

SPIRITS News

Handcrafted, small-production spirits don't come looking for you. We go to the source. Here's what we found in 2014.



NOVEMBER 10, 2014 FEATURES

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Farm to Bottle in Cognac and Armagnac

By David Driscoll

Going to France for the past four years has really opened our eyes to the potential of small-production spirits. While buying from small distilleries in Scotland has been incredibly rewarding, visiting with small farmers throughout the French countryside has been completely revolutionary for our spirits department. Brandy production in France is just another facet of daily farm life for many producers. They raise chickens, sell eggs, tend to their grapes and, yes, distill a little brandy here and there, much of which is aged in a barn next to their rustic homes. When you buy big house Cognac—say from Hennessy, Rémy, or Courvoisier—you're getting a gigantic

blend of brandies made from a combination of many small producers. When we bring back Cognac and Armagnac from France, however, you're getting the uncut juice straight from the source—bottled by the farmers themselves. The good value to be found in quality, mature brandy has never been more apparent than right now—at this very moment—especially when compared to the rising prices of the world's best single malts and bourbons. If you've ever been curious about French spirits, this is a great time to get your feet wet. Here's a peek at what we've been up to this year.

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Raining Whisky on a Whisky Drought

By David Othenin-Girard

This year's Scotland campaign was one of our most challenging. We've seen significant inflation of prices from big-name and small distilleries alike. We've seen good suppliers offer us next to nothing of note. We even saw the near dismantling of the United Kingdom, for God's sake. No doubt about it, it's been a tumultuous year for single malt—and Scotland in general. What we have realized is that it pays to be established in Scotland. We've worked hard over the years to cultivate relationships with several small producers and we've been fortunate to get some of their best stocks. Whether it was just luck, our good name—or perhaps our winning personalities—we were often surprised by how generous these smaller

producers were with us. Today, we regret not taking more advantage of those opportunities in years past because many of our small suppliers have been forced to raise their prices or offer younger or lower-quality product. The more established bottlers, who have got blending business and long-term contracts with distillers, are in a completely different league. While some prices have edged up slightly among this group, in general we're still able to find fabulous casks at outrageously good prices. That means we've focused the majority of our purchases this year on three suppliers.

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Armagnac



Exploring Armagnac in the cellar at Laballe.

(Continued from page 1)

Baraillon

We've been carrying Baraillon Armagnacs for three years now and it's been a match made in heaven for K&L, the Claverie family, and our customers. We're their biggest account and their biggest fans. There's something special about walking into the tasting room at Baraillon, which is just a little hut next to their home, with plastic furniture and humble offerings (like fresh foie gras from the farm next door). Mr. Baraillon will come in from feeding the pigs wearing rubber boots, while his daughter Laurence stands by quietly—yet does most of the talking. It's as “real” of a rustic French experience as I think exists, in that there's absolutely no romantic marketing or salesmanship going on in the room. You're simply stopping by a small farm in the Bas-Armagnac that sells meat, preserves, and also happens to have a little reserve Armagnac in the chai outside—some amazingly delicious Armagnac, no less.

We've brought in several expressions from Baraillon over the last few years: the heralded, customer-favorite 1985 vintage, a simple 10-year expression, a lovely 1998 Folle Blanche vintage, and a trio of super-old, ultra-rare gems from 1893, 1900 and 1933. Tasting through the lineup at Baraillon is not only incredibly exciting, it's also exhausting! There are so many different expressions available, many of which have been archived in glass demijohns to prevent further maturation.

Domaine de Baraillon 20 Year Old K&L Exclusive Armagnac (\$69.99)

If you like big, bold, chewy, meaty, mouth-filling spirits, then this 20-year-old Baraillon is for you. It's a big, teeth-gripping Armagnac that packs caramel and fruit into one monstrous mouthfeel.

1995 Domaine de Baraillon 19 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Armagnac (\$89.99)

The 1995 is classic Baraillon—loaded with dark, brooding fruit, heavy oak and caramel, but with the bright flurry of spice that only Folle Blanche Armagnac can offer. It's both rustic and lively.

While normally we taste from samples out of bottles, pulled by Laurence in advance of our appointment, this year we decided we wanted to bottle a single cask selection. We headed with our glasses into the warehouse where Laurence dipped the rubber hose into the casks and got the booze flowing.

Unlike distilleries that operate day in and day out, the Claveries are not worried about standardization. They only distill one week out of the year, so each batch reflects not only the vintage of the grapes, but the conditions on the farm at that particular time. You have to remember—the Claveries have been living in the same house since 1749. They use fruit from around their property, but also from Mr. Claverie's sister in Le Frêche. They do not use new oak, but rather 5,000-liter vats that house the brandy until other barrel space opens up, or until they can afford to buy more wood. It's not about consistency at Baraillon, but rather what's possible at that particular moment in time.

And that's why we feel the Baraillon Armagnacs are the most “authentic” spirit we carry; they reflect the everyday issues of everyday people attempting to make something great with their own two hands.



1988 Domaine de Baraillon 26 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Armagnac (\$109.99)

While older than the 1995 Folle Blanche, the 1988 vintage is much less rich and more fruit-driven than its sister cask. The vanilla is lighter and the wood less dominant, allowing the perfumy nature of the varietal fruit to shine.

Laballe

Armagnac has been distilled at Domaine de Laballe since Jean-Dominique Laudet returned from the Caribbean to his native Gascony and purchased the estate in Parleboscq. It was Noel Laudet, however, who modernized the operation in the 1970s when he left his position as director at the famed Bordeaux producer Château Beycheville, in St. Julien, and returned home to expand his family's estate into wine production, as well as Armagnac. After Noel, however, production at Laballe stopped until the 8th generation came back to take the reins. Today, Cyril Laudet and his wife Julie have restarted operations at the Domaine and have recommitted to the tradition of their ancestors.

Julie was there to meet us when we visited the property this past March, and tasted us on a number of selections. Because of the break between generations, everything available at Laballe is either quite old or quite young—pre-1993 or post-2001. As we were searching for more value-priced expressions, we were excited to taste the simple VS and VSOP selections. We were instantly impressed by their precocious drinkability; they had spice and richness without too much oak-dominated tannin. Laballe has been using the same wood-fired still since 1923. The older expressions are mostly Baco, while the newer releases focus mainly on Ugni Blanc.

We were very happy with the basic Laballe VS, to the point that we loaded up substantially. We're counting on general drinkability and a shockingly low price point to woo our discerning drinkers into Armagnac happiness. We also selected one vintage from the old guard and one from the new blood: a very Bourbon-esque 1992 selection that shows rich wood and notes of barrel spice, and a young, vibrant 2004 expression with lovely fruit and toasty oak.

Château de Laballe K&L Exclusive VS Armagnac (\$34.99) The VS is going to be a fan favorite—it has all the varietal flavor of the fruit, but enough richness to round out the palate and give the wooded spirits fans their dessert. It's spicy and dry on the finish, making it perfect for rocks drinks or cocktails.

2004 Château de Laballe 10 Year Old K&L Exclusive Vintage Cask Strength Armagnac (\$99.99) This ten-year-old vintage Armagnac is for bourbon drinkers who want to try something new. All the wood spices, pepper, oak and heat are packed into this cask-strength number. It's got a big, bold flavor that finishes with an herbaceous kick. It's quite stunning and will definitely be one of the stars from this year's crop.

1992 Château de Laballe 22 Year Old K&L Exclusive Vintage Cask Strength Armagnac (\$119.99) Those who loved the 1996 Pellehaut or Darroze 20-year expressions from past years are going to go bonkers for this. A huge, rich, dark chocolate and sweet fruited entry blasts you with baking spices and sweetness right off the bat. The richness is tempered by oak along the mid-palate and the brandy finishes with a dry, savory note. This is the kind of Armagnac that changes hearts and minds.



Ognoas

The seigneurie of Ognoas dates back to the 11th century. For more than 700 years it was occupied by various lords and viscountesses until 1847, when the last remaining heir donated the property to the church. In 1905, the Domaine was passed over to the regional government. Today, the 565-hectare estate is run by the Conseil General des Landes and is operated as an agricultural school.

The distillery at Ognoas is considered the oldest in Gascony and has been in operation since 1780. The estate has Baco, Ugni Blanc, and Folle Blanche planted on the site and—perhaps the coolest part of the operation—Ognoas uses its own trees (from the 300 hectares of forest on the property) to make their own oak casks for maturation. A local cooper does all the work at the Domaine and selects the trees himself.

In the past we've bottled single vintage expressions from Ognoas that have always offered soft-fruited texture and a round, creamy profile—unlike some of the woodier, spicier selections we see from other producers. This year we opted for an XO marriage of vintages that brought heaps of rich flavor at a very affordable price point—it may be the best deal we carry in brown booze, period.



Domaine d'Ognoas K&L Exclusive XO Armagnac (\$49.99) Softer fruit and rich woody flavors permeate the initial sip, and the accents of spice and dark caramel carry through to the finish. There's no better deal in the \$50 range.

Pellehaut

We've been working directly with Pellehaut for three years now. They're one of the largest producers in the region and they're definitely the biggest name from the Tenareze. Big is a relative term in Armagnac, however. Pellehaut would be considered a craft distiller in the United States, but since their scale of production is vast and efficient, they're a source of supreme value when it comes to mature spirits. It's not unusual for us to find 30-plus-year-old Armagnac for around \$100 when we visit Pellehaut.

Located near the town of Montreal-du-Gers, Pellehaut has 140 hectares of fruit in the Tenareze and they mature their distilled spirit in a variety of different casks. Owned by the Béraut family, which purchased the estate after World War II, the property is run today by the sons of Gaston Béraut, Matheau and Martin, who have apprenticed at Tariquet, Beycheville, and even Au Bon Climat near Santa Barbara. Today they grow mostly Ugni Blanc and Folle Blanche (which also make into tasty wine). For maturation, they begin with new oak, but often transfer the brandy to 400-liter barrels when the wood becomes too dominant.

We've bottled a number of Pellehaut expressions from the '70s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s in the past, and this year's crop will showcase a similar level of diversity. We chose more of the 1973 vintage, still as creamy and rich as we remember it, and a larger quantity of 1978, which popped in all the right places and finished with dry herbs and baking spices. We also opted for a 100% Folle Blanche from 1994 that showcased the new oak much like a fine bourbon would, yet finished with the dusty complexity that only Folle Blanche brandies seem to offer. A fruit-driven 2000 vintage offered contrast with more of a vinous character, and of course we stocked up on more L'Age de Glace—the young mixing brandy that took the store by storm last year.



Sampling in the cellar at Pellehaut.



Château de Pellehaut K&L Exclusive L'Age de Glace Tenareze Armagnac

(\$27.99) What really excited us this past year was a new project called L'Age de Glace, a young brandy meant to drink on the rocks (hence the name, "Ice Age"). The Armagnac fruit takes center stage here, melding wonderfully with a hint of vanilla from the wood. It's all distilled from Folle Blanche and it's soft, round, and aromatic, but it still has that little bit of rustic brandy flavor that I associate with old-school Armagnac. At 41%, it's light and easygoing, but still has a lot of character.

2000 Château de Pellehaut 14 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Vintage Tenareze Armagnac

(\$49.99) Lovely spices with young, vibrant fruit characterize this 14-year expression. Those looking for more of the rustic flavor and less of the rich oak will get a kick out of this.

1996 Château de Pellehaut 18 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Vintage Tenareze Armagnac

(\$59.99) Big, spicy, woody flavor explodes right off the bat from this 17-year-old, 50.4% alcohol brandy. This is another crossover Armagnac, the one you'll want to buy if you like bourbon and think Armagnac might be something you want to try. The raisiny fruit aspect of the Folle Blanche comes in on the finish, but this is all about the concentration of the wood and the spice. Just \$60 for all this punch.

1994 Château de Pellehaut 20 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Vintage Tenareze Armagnac

(\$69.99) Only two years older than the 1996, which is also distilled from Folle Blanche, but the differences are distinct. The 1994 is less driven by oak and has more fruit character at the forefront—that flurry of spice and floral nature that Folle Blanche tends to bring to the party. Again, the quality-to-price ratio is off the charts. It's hard to top Pellehaut in the bang-for-your-buck category.

1978 Château de Pellehaut 36 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Vintage Tenareze Armagnac

(\$99.99) This 100% Ugni Blanc Armagnac is rich with wood from 36 years in barrel. Black tea, cocoa, herbaceous notes of dried leaves and wood, with spice on the finish. This is incredible for the money. Simply stunning.

1973 Château de Pellehaut 40 Year Old K&L Exclusive Folle Blanche Vintage Tenareze Armagnac

(\$139.99) Composed of 90% Ugni Blanc. The palate opens with loads of caramel and a creamy richness. The aromas are quite bourbon-esque, with hints of soft vanilla and charred oak drifting out of the glass. The complexity is astounding: candied fruit, stewed prunes, toasted almond, baking spices and earthy warehouse notes, all swirling around at the same time. For an Armagnac of this quality, at an age of more than 40 years old, the price we negotiated is amazing. I'm expecting this to be one of our best-selling Armagnacs ever and I expect it to really put Pellehaut on the map stateside.

Cognac

Thorin

I expect Claude Thorin Cognac to be a household name with our customer base by 2015. Brandy drinkers searching for Grand Champagne quality at reasonable prices are going to be thrilled—there's nothing this good for this cheap on the American market, and we're bringing in a whole lotta Thorin for that very reason.



Claude Thorin K&L Exclusive VS Grand Champagne Cognac (\$29.99) The VS is fresh, clean, and fruit-driven, mimicking the best \$40 Grand Champagnes, but for \$10 less. There's nothing transcendent going on with each sip, just good, honest brandy from a French farmer. It's when you see the price tag that your eyes jump out of your head. It's about time that our French brandy program caught up to our Champagne department.

Claude Thorin K&L Exclusive VSOP Grand Champagne Cognac (\$44.99) The VSOP is older, and therefore richer than the standard VS, and is showing plenty of soft caramel, rich vanilla, and pure Grand Champagne fruit behind it. The result is stunning, and we'd expect something of this quality to sell for \$60 or even \$70. At \$44.99, it's almost too good to be true.

2002 Claude Thorin 12 Year Old K&L Exclusive Vintage Grand Champagne Cognac (\$59.99) Gone are the creamy, undulating waves of richness, and in their place are fresh and snappy fruit flavors contained inside of a leaner, brighter mouthfeel. It's quite surprising and it's a peek at what's possible for Cognac when you dare to step outside of tradition and into something more rudimentary and interesting.



Forgeron

Michel Forgeron is a Grand Champagne Cognac producer we're very excited to be working with. He represents the first distiller we've met in the Charente who is interested in maturing his brandy more like the Scots mature their whisky. You're in for a real treat with these Cognacs. They're bold, woody, spicy, and much more lively than the ubiquitous expressions that strive for "smooth" and "no burn." Michel Forgeron also said one of the coolest things to us when we asked him why other producers weren't looking to bring Cognac into the next generation: "Most Cognac producers don't even drink Cognac," he said with a snarl. "They do it because they were born into it. They don't even like Cognac, most of them." Michel is not afraid to piss people off. We love this guy.

Michel Forgeron K&L Exclusive VS Grand Champagne Cognac (\$39.99) The VS is the most delicate of Michel's expressions, but it showcases a tremendous concentration of fruit with a supple, smooth character. Beautiful vanilla on the finish.

Michel Forgeron K&L Exclusive VSOP Grand Champagne Cognac (\$59.99) This is bumped up to 43% and has more new oak and barrel spice without sacrificing purity of fruit. It's gorgeously balanced and it pops in all the right places. A blend of brandies aged 10-15 years.

Michel Forgeron K&L Exclusive XO Grand Champagne Cognac (\$99.99) At 45%, the XO is a marriage of vintages from '82 to '93, with lots of barrel spice and richness from oak. This is bold, spicy, rich, and dry on the finish with deep concentration.

Giboin

Have you ever been to a Cognac tasting or event where the producer said, "All of our fruit is Grand Champagne quality"? I have. I hear that all the time as an accolade when referring to a certain producer. But what does that really mean? It's the name of the most prestigious winemaking appellation in Cognac; the place where the soil is the most chalky, and the resulting fruit has the most finesse. That elegance translates over into the Cognac, of course.

It's one thing to have heard that Grand Champagne fruit makes for better Cognac, but it's an entirely different thing to actually know that through your own tasting experiences. When's the last time you even saw a Cognac from the Borderies at your local shop? And what about the other satellite regions: the Bon Bois, Fins Bois, and Bois Ordinaires? Have you ever tasted anything from those inferior terrains to compare against the preordained superiority of Grand Champagne Cognac? We hadn't, until we met with Francois Giboin and dug through his cellar in the Fins Bois region.

Giboin's estate is a classic Cognac milieu—gigantic country house, scattered papers and books, that smell that reminds you of your grandparents, and antique wooden furniture. It's a romantic idyll and a helluva place to go Cognac spelunking. The fact that we were so far outside the realm of "normal" Cognac producers sent an adventurous tingle through our spines. We were ready to expand our horizons.

1996 Giboin K&L Exclusive Fins Bois Vintage Cognac (\$54.99)

A simple, easy, to-the-point Cognac with lovely richness, but with a less refined and more robust Fins Bois character. There's a weight and a boldness that the Grand Champagne brandies lack, but that's what makes the Giboin so interesting. We definitely need to spend more time in these outer satellites, searching for Cognac like this.



Single Malt



The malting floor at Bowmore.

(Continued from page 1)

The Laing Brothers and their competing whisky businesses are providing some of the best values of the year. The brothers split up their stocks and contracts last year and now are going head to head. Douglas Laing has appointed us as the exclusive California retailer for their new flagship brand Old Particular, a selection of their finest casks designed to replace the highly regarded Old Malt Cask brand, which they lost. Expect to see an incredible Macallan 21, a soft and creamy Tobermory 18, a powerful and heady Laphroaig 16, and a classic, middle-aged Speysider Tamdhu 16-year. Down the way, the brotherly rivals will be sending us nearly 10 casks, including a lovely, sherried Craigellachie, young whisky from Mortlach and Caol Ila, another well-aged Miltonduff, and some incredible, aged single grain (how about a 50-year-old North British?). We've also finally secured our very own blended Scotch under the Faultline label, and it might be the best value in Scotch *ever!*

Finally, we've secured three old *rums* from Scotland, which will be sold under the Faultline label and will absolutely blow your mind. All these products are due to arrive right after New Years, so save up those K&L gift cards, because we're pushing whisky season into 2015. Keep your eyes peeled for these special exclusives, which will likely be released as pre-arrivals in the coming months.

While I can't offer you the above casks quite yet, we've worked hard to make sure that 2014 was the most interesting and exciting year for whisky that K&L has ever had. We've looked far and wide for Scotland's finest casks, turning over every stone—even traveling to France to find stocks. I believe that 2014 is shaping up to be the most exciting year to date for the K&L Spirits Department, and Scotch is a big reason why. If you haven't already grabbed one of these, here are some of our 2014 exclusives that remain in stock.



1994 BenRiach 19 Year Old K&L Exclusive Single Bourbon Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$149.99) and Peated Single Bourbon Barrel #7187 (\$149.99) The exceptional

BenRiach distillery was once an experimental playground for its owners. Now we reap the rewards of those experiments. Ever wonder what it would taste like if you ran the exact same distillery with peated and unpeated barley? Now is your chance. This offers an extremely interesting comparison, not to mention two delicious casks that are worthy of your attention all on their own.

1997 Bunnahabhain Heavily Peated 16 Year Old K&L Exclusive Chieftain's Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$129.99) More experimental fun here! This fabulously underrated non-peated Islay distillery was recently sold to a South African distilling conglomerate, so future Bunnahabhain bottlings like this might become more rare. This cask comes from the '97 experimental heavily peated run, which has now become quite sought-after. It was also aged in first fill sherry, so it has tons going on to balance the intense smoke. This will definitely scratch the itch of anybody who loves the sherried peaters.

Kilchoman K&L Exclusive 100% Islay Single Bourbon Barrel #344 Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$109.99) and Barrel #345 (\$109.99) When the distillery agreed to release a barrel of the 100% Islay for their old friends at K&L last year, they noted that this would never happen again. Apparently they were wrong. This is made from Islay barley malted on-site—something that not even the progressive Bruichladdich can claim. These two casks are some of the most exciting I've tasted from any distillery at any age or price range. If you tell people that you're into terroir, no Scotch has more sense of place than these special 100% Islay bottlings.

Signatory

While we secured only a handful of casks from our other producers, one supplier remains leaps and bounds ahead of the rest in terms of offering the best quality casks at prices people can still afford. It gives us great pleasure to announce the arrival of the second tranche of our 2014 selection from Signatory.

Without a doubt, Signatory is one of Scotland's premier bottlers of whisky. They had the foresight to get in early and buy the beautiful Edradour distillery in Pitlochry before the market completely exploded. This great vision has also led them to cultivate a selection of magnificent casks over the last three decades. While their products are absolutely top tier, they remain some of the best values Scotland has to offer. They may not be considered "value whisky" of the sort you'll see bottled by some chain retailers, but Signatory has managed to not raise prices at the same pace as their competitors. Nonetheless, they're sitting on some of Scotland's finest stocks, and they know it. We've always had

a great relationship with the boys at Signatory. It's a small company, and personal relationships matter. Over the past few years, we've found spectacular, rare casks hiding in their frigid warehouse. Visiting the Signatory warehouse, secluded behind the quaint vacation destination of Pitlochry, is always one of our most cherished appointments. This year was no different. In a climate of dwindling stocks and sky-high prices, we knew that Signatory would be our last best hope for finding some really choice casks in 2014. We couldn't count on unproven sources to supply our ever-growing base of savvy single malt customers, so we hit the warehouse hard in hopes of finding an answer to this Scotch whisky drought. We have never been more right. Six hours later and nearly a hundred casks sampled, we had selected 18 exceptional offerings. Our first batch is nearly sold out, but the second has just landed and features some truly exciting malt. Many of you know all too well that these casks won't be around for very long. If you're reading this now, you'll be ahead of the game, so don't wait. There's lots to love here.

1988 Blair Athol 25 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Sherry Butt Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$154.99) Sometimes rarity is relative. Blair Athol whisky is not rare per se—it's used in some of the big blends popular in the U.K.—but as a single malt it seems to be quite hard to come by. It's a whisky of great quality and consistency, and when you put it into an ultra-high-quality sherry butt like Signatory has, it can be transcendent. This is everything you could ever want in a sherry Highlander, at a price that makes the big boys quiver.

2001 Bowmore 12 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Refill Sherry Butt Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$99.99) This distillery is cranking out the most magnificent malt and Signatory gets amazing, high-quality butts. This is more consistent with the house style than the last cask, bringing the nutty sherry slightly more to the foreground. It's a manifest reminder that Bowmore should be considered one of Scotland's greatest distilleries.

1990 Bruichladdich 23 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Refill Sherry Butt Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$159.99) We've been tasting this special cask every year since we first set foot in Signatory's wonderful warehouses and we finally felt that it had reached its true peak. This hits every note without skipping a beat—while skipping the peat. The perfect amount of ripe, round, malty spice mixed with zesty citrus fruit, with an ever-so-subtle oceanic brine, and a slight, nutty, oxidative quality. It's a gem and will likely go down as one of our most repurchased casks.

1997 Glen Ord 17 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Hogshead Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$79.99) We went crazy for a few casks from 1997 this year, and this Glen Ord is top of the top. Classic oily Ord, with tons of wonderfully unusual malt flavors. Tart, white fruit on the nose, white cherries—if those exist—linseed, wildflowers, waxed apples and the finest plum eau-de-vie. This one is for the real "malt nuts." You know who you are.

1997 Glenrothes 17 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Refill Sherry Butt Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$79.99) Perfect, earthy 'Rothes paired with this beastly refill sherry feels like some sort of harmonic consonance on your tongue. Sister casks go for \$100-plus in Europe—not sure if someone at the importer made a mistake, but we're running with it, so take advantage.

1995 Glenburgie 19 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Hogshead Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$89.99) This little 'Burgie was definitely a surprise for all of us. At nearly 20 years of age in a first fill hogshead, we were expecting something special, but not this magnificent, aromatic beast. The nose is somewhere between buttered toast and caramelized citrus peel, with honey drizzled over the top. The sweet flavors on the nose feel like you're about to taste a liqueur, but the palate moves away from overt sweetness and toward earthy herbal tea, sliced apple, fresh vanilla bean. This is surely undervalued thanks to the lack of marketing on behalf of the owners, who keep the whisky almost exclusively for their high-end blends.

1995 Imperial 18 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$84.99) OK, so it turns out we are bringing you a rare, closed distillery bottling after all—it's just not from a distillery anyone has ever heard of! I'm totally in love with this odd little distillery, which was demolished in 2013. This cask was the best of several excellent ones we found in the warehouse. Bone dry, with concentrated nutty flavors, it's full-bodied and lush to the max. It's not altogether unphenolic, with a slight earthy smoke in the background. Incredibly complex and deep, not the sort of whisky you can evaluate in a mere few moments, so be sure to let this one breathe in the glass.

1998 Mortlach 16 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Sherry Butt Finish Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$99.99) This is the result of a sort of experiment Signatory conducted to see how these '98 Mortlachs took to fresh sherry. Immediately after popping the first cask, we asked how many we could have. Our hosts, nodding slowly (also tasting this cask for the first time), said "just that one." We didn't push harder for more of this wonderful whisky, but there's no question in my mind that it trounces recent distillery bottlings as well as most other expressions of Mortlach currently available in the U.S. Meaty Mortlach and powerful sherry is a match made in heaven. Too bad it is a fleeting pair—this butt will most likely be gone within moments of its arrival. Luckily, you get first crack at it, so get going.

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1998 Laphroaig 15 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Single Refill Sherry Butt Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$169.99) I still consider this one of the best Laphroaigs I've ever tasted. Don't look at the age in comparison to the price. Instead, imagine that Laphroaig is now as rare as any closed distillery on the secondary market. Imagine that this is from a day at the distillery like no other, where the hand-malted barley was at its finest and the peat smoke at its most pungent. Then imagine it went into the best possible sherry casks for the perfect amount of time. This whisky transcends age and price. A legend by any measure that has impressed even the most discerning connoisseurs.

1983 Caol Ila 30 Year Old K&L Exclusive Signatory Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$279.99) Why do we keep buying old Caol Ila? Because it's freakin' amazing. This magnificent distillery proves time and time again that it's a world-class malt. Few casks we taste achieve the amazing depth and power of this lovely little barrel. Easily rivaling its long-gone sibling Port Ellen, at a fraction of the price, this Caol Ila is exactly what Islay whisky should be.



Holiday Buying Guide

Here are the K&L Spirits Department's finest offerings, either exclusive to us or at very special prices, to purchase for that special lover of spirits in your life. Click through (or search our website) for detailed descriptions of these special, rare and well-priced products.



1792 Ridgmont Reserve Bourbon (\$24.99) (elsewhere \$33)

Bowman Bros Small Batch Virginia Straight Bourbon (\$29.99) (elsewhere \$40)

Faultline Straight Bourbon Whiskey (\$39.99) (K&L Exclusive)

Henry Mckenna 10 Year Old Bottled in Bond Single Barrel Bourbon (\$26.99)

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