balanced between smoke and sweet, with notes of apple, pear and banana. "This is what we like to call the 'peaty paradox' - how the world's smokiest whiskey is also one of the most subtle, yet complicated drams," explains Gregor Mina, Brand Director, Ardbeg Single Malt Scotch Whiskey. "In the past we have created an expression called 'Supernova' which was produced in very limited supply, but was incredibly smoky at 120 PPM," notes Mina. Other recognizable distillery names in the Islay region that are worthy of note, are Lagavulin, Laphroaig, and Caol Ila, all producing variations of the smokiest whiskey products on the market today. Smokehead also offers a rich, seaweed and intensely peaty whiskey, with hints of sherry, iodine, toffee, smoke and sea salt.



*Ardbeg 10 Year Old*



*Corsair Triple Smoke*



*Iron Smoke Whiskey*

The American craft distilling movement is continuing to expand, and several have begun adding a smoky hue to their brands. Balcones Brimstone is made from blue corn that is uniquely smoked after distillation with Texas scrub oak, the world's first wood smoked whiskey. Corsair Triple Smoke is distilled from malted barley smoked over three different fuels - peat, beechwood, and cherry. The result is a sweetness and barrel notes of an American Whiskey, combined with single malt's rich smoke. High West Whiskey Campfire is the world's only blend of Scotch, bourbon and rye whiskey, while Rocktown Hickory Smoked Whiskey is distilled from Arkansas soft red winter wheat, aged in Bourbon casks with a nice light hickory blend.

Knob Creek Smoked Maple is full-bodied with rich vanilla and caramel, smoked hickory and maple wood, with hints of earthy grains. Upstate New York's Iron Smoke Whiskey has a rich deepness of oak throughout the pallet, with a subtle warm apple-wood smoke finish. None of these American made blends are anywhere near as smoky as the highly peated Islay malts, but they might act as a good introduction for those unfamiliar palettes.

Crafty bartenders and home aficionados can practice the art of aromatic additions by way of a simple smoking gun. This is an easy way to prepare a single serving of beverages, or even bottle the smoky flavor to have on hand for future creative cocktails. The key to preparing smoky libations is to aim for subtle rather than substantial. For those wanting to enhance the smoky flavor a bit further, why not add a touch of smoke to the mixtures as well. Smoking different fruits and herbs can be either added as garnish, or muddled down to a puree additive. Or as Mina suggests, "I would have to say my favorite way to enjoy Ardbeg is in a Bloody Mary, or Ardbeg Dirty Mary, made with Ardbeg 10 Year Old instead of the traditional vodka. For an incredibly spicy and meaty note use Ardbeg Corryvreckan, garnish with a crispy rasher of bacon and perhaps a shrimp, and voila, breakfast in a glass!"