

# KOSHER LIQUOR – AN OVERVIEW

One of the topics which keeps us busy year-round – and especially Pesach time – is the question of kosher liquor products. People take their liquor very seriously and turn to the cRC with these all-important questions, inquiring about the *kashrus* of their favorite product. On Pesach, in particular, there is a dearth of Kosher for Pesach liquor products, and consumers often look to us for guidance. Let us first explore the world of liquor and the various issues that come up year-round, before we focus on issues related to Pesach.

## OVERVIEW

Alcoholic beverages have been produced almost since the beginning of time. Wine was likely the first beverage but many ancient civilizations regularly brewed beer. Over the millennia, methods of production may have improved, but the ingredients and general production methods haven't changed. It is this sense of history, consistency, and stability that allows us to approach this topic with some sense of confidence.

The generic term referring to alcoholic beverages is liquor. It encompasses numerous categories, including beer, mead, and bourbon, but in the vernacular, it generally refers to high-proof (high-alcohol) products such as vodka, gin, and whiskey. Many of these products can contain flavorings, such as fruit and spices, but one thing all alcoholic beverages have in common is that they are produced from a fermentable sugar and yeast.

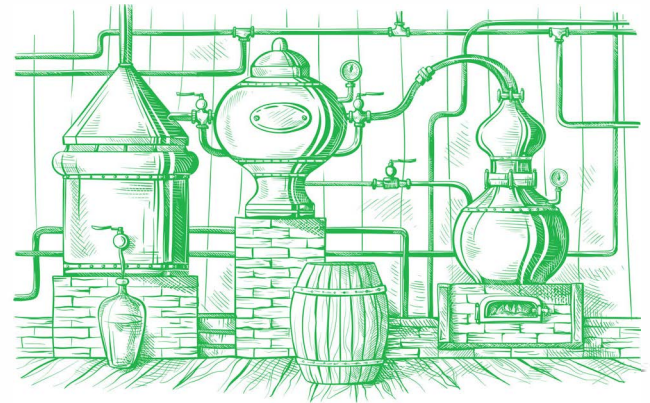
### ? DID YOU KNOW?

Archeologists in Israel recently uncovered what is supposedly the world's oldest brewery, located in Raqefet Cave near Haifa.

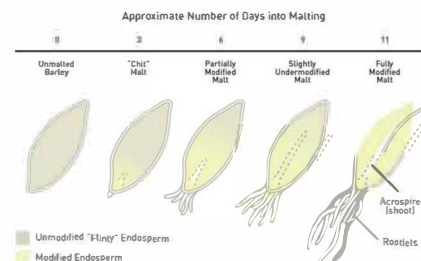
*(Journal of Archaeological Science, Volume 21, October 2018)*



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## THE GENERAL PROCESS



In order to produce alcohol (drinking alcohol is called ethyl alcohol or ethanol), it is necessary to convert sugar into alcohol through yeast by a process known as fermentation. Alcohol

can be produced from almost anything which grows – such as plants, vegetables, and fruits – but the most common sources are corn, potatoes, and grain (barley, wheat, and rye).

Keep in mind, however, that only sugar is fermentable – starch isn't fermentable. Since most foods are starch-heavy, not sugar-heavy, this will create difficulties. Take beer for example. It is often produced from barley, which has lots of starch and minimal sugar (70% vs 1% respectively). Fermenting barley to make beer would produce very little alcohol. What's the solution? Convert the starch into sugar through a process known as saccharification, utilizing an enzyme known as amylase. This can be done through a process known as malting. (See sidebar, page 91, to see how this amazing process works.) Alternatively, commercially-produced amylase can be added directly to barley kernels thereby accelerating the above process.

### ? DID YOU KNOW?

Our bodies have no need for starch (think potatoes and bread); when we eat starch, amylase enzymes in our saliva converts it into sugar/glucose allowing it to be absorbed in the blood.

Now that the sugars are ready to go, the grains are boiled, and we have a mixture known as wort or mash, which looks

like porridge. After cooling down the wort, adding yeast to the mixture will start the fermenting process. Yeast, a single-celled organism, “eats” the sugar, and after a few days, produces alcohol and carbon dioxide as by-products. After the sugar is used up, we are left with a mixture known as wash, which looks like porridge and contains about 5-8% alcohol by volume (ABV). This is the basic fermentation process common to all alcoholic beverages. The next step in the process depends on the type of product being produced. Although there are multiple varieties, we will focus on a few of them.

## ? PROOF OR ABV?

Alcoholic beverages generally list the alcohol in two ways – proof and ABV (alcohol by volume). Proof is simply double the ABV such that a product which is 43% ABV is also 86 proof.

## BEER

Beer is one of the simplest products to produce. The mash is made from grain (usually barley), and one simply adds hops (the flower of the hop vine) to the wort during the boiling process, which provides the bitter taste and astringency common to beer. After fermentation, the cloudy beer/wash is filtered and packaged into bottles, cans or kegs.



## KASHRUS CONCERNS

The basic ingredients (grain, water, hops, and yeast) are all assumed to present minimal *kashrus* concerns. [Note: Prior to home-brewing, one must ascertain that the ingredients are all acceptable.] However, some breweries, especially pub, craft, and microbreweries, brew non-kosher beers, such as oyster stout, which aside from being forbidden to drink, can also make the entire production line non-kosher. Others brew questionable brews, such as spiced or fruit beers. Although spices and fruit are likely kosher, the beer may be supplemented with chemical flavorings which require reliable *hashgacha*. According to U.S. Federal Law, beer with flavorings must list the flavorings on the label; hence, any beer label which doesn't mention the presence of flavors can be assumed to be unflavored. Other examples of questionable beer include milk stouts which can contain lactose – a dairy ingredient which requires reliable *hashgacha*. [The consumer should note that all alcoholic beverages likely contain added enzymes and finishing agents to help with production, but these are assumed to be minimal and nullified (*batul*) in the final product.]

Another concern relates to Jewish ownership. Any Jew-

ish-owned company which produces beer from *chametz* grain must make sure to arrange proper non-Jewish ownership over Pesach; beer which was owned by a Jew over Pesach presents issues of *chametz she-avar alav haPesach*.

## RECOMMENDATION

Flavored beer, as well as milk stouts, requires reliable *hashgacha* to ensure that all the ingredients are acceptable. Due to the stability of the general beer industry, coupled with the requirement to list flavors on the label, unflavored beer is likely kosher, but the concern exists that it may have been produced on lines used for non-kosher beer. As explained, this is particularly concerning regarding pub, craft and microbreweries. Larger companies do less experimentation and generally avoid producing non-kosher beers on the same lines as unflavored beer, and, therefore, this concern is minimized. Beer companies which are Jewish-owned present concerns with regard to Pesach. Purchasing beer with a reliable *hechsher* will remove any and all concerns.

## WHISKY

The fermentation process described above only produces minimal alcohol levels, about 5-15% ABV. How can we raise the alcohol level to the higher levels commonly found in whisky (such as Scotch and Bourbon) and vodka? Distillation. Distillation is the process of separating various components of a liquid, and the point in this case is to separate and isolate the alcohol from the wash. This is done by boiling the wash in a still, either a tall column still or a round pot still, allowing the vapors to rise. The interesting point is that alcohol boils at 173.1°F, whereas water boils at 212°F. The trick is to boil the wash above 173.1°F but below 212°F. Theoretically only alcohol will boil up, which can be caught and condensed back into liquid. On a practical level, other liquids come along with the alcohol, and a second distillation (and perhaps third) is needed to bring the alcohol level to 65-75% ABV. At this point, the distillate, known as white dog, can be bottled and sold as moonshine, but many people



## BARREL AGING

Scotch must be matured for at least 3 years in oak barrels – used or new. Bourbon must be aged in new, charred oak barrels and has no minimum time duration (other than Straight bourbon which must be aged for at least 2 years) but is commonly aged for many years.



don't appreciate the harsh, bitter taste. For this reason, the white dog is generally filled into oak barrels for maturation and mellowing. There are various requirements for aging. (See sidebar.)

## KASHRUS CONCERNS

Similar to beer, the basic ingredients for whisky are assumed to be kosher. Scotch and bourbon are both highly regulated by the U.K. and U.S. governments, respectively, and may only contain grain, water, and yeast (Scotch may also contain caramel coloring) – all of which present minimal *kashrus* concerns. Other whiskeys may not have the same regulations, such as Indian, Japanese, and Canadian whiskey, and may contain added ingredients such as wine, glycerin, and chemical flavorings.

According to U.S. law, bourbon must be aged in new, charred oak barrels, but Scotch can be aged in any oak barrel and is commonly aged in used barrels, including those which previously aged wine (such as sherry wine from Jerez, Spain). Whisky aged in non-kosher wine barrels can present *kashrus* issues, because the wine absorbed in the barrels seeps into the whisky. (See *Sherry Casks: A Halachic Perspective*, written by this author, for a detailed study of this topic.)

As with beer, any Jewish-owned company which produces whisky from *chametz* grain must make sure to arrange proper non-Jewish ownership over Pesach; whisky which was owned by a Jew over Pesach presents issues of *chametz she-avar alav haPesach*. This is especially problematic with regard to whisky, which is often aged for many years and almost surely passes over a Pesach.

## RECOMMENDATION

Scotch and bourbon whisky are assumed to contain only kosher ingredients, but the possibility exists that it may have been aged in non-ko-

## ? WHISKY OR WHISKEY?

Although both terms refer to barrel-aged alcoholic beverages, whisky generally refers to Scotch and Canadian products, and whiskey refers to American and Irish products.

## AGE STATEMENT

Both Scotch and bourbon do not need to contain age statements on the label. However, according to U.S. law, any product less than 4 years old must contain an age statement.

## SACCHARIFICATION

In order to ferment grains and other starchy foods into alcohol, it is crucial to convert the natural starch into sugar. This can be done through a process known as malting, and here we get a glimpse into Hashem's wonderful world. All seeds, including barley kernels, come loaded with starch, because that is what it needs to grow into a new barley stalk. But, first the starch needs to be converted into sugar, which happens by means of amylase enzymes located naturally within the kernel. However, the enzymes are only activated when exposed to high levels of moisture and temperature, most often when the seed is planted in the ground and watered. The little seed already has everything it needs to survive and flourish! This is Hashem's way of keeping the kernel intact and protected until it's ready to grow into a new plant. We can take advantage of this natural process for our own purposes. The barley is soaked in warm water until the kernel begins to germinate, activating natural enzymes to break down the carbohydrates and utilize the starch reserves, naturally converting the starch into sugar. Little rootlets begin to form, but before the process progresses too far, the barley is dried, thereby arresting the process, allowing the sugars to be accessed for fermentation.

sher wine casks; this concern generally does not exist with regard to bourbon which, by law, must be aged in new casks. (Recently, some varieties of bourbon have appeared on the market which have been further aged in wine casks; by law, this needs to be clearly identified on the label.) Unfortunately, many popular varieties of bourbon are produced by a large Jewish-owned company which apparently doesn't sell their *chametz* for Pesach and must be avoided (see the cRc Liquor List for details). In addition, whiskey from other countries may have issues with regards to questionable ingredients and additives.

## VODKA

Vodka can be produced from multiple sources and is often produced using the excess grain in that region (e.g., the U.S. often uses corn, Russia uses potatoes). Like whiskey, it is distilled after fermentation in order to raise the alcohol level, but unlike whiskey, it is dis-

## ? DID YOU KNOW?

Contrary to common belief, bourbon may be produced anywhere in the U.S. – not just Kentucky.

Bourbon must be made from at least 51% corn; Single Malt Scotch must be made in Scotland from 100% barley.

## ? TRIVIA QUESTION

According to U.S. law (27 CFR §5.22(a)1), vodka must be tasteless, colorless and odorless. So why does one brand seem to taste different than the next? Why do some brands cost more than the rest?

tilled to higher levels (such as 90-95% ABV) and unaged (and diluted before bottling). Many flavored varieties are available (such as pineapple vodka), and these must be clearly labeled.

### KASHRUS CONCERNS

Since vodka can be produced from multiple sources, one must be careful to avoid vodka produced from milk and dairy products, as well as grape and wine products. The label will often indicate the source of the vodka.

Flavored vodka requires *hashgacha*, because it likely contains chemical flavorings which require reliable kosher certification.

Since vodka can be produced from multiple sources, including wheat, there may be a concern with regard to ownership over Pesach.

### TEQUILA

Tequila is a high-alcohol product, similar to vodka, but it must be distilled from sugars extracted from the blue agave plant, a type of cactus indigenous to Mexico. Some flavored varieties are available (such as lime tequila).



### KASHRUS CONCERNS

Some have raised the concern that tequila manufacturers may supplement the agave alcohol with added alcohol from questionable sources (such as grape alcohol) or add glycerin (a smoothing agent), but these concerns appear to be minimal.

Some varieties of tequila may be aged in wine casks. These would present the same concerns as Scotch above.

Flavored tequila requires *hashgacha*, because it likely contains chemical flavorings which require reliable kosher certification.

### RUM

Rum is produced by fermenting sugar or molasses – both of which present minimal *kashrus* concerns. It is available in various shades and colors, ranging from clear (unaged) to dark/black (aged). Some varieties are flavored (e.g. Spiced Rum).

### KASHRUS CONCERNS

As explained, the ingredients used in rum production are assumed to present minimal *kashrus* concerns. Flavored and spiced rum require reliable *hashgacha* due to the potential usage of questionable flavorings. In addition, aged rum products may have been aged in non-kosher wine casks, but it can be assumed that such information would likely be written on the label.

### PESACH ISSUES

How does Pesach impact the above discussion? Well, for starters, any product made from the five species of grain (wheat, barley, rye, spelt, and oats) is *chametz* and cannot be consumed (or owned) by Jews over Pesach. Thus, beer, Scotch, bourbon (see sidebar), and virtually all whiskey products are problematic over Pesach. This will also include most vodkas, including those produced from corn (due to *kitniyos* concerns). In addition, any flavored product should be avoided due to Pesach questions regarding the flavorings. This doesn't leave too many options for Pesach.

What about tequila, rum, unflavored potato vodka, or quinoa beer? Since the primary source of alcohol seems to be fine, can this be consumed on Pesach? Well, there are actually a number of other concerns, including ingredient and equipment issues. As mentioned, fermentation requires the use of yeast and enzymes; these must also be kosher for Pesach. In addition, even if a company claims to only use potatoes for their vodka, we can't be certain that it isn't supplemented with other grains. And how can one verify that the tequila wasn't supplemented with non-agave alcohol (such as corn-based alcohol)? Finally, regarding equipment concerns, if the quinoa beer is produced on the same lines as wheat beer, the quinoa beer is not acceptable for Pesach. Nevertheless, regarding ownership over Pesach, since tequila and rum are both produced from non-*chametz* ingredients (the blue agave plant and sugar/molasses, respectively), there is no concern with regard to ownership over Pesach, but as mentioned, one should not consume it on Pesach without special Pesach supervision.

### OWNING BOURBON ON PESACH

Isn't bourbon made from corn? Since it isn't *chametz*, why can't it be owned over Pesach by Jews? According to US law, bourbon must be produced from at least 51% corn, but the balance is almost always substantially from barley, rye, or wheat. Therefore, bourbon may not be under Jewish ownership over Pesach.

### CONCLUSION

Various liquor products present specific *kashrus* concerns – consumers can check our popular Liquor List ([www.cRcWeb.org/LiquorList.pdf](http://www.cRcWeb.org/LiquorList.pdf)) for detailed information. Our current list has over 1,700 listings and is still growing. Regarding Pesach, due to the extra ingredient and equipment concerns described above, the cRc recommends only purchasing alcoholic beverages for Pesach which are certified by a reputable agency as kosher for Pesach. Be sure to check out our Pesach Liquor List for various certified products. And remember to please drink responsibly. ▲

# PESACH LIQUOR LIST 2020



Brandy	Boukha Bokobsa	Fig Alcohol	OU-P logo required
Brandy	Herzog French	Boukha Fig Brandy	OU-P logo required
Brandy	Sabra Liqueurs	Grand Sabra Orange Brandy	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Dupuy	Cognac VS	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Dupuy	Cognac VSOP	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Dupuy	Cognac XO	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Herzog French	Cognac Louis Royer VS	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Herzog French	Cognac Louis Royer VSOP	OU-P logo required
Cognac	Herzog French	Cognac Louis Royer XO	OU-P logo required
Gin	Distillery No. 209	Gin	OU-P logo required
Liqueur	Sabra Liqueurs	Sabra Coffee	OU-P logo required
Liqueur	Sabra Liqueurs	Sabra Orange Chocolate	OU-P logo required
Liqueur	Sukkah Hill Spirits	Assorted Varieties	Star-K P logo required
Other	Exodus	Hopped Cider	Star-K P logo required
Other	Zachlawi	Arak - Various Varieties	OU-P logo required
Other	Zachlawi	Spiced Arak	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Boyar	Vodka	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Distillery No. 209	Vodka	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Lvov	Vodka	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Peacock	Vodka	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Pravda	Vodka	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Shikor	Vodka Infused with Saffron	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Metropolitan Martini Co.	Vodka Martini	OU-P logo required
Vodka	Zachlawi	Assorted Varieties	OU-P logo required