



BEHIND THE TASTING PANEL

M. Quinn Sweeney

The San Francisco World Spirits Competition is a major, international contest of distilled alcohols, organized by Tasting Panel Magazine, where industry experts nose the bouquet of their booze while awarding fancy medals. So I didn't expect such an entertaining and engaging weekend.

I certainly didn't predict that every college boy's dream job would be so arduous and taxing. Over the course of two days, I observed every judge tasting two hundred full-strength spirits from over one thousand entries. No mixers, no drinking, just hundreds of ounces of hard alcohol being sipped, swished, studied and spat out. This contest is one of dozens of medal-awarding spirits tournaments around the world, but now in its tenth year, it is highly regarded among the top tier events.

The first day of the competition was a little dry, if only figuratively. In unmarked conference rooms at Hotel Nikko near Union Square in San





Fransisco, the best booze tasters from around the country convened at nine o'clock on Saturday morning and donned white, lab coat-style smocks. When I rolled out of bed and into the Monterey Room around one thirty, I was met by the sound of glasses softly clinking and hushed whispers. Brows were furrowed in serious contemplation, as panelists hunched over their assigned tables in groups of three and four.

The judging panel was comprised of thirty seasoned professionals from the bartending and hospitality fields, professional wine and spirits writers, and experts from the alcohol industry. Everyone on the panel is handpicked by Anthony Dias Blue, Executive Director of Tasting Panel, Managing Director Carol Seibert, and Tony Abou-Ganim, the famed bartender recently named Director of Judging. Each of the three is entitled to suggest candidates for approval by the other two.

When I asked Abou-Ganim what they look for in judges, he barbed at David Wondrich, the cocktail writer for *Esquire* who was sitting nearby, "It's mostly writers pretending to be mixologists," to which Wondrich responded, "And mixologists pretending to be writers." (Abou-Ganim had a signing scheduled the next day for his new cocktail book.)

Author and beverage consultant, Robert Plotkin told me, "Being a successful spirits judge requires an in-depth familiarity with each type of spirit and knowing what qualities or attributes a high quality product should possess. Judges are asked to critically evaluate any and every type of spirit. I often cringe when I hear a judge say that he or she isn't familiar with a particular type of spirit and doesn't recuse him or herself from participating in that flight."

Identical arrays of lettered tasting glasses, like short champagne flutes topped with a glass disc, were spread out in front of each judge, poured by staff members in a secure back room, and delivered on large, unmarked wooden trays. The judges were tasting blind, as they sampled flights of spirits. There were perhaps nine varieties of gin, seven American whiskeys, or five herbal liqueurs.

Judges began in silence, first gauging appearance for color, clarity and purity, then tasting for quality and authenticity, to detect appealing flavor components and off flavors, looking for balance and consistency throughout the tasting experience, including the length and quality of finish, or aftertaste.

They scratched notes and gave each glass



a rating, ranging from no medal to gold, like the Olympics, but with pluses and minuses like a letter grade. At the end of each flight, judges shared their scores and notes, then either averaged their ratings, or debated the merits of every expression to achieve consensus on which medal, if any, to award to each.

As a panel, they revisited the strongest gold medalists to consider them for the lauded double gold, and determined the best of the best to send to the sweepstakes round. Once concluded, staff swooped in to clear and replace glasses, record the results, and ferry the spit buckets into the hallway where they were emptied into an even larger bucket lined with a very flimsy plastic bag.

Judges offered mostly sensory obser-

vation without pretension or much opinion, and several told me they had reached the point where they could judge most spirits based on the nose, knowing from smell, exactly how it would fair in the tasting.

More than once, a barrel-aged American whiskey was described as “got a lot of lumber on that” and a 12-year-old Scotch elicited discussion of flavor components like honey, smoke, iodine, wet stone, and doughy-ness.

A flight of “other liqueurs” with which one panel ended the first day, was confirmed by a staffer to be from “mysterious bottles without any English writing,” and prompted comments such as: “This would not have been a good way to start the day,” “Is it supposed to have floaties?” “Tastes like when you walk into Macy’s and the perfume sprayer catches you with your mouth open,” and “It smells like my grandpa eating ice cream.”

It was later determined that the floaties were strands of ginseng and the judge’s grandfather smelled like paan, an herbal betel nut mixture chewed in India, which prompted some debate about whether the panel’s general dislike should be overruled by the preference of a billion people in South Asia.

Panel members remained sequestered in these groups until lunch on Sunday, when the staff removed the dividers between the rooms and set up a banquet of booze. This year, 81 spirits were sent to sweepstakes, and every judge was tasked with tasting them all. The mood was wildly different from the first day and a half. Rather than carefully considering the nuances of each, then somberly voicing their findings, all they had to do was vote by a show of hands for their favorites in each category. The commentary transitioned sharply from

scientific and historical to bawdy and boisterous.

The sweepstakes began with a little scoffing at the flavored vodkas, but overall, the mood was much lighter and livelier, with everyone trying to one-up each other, comparing the characteristics of lesser spirits to the personal hygiene and sexual predilections of their colleagues around the room. In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida was played on glasses with a pencil, and after a string of contentious rounds and recounts, a unanimous favorite prompted calls for a run-off vote.

Wondrich and Plotkin invited me to sit with them when their tablemate left for an early flight, fortuitously right after forty or so beautiful brown spirits had been poured. Fortified by a heaping pile of Thai fried rice, I belled up to the table and started tipping back glasses.

Confident I had mastered the physics of spitting in middle school, I learned that there is a secondary skill set required for judging, which allows one to void a mouthful of booze into a partially filled bucket at short range without incident. Let's just say I had the unpleasant experience of wiping 80-proof saliva from my eyebrows in front of two esteemed colleagues.

From an outsider's perspective, the process seems to drag on forever, but once you sit at the table, it's nearly impossible to keep pace with the tasting or the banter, and I felt guiltily like the feudal lord at a feast when the staff swooped in, one to clear my empty glasses, another to replace them and three more with cloth-wrapped bottles filling them in turn.

After ten tastes, my tongue and throat were already starting to burn, but I

found that letting a few slide down my throat instead of spitting helped numb the pain (and the rest of my senses). Two days later, the sides of my tongue still feel raw, as though I ate a one-pound bag of Sour Patch Kids.



Judges varied in how they compensate for palate fatigue. Some took breaks, others drank sparkling water or chewed on bread, and one said a trick he learned from wine tasting was to snack on fatty food, counteracting the tongue-stripping effect of the alcohol and acidity.

When I asked what they were planning to drink once the competition ended, most seemed to want water or light beer, particularly lagers, while Wondrich poured "the grand blend" of his five favorite sweepstakes scotches into a glass and carried it back toward his room. Now that's dedication to one's craft.

Check www.drinkmemag.com to read about the results.