

**2026 Monterey International Spirits Competition
Platinum Award Winners - Director's Tasting Notes**

(Listed alphabetically by producer)

Griffo Distillery Espresso Martini Premium Cocktail, USA (\$24)

So full disclosure here – as a home coffee roaster of ranch specific single origin beans, you might say I'm a bit particular about my coffee - some would say precious, or even pretentious – and I also cold brew at home. This is to let you know that you're on solid footing in taking this review as a very high recommendation. It's spot-on cold brew aromatically, not roasted too dark to let the pure, fruited aromas shine. The coffee remains bright from beginning to end, making this perfect for a lighter espresso martini, or a sipper for true aficionados.

Griffo Distillery Scott Street Gin, Batch No. 35, USA (\$24)

A classic London Dry style gets a little California twist in this fine Gin. Bright juniper aromas with hints of citrus, coriander and fennel kick things off – and when I say bright, I mean they waft their way out of the glass to your nose at arm's length. That brightness continues on the palate, with the coriander coming forward and riding the warming spirit through a blown out finish that will make your gin based cocktails sing. Whether it's a martini, a G&T or a negroni, this is a serious upgrade.

Laelia Tequila Añejo, Batch LLA001, Mexico (\$80)

A lightly colored expression as Añejo goes, this might have you think that it'll be light on flavor. That's certainly not the case – instead it's quite full flavored in all senses, with vanilla and oak spice well folded into a beautiful agave core. It's something I look for in aged tequilas – that fine-tuned balance between the aging vessel and the pure, classic presentation of the agave plant. Well done!

Larrikin Bourbon Co. Maple Bourbon Cream, USA (\$30)

The Monterey judges went gaga over this cream – one judge commented that it should be sold in the dairy section for all of its pure milky goodness. That whole milk sort of texture combined with balanced flavors of caramel, maple and spice make for a fine solo shot or something you add to taste in your evening espresso. Nothing artificial here...

Rivulet Artisan Pecan Liqueur, USA (\$35)

I'll confess to a personal non-affinity for pecan pie. Like anything else, it's probably because I haven't had the right one yet, but the few samples I've tasted have just been over the top on sweetness. And that's a guy with a sweet tooth saying so. This liqueur, however, tempers that sweetness with a bright spirit base that lets the nutty character cut through. Seems to me an affogato spiked with Rivulet is a perfect play.

Señora Leona Tequila Blanco, Organic, Mexico (\$29)

This about to be released tequila hits all my markers, showing bright agave, citrus, grass and a dash of pepper on the nose and on the palate, finishing long and bright thanks to a two percent ABV bump over the usual 40%. Don't bother cocktailing with this one – it's built for sipping slowly.

Uncle Nearest Cognac Cask Premium Whiskey, Barrel No. 06, USA (\$160)

This is a new product in the Uncle Nearest line, and it's certainly worthy of inclusion. The floral tones of ten to twenty year use Cognac barrels add an unusual yet welcome dimension to the high proof, serving to round off spice tones without removing them and giving layered complexity of presentation that is a pleasure to sip. While it's warming as expected, it's not at all edgy or fire-y, but I'd still recommend dilution for full enjoyment. Delicious!

Uncle Nearest 1856 Premium Whiskey, USA (\$45)

Here's a straightforward American whiskey that is like pulling on a warm blanket. Aromas of nut and toasted marshmallow entice, and the palate delivers the promised flavors with brightness and lightness. There's no lingering viscosity to interfere with the flavors – just plenty of warmth and sweetness. I'm getting visions of campfire cocktail recipes...

Uncle Nearest Master Blend Edition, Premium Whiskey, Blend No. 072, USA (\$109)

It's been a pleasure to follow the different blends in this series over the past few years, and I bet it's been a pleasure on the blending table for the distillers involved as well. It seems that the goal is to land on something unique with each blend rather than to try to produce a house style, and this version succeeds with a top note of root beer or sarsaparilla aromatic that's very inviting. That note hits on the palate as well, along with the expected "take your breath away" heat when tasting neat. Lingering rye spice defines the long finish. I'd serve this over a large clear ice cube and enjoy an hour of slow dilution to experience all that's here.

Uncle Nearest Single Barrel Premium Whiskey, Barrel No. 3633, USA (\$79)

Whatever the barrel number, the quality level remains very high in this particular line, as you might expect. The approach here isn't the "take your breath away" smack in the nose, but rather a rich caramel and apple pie aromatic that draws you in tight. The first sip translates that character beautifully, and the heat makes itself known in the finish, wiping away the viscosity and leaving a clean, lingering impression. Safe to drink neat in minute quantities, or pour over a clear ice cube and enjoy the dance.

More below...

Weldon Mills Norman's 53 Straight Bourbon Whiskey, Single Barrel, Batch No. 1, USA (\$295)

There are more and more wheated whiskeys on the market, and this bottle will make you understand why so many distillers are choosing wheat over rye in blending their high end products. I was fooled by the spice character that the wheat presents here – it seems rye-ish, but there's a sweetness to the spice that is rounder and mellower than rye spice, and there's less grassy character as well. That said, the palate doesn't come off as sweet at all. Complexity and depth are the hallmarks here, and as usual with high proof, dilute for maximum enjoyment.

Weldon Mills Reserve Straight Bourbon Whiskey, Barrel Proof, Batch No. 3, USA (\$65)

I've tasted several different batch numbers of this product over the past few years, the most recent prior to this one being Batch 42 and Batch 2. I'm guessing that this may have been a batch that was held in the barrel for a longer period of time to see if there were benefits to be gained. That might be just the case here. A rich nose of caramel and fall spices leads to a bright spicy palate that, in typical Weldon Mills style, avoids any syrupy viscosity and keeps the focus on the balance of flavors. A very close match to Batch 2 with a little more spice. Sip neat or dilute slowly with a large ice cube – it's a delight.