



AS SEEN IN

*Nation's Restaurant  
News*

April 29, 2010



---

## Experts pick the best spirits for cocktails

By Sonya Moore

**NEW YORK (April 29, 2010)** A group of judges selected from the cocktail world gathered recently in New York for the Ultimate Cocktail Challenge for three days of blind taste tests to determine the best spirits for various drinks.

Thirteen different kind of spirits went head-to-head, tournament-style, in a list of 58 cocktail categories featuring standardized recipes. North American whiskies, for example, were judged in cocktails like Manhattans and Sazeracs, brandies in pisco sour and Jack Collins cocktails, and vodka in cosmopolitans and vodka tonics.

- [A full list of winners](#)
- [Photos from the competition](#)

"We're following what's been done with wine for a long time," said David Talbot, managing director of Ultimate Beverage Challenge, which aims to set a higher standard of quality for spirits, cocktails and wines through competitions.

Talbot founded the company with F. Paul Pacult, publisher and editor of F. Paul Pacult's Spirit Journal and founding partner of the educational company Beverage Alcohol Resources, and Sue Woodley, longtime managing editor of F. Paul Pacult's Spirit Journal and managing partner of Spirit Journal Inc.

"A rep from a brand can visit a bar and explain that their product is the best, but the bar is not at much of an advantage," said Talbot, explaining how competitions like the Ultimate Cocktail Challenge can help bar professionals learn more about what is available in the market.

For example, in March, when Ultimate Beverage Challenge held the Ultimate Spirits Challenge, Talbot said smaller, independent or more affordable brands were taking top placements in some categories.

According to Talbot, just as a consumer with no background in cocktail making can use the results as a guideline for their purchases, restaurants or bars looking to improve their bar program with new spirits or drinks could use the results as a baseline for determining how to stock their shelves. The recipes used during the deliberation process, [which are posted here](#), also provide an additional source of information.

Judges Dale DeGroff and "King Cocktail" Dave Wondrich, along with Ultimate Cocktail Challenge chairman of judging, F. Paul Pacult, came up with the list of recipes used for the event.

"We tried to get as close to standard, non-controversial recipes as we could," said Wondrich, cocktail historian and Esquire magazine's drinks writer.

The recipes dwell in a middle ground between more spirit-forward cocktail stylings from contemporary speakeasies and drinks with more mass-market appeal. For example, when tinkering with a recipe for sours, the key was to make sure a drink wouldn't be too sour, but at the same time not too sweet. In coming up with the final recipe for the gin martini, Wondrich said that while he personally prefers the more traditional martini with equal parts gin and vermouth, the regulation recipe used during the challenge used a three-to-one ratio more in line with today's tastes.

Talbot explained that the ultimate goal of the competition was to come up with a way to benchmark spirits for cocktails on as equal a platform as possible while maintaining transparency.

For example, brands that wished to participate paid an entrance fee, rather than be sponsors of the event, and the list of cocktail recipes for each category are listed for all to see.

The competing products also were placed in carafes labeled only by numbers with the original bottles kept away from the judges and the bartenders the mixing cocktails. The scoring was done on a 100-point scale.

The roster of judges picked from the spirits industry included New York's Audrey Saunders, of New York's Pegu Club; Julie Reiner of Flatiron Lounge and the Clover Club; Jim Meehan, general manager of PDT (Please Don't Tell); Jacques Bezuidenhout, master mixologist for Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants; Tad Carducci, part of the cocktail consulting duo the Tippling Bros; Steven Olson, founder of aka wine geek, beverage consultant and educator; and Andy Seymour, owner of consulting firm Liquids Productions, a partner in aka wine geek and a partner in Beverage Alcohol Resource.

For more information on the evaluation method used during the judging process, visit the [Ultimate Cocktail Challenge website](#).





Online at: [http://www.nrn.com/article.aspx?menu\\_id=1368&id=382616#](http://www.nrn.com/article.aspx?menu_id=1368&id=382616#)