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I Came, I Saw, I Got Blasted: The Ultimate Wine, Spirits & Cocktail Blast Event Recap

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Part industry gala, part trade show, part cocktail party, part cheesy wedding. The second annual **Ultimate Blast**, hosted by the **Ultimate Beverage Challenge**, had something for everyone. Most notably alcohol, and lots of it, from many of the world's most noteworthy mixologists, distillers and distributors of wine and spirits from around the world. Just about any libation the imagination could conjure was there, from Bacardi on the rocks to Chinese oat liquor, and everything in between.

When entering an enormous ballroom filled with dozens of tables and booths, all of them occupied by brand reps wanting you to try their booze both neat and mixed in a signature cocktail, it's very easy to get very drunk very quickly. Therefore, some serious pacing is required. I started by ruling out trying any brand that I already have at home. I immediately broke this rule when I checked out the **Chatham Imports** lounge. I found it impossible to pass up a **Michter's whiskey** cocktail with, get this, a prosciutto wash. It was... a little weird. But their **Farmer's Gin** and **Crop Cucumber vodka** cocktails were much more successful.

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I then got a little more serious about limiting my intake. I decided to primarily visit booths containing either a) newly introduced spirits that sounded interesting or b) well-known brands which I'd somehow never gotten around to trying. That meant bypassing old and new favorites like **Beefeater Gin**, **Denizen Rum**, **Glennmorangie** and **Ardbeg** whiskies, **Banks Rum**.... the list seemed endless. Had I more than one liver to use, I would have gladly visited them all. But I still wouldn't have visited the **Balls Vodka** table -- apparently the company's slogan is, "That's right. We called it Balls." That may be enough for some intrepid drinkers, but my college days are too far behind me, thanks.

Besides, there were so many delicious and exciting new and relatively unknown spirits to taste (not to mention more than 100 wines, which I sadly didn't get a chance to sample). Making its debut to the drinking public was **Bombay Sapphire East** gin, which adds botanicals like lemongrass and black peppercorn to the usual juniper-dominated mix. Said my drinking cohort, "It tastes like a Thai meal in a glass. And I mean that in a good way." Drambuie unleashed its new **Drambuie 15** Scotch-and-honey liqueur, which emphasizes the Scotch more than standard Drambuie -- to brilliant effect -- but is still smooth and sweet enough to make a fine after-dinner drink.

I tried a pair of knock-your-socks-off Cognacs that pack more of an alcoholic punch than your standard Hennessys and Courvoisiers, but go down much more smoothly. **Pierre-Ferrand 1840**, formulated to taste like a vintage 19th century Cognac, is fruity and even a little floral compared to most modern-day Cognacs, but still has lots of flavor without a lot of burn. And **Louis Royer VSOP Force 53**, so named because it's 53% alcohol by volume (or 106 proof; most Cognacs today are bottled at 80 proof), is super-smooth and rich despite its high alcohol content. An Old Fashioned variation created by renowned bartender Chad Solomon, using Force 53, maple syrup and Angostura bitters, was stunning.

Two of my favorite spirits of the evening made me scratch my head and go "Huh?" The first was **The Botanist Islay Gin**. Wait a minute -- Islay is that part of Scotland that gives us amazing, smoky and peaty whiskies like Lagavulin and Laphroaig. I was surprised that people in that part of the world ever drank gin, let alone knew how to make it. But the folks at the Bruichladdich distillery dared to dream. Despite using a bunch of botanicals native to Islay, which, needless to say, you don't normally find in gin, they came up with a very fine product that actually tastes like gin (unlike so many new, fruit-flavored "gins" out there).

And straight out of Colorado comes **Breckenridge Bourbon**. That's right, a bourbon that's not from Kentucky. Hold it right there, I hear you say. Doesn't bourbon, by law, have to be made in the Bourbon county of Kentucky? I never remember myself. But the answer is, apparently, no, because there were no native Kentuckians confiscating the Breckenridge bottles. And a good thing, too, because it's a very fine whiskey. The brand rep told me that it's the non-ionized Rocky Mountain water that makes it so good, and I'll take him at his word. Regardless of what the secret is, this is a bourbon worth trying.

The Ultimate Blast had its share of media folk, PR people and industry pros, all of whom could be seen hugging each other like long-lost cousins at a family reunion. But, for a fee, the Blast was also open to the public. These amateur drinkers, many of whom seemed to suffer from kid-in-a-candy-store syndrome, could be seen talking too loudly and high-fiving each other by the end of the evening, giving a slight frat-party vibe to the proceedings. My favorite moment of the night happened at the **Corzo Tequila** table, where a comely and statuesque brand rep was serving shots and cocktails:

Drunk Guy: Wow, you're tall.

Brand Rep: Um, thank you?

Drunk Guy: I mean, you're *really* tall.

Brand Rep: Would you like a sample of Corzo?

Drunk Guy: Yeah, I just want the añejo [aged longer and more pricey than blanco or reposado]. I only want the most expensive one. [Gulps down shot, walks away.] Thanks. You're tall.

A cheesy wedding-type band, butchering classics by the Police, Bob Marley, Eric Clapton and many others, only added to the weirdness factor, although a decent number of attendees could be spotted shaking their tailfeathers on what passed for the dance floor.

The event was scheduled to end at 9:30, which rolled around way too quickly for my liking. In fact, I hadn't made it to one of the most anticipated sections of all -- the Chinese liquors, all of them making their Stateside debut. My cohort and I ran to their lounge only to find that almost everything had been packed up, and only a few mostly-empty bottles remained. We pounced on one of them, the label of which was printed entirely in Chinese. We eagerly poured the remainder into a pair of plastic cups, took a sip, and....

well, my friend put it best when she called it "Ass Of The Ocean" Turns out it was, no joke, <http://twitpic.com/7ocrxe> target="_hplink">Hinin Abalone & Sea Cucumber Liquor.

Perhaps it's just not for American palates. Better luck next year.

The Ultimate Blast was indeed a blast -- for anyone with the slightest interest in wine, spirits, cocktails or all of the above, it's both ridiculously fun and educational, a rare combo. And I haven't even mentioned the tremendous food, or the book signings by luminaries such as David Wondrich, PDT's Jim Meehan, artist/caricaturist Jill DeGroff, and Paul Pacult. All I could ask is that it run for a whole weekend instead of just one night. I'm already looking forward to next year's Blast -- I should be over my hangover by then.

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