



## San Francisco World Spirits Competition

234 spirits. It seems like an almost unfathomable number, even when spread out over the course of three days. Judging the **San Francisco World Spirits Competition**, presented by [Tasting Panel Magazine](#), was by far the biggest spirits undertaking of my life. For three days I sat in a room tasting and evaluating with some of the top spirits people in the world, including [Tony Abou-Ganim](#) (the definitive world ambassador for mixology), Audrey Saunders (legendary mixologist, Pegu Club), Misty Kalkofen (Drink, Boston), Anthony Dias Blue and Meridith May (Tasting Panel Magazine), Julio Bermejo ([Tommy's Mexican Restaurant](#) & US Tequila Ambassador), [Jeffrey Morgenthaler](#) (Mixologist blogger), Jim Romdall (Vessel, Seattle) and [more](#).

The process of how you individually taste so many spirits is almost as fascinating as tasting the spirits themselves. In total there were over 1200 individual spirits submitted to the 2011 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. The number of spirits grows exponentially year to year and this year's submissions were the most of any year yet. Judges are divided into teams of three or four people and given a selection of the spirits which are entered every year.

Our team comprised of Julio Bermejo (Tommy's Margarita), Geoffrey Kleinman (Drink Spirits), Bridget Albert (Mixologist, Southern Wine & Spirits, Chicago) and Michael Feil (GM / Wine & Spirits Buyer, Westchester Country Club, Rye NY). It was a diverse group of spirits professionals, each with our own area of expertise and spirit affinity. To get a medal, a spirit would have to convince the majority of our group it was worthy, and to get a [double gold](#) it would have to impress us all.

As with all teams, we started out tasting and rating vodka. As with all spirits we tasted at the competition, the vodkas we tasted were blind. Each spirit was presented in its own glass marked with a number and a letter for us to reference. For vodka, our team tasted the same batch of spirits as the team next to us, so not only were they tasted blind, but they were tasted individually by two separate teams and our scores were compared. I was extremely impressed by the level of attention to detail in this competition and creating a system, especially for vodka, which ensured judging at the absolute highest level. Throughout the competition, on all levels, there was an extraordinarily high commitment to giving each glass on each table its own assessment and evaluation.

Although I've tasted tons of spirits in my career, nothing could prepare me for the absolute sea of spirits that were carted out for us to taste. Looking at a table so filled with glassware that there's hardly any room for anything else is extraordinarily intimidating, and then add to that fact that you are tasting shoulder to shoulder with some of the giants in the industry, and it creates this vibe that this event is 'the big show'. As significant as the San Francisco World Spirits Competition is and the amazing talent that they put in the tasting room, there's a complete lack of ego. Once the doors are closed and everyone gets down to tasting, it's all about the spirits.



CL CODE	CLASS		Totals	M Fed
100	Vodka - Neutral Grain	f	38	13
100	Vodka - Wheat	f	45	12
100	Vodka - Other		6	6
101	Flavored Vodka - Citrus		12	12
160	Silver / Gold (Unaged) Tequila	f	53	23
161	Reposado Tequila	f	48	8
162	Añejo Tequila	f	43	11
172	Mescal, Sotol, Bacanora, Comiteca	f	26	13
173	Other Agave Spirits		1	1
231	Single Malt Irish Whiskey		15	8
260	Distillers' Single Malt Scotch - Islay	f	17	9
300	Cognac VS Three Star or Equivalent		6	6
303	Cognac Extra-Aged/Vintage		5	5
360	American Grape Brandy		6	6
500	Fruit Liqueur - Berries		7	7
500	Fruit Liqueur - Other		5	5
TOTALS			1107	142



# Drink Spirits – Learn, Drink, Repeat

Helping you figure out what to drink next



“Some of the big winners included Cognac Landy XO which won both for best XO Cognac and best overall Brandy”



So how do you taste so many spirits? Carefully. Depending on the spirit category, it can take hours to make your way through a large flight of spirits. Each spirit is nosed at least twice and then tasted at least twice. Our table blew through bottles of water swishing and cleaning our palates, with plates of cheeses and bread and celery to clear out the tougher spirits. As we discussed each spirit, and we talked our way through each glass in each round on each day. We evaluated spirits on distillation, nose, flavor, flavor delivery, representation in the category and overall experience. There were many levels to evaluate on and it led to some fascinating discussions about spirits and their categories.

One of the things I really appreciated about the competition is that it is indeed a world competition. All too often in the US, we call events “World” without including anything from outside our own borders. In the SF World Spirits Competition, we evaluated spirits from across the globe, from things you’d expect like Scotch Whisky, Irish Whiskey and French Cognac, to Japanese Shochu and Austrian Chocolate Spirit. One of the most interesting moments in the competition came from tasting a Chinese [Maotai](#), which was simultaneously slightly repulsive and captivating. It was one of those challenging moments when you realize that you’re being presented with something fantastic that lives far beyond your own personal taste preference.

After tasting 142 spirits over the course of two days, the absolute best of the best from that group (which not only win double gold but get a unanimous vote to be sent on to sweepstakes from a group) get sent to the final day of Sweepstakes where all teams taste and evaluate all the winning spirits together. On that final day we tasted another 92 spirits (including some which we sent along to sweepstakes). The final day could only be described as a little slice of heaven, and from that tasting the best in class and show are awarded. After the whole event has wrapped and the winners are picked, the judges finally get to see the line up of things we tasted. Standing around the winner’s table, there were a lot of great exclamations.

**Some of the big winners included Cognac Landy XO which won both for best XO Cognac and best overall Brandy**, Sloane’s Dry Gin which won for best White Spirit, Alberta Pure for best Vodka, Sinai for best Mescal & Agave Spirit, Caol Ila for best Scotch Whisky, Michael Collins for best Single Malt Irish, and Leblon Cachaca for best Cachaca (which was a close second for best white spirit). As a judge I felt great looking at the big reveal of winners because even though I was part of a larger group, the list of winners really felt like it reflected my own tastes and evaluations.

The San Francisco World Spirits Competition in many ways is the Super Bowl for spirits, and after having gone through the experience of it all, I do feel lucky to have played in the big game. It was an amazing experience and one I hope to repeat next year.