



Fun with Whiskey

Second Edition

A How-To Guide to Whiskey Tastings, Events, and Exploration

Elton Billings

A huge thanks to Christine, my editor, my wife, the love of my life.

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CONTENTS

About This Book	1
Basics of Tasting Whiskey	3
Beginning Your Whiskey Journey	6
Solo Whiskey Activities	10
Keeping, Storing, and Collecting Whiskey	14
Whiskey Event Basics	18
What is a Whiskey Tasting?	24
Tasting Format: Pre-Poured	28
Tasting Format: Guided Pours	31
Tasting Format: Staffed Stations	33
Tasting Format: Self-Pour Stations	35
Tasting Variations	37
Alternatives to a Whiskey Tasting	40
Whiskey Potluck	41
Show and Tell	43
Whiskey-Themed Party	45
Pink Elephant Whiskey Gift Exchange	47
Bring Out Your Dead	49
The Blending Contest	50
20 Whiskey Questions	53
Adult Easter Egg Hunt	55
Sample Sharing Party	56
Including Whiskey in Other Parties	58
Extra Tips & Tricks	62
Cheers! Sláinte! Kanpai!	65
About the Author	66

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Right off the bat, there are a few things you should know.

This is NOT a book about whiskey. There are already many good books and websites with information about the history of whiskey, types of whiskey, and the whiskey-making process. Those topics are not covered here.

This is also NOT a book of whiskey drinking games. Drinking games are easy to find on the Internet or just make up your own. You can take pretty much any game that has periodic outcomes, such as matching something or losing a round of play, and turn it into a drinking game.

This book explores ways to have fun with whiskey. You'll find ideas for increasing your enjoyment of whiskey on your own and discover ways to make whiskey a central theme for events and parties.

Second Edition Notes

I decided to publish a second edition to the book after realizing some very specific references were out of date, or eventually might be, and should be removed. I also took the opportunity to clarify a few points, change the photos to color, add a bit of new information, and even remove a few bits that I decided just sounded too pedantic. I hope the result is a slight improvement over the original.

I also added a section (in Tasting Variations) about remote or teleconference whiskey tastings. This really wasn't even a thing until a few weeks after the first edition was published in March of 2020.

Helpful Tips

Now that you have some idea of what you're getting yourself into, here are some tips to help with this book:

- How you read this book is entirely up to you, although the *Basics of Tasting Whiskey* and *Whiskey Event Basics* chapters probably have information that will make the other chapters more clear. That being said, feel free to skip ahead to whatever you think will be the most interesting. That is entirely your choice.
- I highly recommend having a glass of whiskey to sip while you read. It will make the experience more enjoyable. In fact, if you have a couple of glasses, the writing will actually start to make more sense.

- Whiskey and whisky are the same thing, just spelled differently. In this book, I'll use the country-specific version as appropriate, but when speaking in general, I will spell it as "whiskey."
- Not every idea will work for every type of crowd. Take into consideration the general level of whiskey knowledge, how well everyone knows each other, the purpose (or excuse) for the gathering, and general willingness of most in the group to try new things.

What's the Point?

Individual reasons for exploring whiskey and hosting whiskey-focused events are many and varied, including:

- The great adventure of trying something new.
- A chance to expand your and others' knowledge on the subject of whiskey.
- Simply a way to bring people together.
- An opportunity to just enjoy your favorite beverage, whiskey.
- Identifying new favorites and occasionally learning of bottles to avoid.
- It's time to have a party and you just really need a cool theme.

Some Terminology about Whiskey Knowledge Levels

People have different levels of whiskey knowledge. This book has ideas for all levels, but not every idea is appropriate for every whiskey drinker. To help you gauge how appropriate each idea might be for a particular group, I'll use the following rough definitions for levels of knowledge:

- *Novice* - Very little knowledge about whiskey. They might have no idea of the various types of whiskey, nor be certain what they like. They may not even be sure they like whiskey at all.
- *Intermediate* - Some knowledge of whiskey. Usually knows some of the various types of whiskey and something of how it's made, but may not be familiar with details such as the regions for Scotch whiskey or how mashbills influence different bourbons.
- *Enthusiast* - Solid knowledge of one or more types of whiskey, with some experience in tasting techniques and the factors that influence flavor. In some cases, this knowledge may be focused on one type of whiskey, but there is usually a general awareness of all types.

These definitions are just for convenience in discussing activities and the lines between the levels are pretty blurry. It's just a rough guideline to help match folks with the ideas they might actually enjoy.

BASICS OF TASTING WHISKEY

There are many instructive articles, book chapters, and videos that explain how to taste whiskey. I'll go over the rudimentary ones here in case you've never encountered any of those other sources.

As with most expert advice, there are varying opinions on techniques. I've included several techniques here that have some level of general agreement, but use whatever approach works best for you.

Appearance

Look at the color, which may or may not give you clues about aging and finishing. Some types of whiskey are allowed to add artificial coloring, so it's not always an accurate indicator of anything.

Gently roll the whiskey up the side of the glass to look for "legs," indicating viscosity. If you're uncertain about what that means, think about the difference in the way oil runs down a surface and the way water runs down a surface.

Nose

Again, gently roll the whiskey up the side of the glass. Some may suggest you swirl the whiskey, as if tasting wine, but that will just stir up the alcohol more than anything else. Just a slow, gentle motion will coat the sides of the glass and let some of the flavor components free themselves.

Bring the glass near your nose and try to detect aromas. Start slowly and bring your glass closer, a bit at a time. Just quickly poking your nose into the glass will likely result in an overload of alcohol, shocking your scent detectors and dulling your sense of smell. After a few seconds, pull the glass away and give your nose a rest. Do this a few times to see how many different smells you find.

Palate

Sip a small amount of whiskey, as if drinking hot coffee. Let it roll around in your mouth with a gentle chewing motion. (No swishing.) Notice the flavors as they unfold. Let the whiskey gently roll around your tongue for about 10 seconds.

Holding the whiskey in your mouth will give it time to cover taste buds in all parts of the tongue. Most people also find that letting the whiskey spend enough time to burn a bit in the mouth lessens or prevents the burn they might get in the throat.

Another aspect of the whiskey to notice is the "mouth feel," meaning how the whiskey coats your tongue. Does it feel thin and watery or lush and velvety? This will contribute to the length of the finish.

Finish

After you swallow, pay attention to how long the flavors linger and if they change from what you originally noticed. This is also a good time to breath in and out and see if that unlocks any additional aromas.

Repeat

Doing all of the above a second time will yield greater insight, and you'll probably find things you missed the first time around.

Optional: The Essence

Place your palm over the top of the glass and briefly invert the glass, wetting your palm with the whiskey. Remove your hand from the glass and vigorously rub your hands together, then cup them and smell. You may unlock new aromas once the alcohol has rapidly evaporated from your hands.

Optional: Let It Breathe

If time and the tasting format permits, you might find it helpful to let the glass settle for just a few minutes before tasting again. This can open up new aromas and flavors in some whiskeys.

Optional: Add Water

Add just a couple of drops of water, then give some time for the water to be integrated. This may reveal new flavors. Adding a few more drops may lower the "burn," allowing you to taste a bit more. This is highly variable from whiskey to whiskey. Some will just taste a bit weaker, while others may taste significantly different.

About Flavor Notes

I've seen a lot of folks new to whiskey express disappointment that they can't seem to identify and express flavor notes on the nose, palate, and finish. They seem to think this means they are doing something wrong, or that they are just basically lacking the necessary talent.

This is not something to fret about. It comes with practice, time, and sensory recall. The parts of the brain that handle flavor and scent and the parts that handle words and speech don't normally do much together, and they'll need a chance to get used to it.

In the meantime, if you are in a group of people tasting whiskey and find that everyone is calling out various aromas and flavors but for some reason you can't seem to find the right descriptive terms, just be poetic. You don't always need to use straightforward terms like "dried apricots" or "vanilla." Your tasting notes can be descriptive yet highly personal. Try to free associate and see what comes to mind. Here are a few examples I've either heard or called out myself:

- This is like walking through my grandfather's old office.
- It reminds me of the first really hot days of summer, when I was a kid.
- The finish is a lot like that weird taste at the back of your throat when you fall in the lake and accidentally get water up your nose.
- This tastes a lot like a good excuse for some bad behavior.

Tips & Tricks

The previous section contained some basic techniques for tasting whiskey. Even if you skipped that section and already have your own method, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Every time you drink whiskey is an opportunity to practice your tasting skills.
- Tasting whiskey is a gradually learned skill. Initially try to find just one note on the nose, one note on the palate, and one on the finish. More will come with practice.
- One good way to start is by reading the notes on a particular whiskey from reviewers or the distiller's website, and see if you can find the notes they describe. (And it's no big deal if you can't. You'll find they often don't even agree with each other.)
- How you describe an aroma or flavor is based on your personal experience. Don't expect to identify salty sea air if you've never been to the sea.
- Your kitchen cupboard and spice rack are great training tools for identifying aromas. Just open bottles and packages, take a few gentle sniffs, and start to train your nose. (Ignore the strange looks from your roommate, spouse, significant other, or children.)

One last important tip: if you taste a whiskey on Monday and then again on Thursday, it's very likely you'll find some different notes on the two days. Noses and palates are easily influenced by outside forces, such as meals, other beverages, various natural aromas, and even fatigue. Don't let this worry you. It's just a fact of life.

BEGINNING YOUR WHISKEY JOURNEY

Some people drink whiskey their entire lives without really knowing much about it. They stick to one or two brands and drink happily away. There is nothing wrong with that at all.

The fact that you are reading this book means you might not be completely satisfied with that approach. There is plenty to learn and understand about whiskey and the happy journey of discovery can greatly enhance your enjoyment of the delicious golden elixir. Here are some ideas to help you on your way.

Learning Your Tastes

If you are new to drinking whiskey, or even just recently started to be a serious fan, one of your first challenges will be to learn your own tastes. That means trying different whiskeys to figure out which ones you like and which ones you might want to avoid. To really learn about a whiskey, you may want to study it by tasting it more deliberately and frequently. (See the section on *The Basics of Tasting Whiskey*.)

One outcome of tasting whiskey is the identification of flavor notes. While it can seem silly to describe whiskey in terms of component flavors and smells from foods, beverages, and other items, there is a point to it all. The point is really to be able to communicate about whiskey. To be able to share information with others about the differences and similarities of various whiskeys.

The benefits of this are reaped when you read or hear the tasting notes for a whiskey, recognize those notes are pretty similar to another whiskey you like, and make the decision to try the new whiskey. On the flip side of that, you may learn of a whiskey and determine that it's probably not something you'll enjoy. Even if you are adventurous enough to try almost anything, it's good to have an idea of what to expect before trying your first dram of something new or spending significant money to buy a bottle.

Of course, this is not quite as simple as it sounds. First of all, you'll need to develop a bit of skill in identifying flavors and smells, and giving them names. That can take a bit of work and time, but practice involves drinking whiskey, so maybe that's not so bad.

Taking Notes

As you begin tasting whiskeys and try to improve your skill, it's not a bad idea to take notes. The simplest method is just a notebook or online journal in which you record the date, the whiskey, and anything you were able to identify about the appearance, nose, palate, and finish for each whiskey you try.

Taking notes is helpful to jog your memory if you find yourself trying to remember a particular whiskey. It can also help build your own vocabulary of descriptions for smells and tastes, since looking back over your notes will remind you of the terms you've previously used.

One small warning: when you taste the same whiskey a second time, don't be surprised if you have new notes that don't agree with your initial assessment. This is very common, since so many factors impact what you are experiencing when you taste whiskey.

Learning from the Tastes of Others

As mentioned above, one of the biggest advantages of being able to identify tasting notes is that doing so will enable you to learn about new whiskeys from others.

There are many whiskey review websites, distillery websites, whiskey Youtube channels, books and magazines in which various whiskey experts offer tasting notes. You may also know friends, bartenders, or whiskey sommeliers who share tasting notes. These are all useful sources of information.

But, if you compare carefully, you'll find that these sources don't fully agree on the tasting notes for any given whiskey. Taste, as it turns out, is a pretty subjective thing.

The trick to taking full advantage of all the tasting notes and reviews available to you is to identify which tasters and reviewers have subjective palates that most closely match your own subjective palate.

To do this, choose a few whiskeys (maybe 2-3) with which you feel pretty familiar. Look up reviews for those whiskeys from many different sources. Take note of which reviews are in agreement with your own tasting notes on those very same whiskeys. While you are not likely to be in full agreement with any other taster or reviewer, you'll very likely find that your notes have a great deal of agreement with some reviewers and not so much with others.

Remember which reviewers most often best match your own notes. Those will be your most useful resources for finding out about new whiskeys. Continue to compare your tasting notes with those of your chosen reviewers and perhaps make adjustments over time as you become more comfortable with your own skills.

By the way, this same approach can be applied to hearing tasting notes from any of your friends with an interest in whiskey. Over time you'll begin to understand which of your friends tend to identify aromas and flavors that are similar to the ones you notice and can use that knowledge to learn of new whiskeys to try.

Now, for a word of caution. Be wary of some types of whiskey journalism. Articles, videos, and books by acknowledged whiskey experts are great sources of information and will enhance your knowledge. But

even that will have some limitations, since you'll find that your tastes and the tastes of these folks are not always in perfect alignment. Exercise a bit of judgment and you'll be able to learn a lot from these sources.

Beyond that, you will likely encounter many articles, videos, and books that are a waste of your time. These are mostly going to be the work of various types of journalists, with titles such as "Lifestyle Editor" or "Entertainment Writer." You'll often find them lacking in really helpful information, since they are reporting on popularity, fashion, and trends, and not really so much on the whiskey itself. In fact, I've found a significant number of such articles to contain complete falsehoods, such as, "All bourbon must be made in Kentucky."

Be especially wary of "Top 10 Lists" and the like. These can be kind of interesting and fun, but are usually based on one person's preferences or on what seems trendy at the time. (Or, I suspect, sometimes on advertising dollars.)

Trying Lots of Whiskeys

Famous chemist Linus Pauling once said, "The best way to get a good idea is to have a lot of ideas." The same is true for whiskey. The best way to find really good whiskeys is to try a lot of different whiskeys.

Of course, if you have an unlimited whiskey budget, this is very easy. You can just buy a bottle of any whiskey you want to try. If you don't like it, just set on the back of your whiskey shelf until you are able to serve it to guests who have a somewhat different taste preference. No problem.

But most of us do not have an unlimited budget for whiskey, so other approaches are in order. Here are a few helpful ideas:

Meet some like-minded friends. Whiskey is meant to be shared, so this one is a natural. You can get together with these friends to try the whiskeys they have and share the whiskeys you have with them. If your time for real socializing is somewhat limited, you can just get together to swap samples of bottles to try on your own. Sometimes groups of friends will even pool their money to buy a bottle to try, then split it up 4-5 ways.

Purchase sample-size bottles. Some people call them airline bottles. Buying those really small bottles of whiskey is a good way to try something without a big financial commitment. The biggest limitation is that not every whiskey is available in those small bottles. Also, these bottles really only contain enough whiskey for one or two tastes, so you can't try it several times over a few weeks, which is usually a good idea to really learn about a whiskey.

Go to whiskey tastings. There is a fair chance that some bars or distilleries in your area have whiskey tastings. These usually involve trying out 3-6 whiskeys at once, often focused on a central theme or style. The additional advantage to this method is that they are often led by a whiskey sommelier or

knowledgeable enthusiast who can give you tips and advice. You can become good at something with practice, but you become better, faster when you have a coach. If there are no bars in your area doing whiskey tastings, find some other folks who like whiskey and use the information in this book to hold your own.

Drink whiskey in bars. Some people will argue that this isn't very cost effective, but that's sort of a judgment call. Depending on the type of bar, you'll likely find that the cost of a 1.5 ounce drink of whiskey is about one third to one fifth the cost of a whole bottle of that same whiskey. (You're paying for the ambiance, service, convenience, etc., not just the whiskey.) It's up to you to decide if you'd rather spend \$15 to try one pour of a new whiskey or \$45 to buy a full bottle that may end up just sitting on the back of your whiskey shelf.

SOLO WHISKEY ACTIVITIES

Whiskey is meant to be shared. That being said, you are probably not going to be constantly around other people and there are a few solo activities that can help you advance your knowledge and enjoyment of whiskey.

Keep in mind that almost anything in this chapter can be done with a friend or two if you'd like, and sharing is often better.

Comparison Tasting

Want an easy way to accelerate the education of your whiskey palate? Make it a habit to taste 2 to 3 whiskeys at a time.

And just to be clear, this doesn't mean 2 to 3 full size drinks. Pour small tastes, not drinks, of each. For example, if you pour a half ounce of each of three whiskeys, you'll be drinking 1.5 ounces, which is one standard bar-drink serving in the U.S.

The advantage of tasting more than one whiskey at a time is that your brain and palate will be able to do a comparison. Our brains find this much easier than a simple assessment. For example, if we show you a picture of someone and ask you if they are tall, you might have a difficult time deciding for certain. This is especially true if the photo has no visual reference points, such as a doorway.

But if we show you a picture of someone standing next to your best friend, Bob, you'll have an easier time making an assessment. Even if you can't remember exactly the height of your friend, you can express a comparative opinion, such as, "Well, that guy is a little bit taller than Bob."

The same is true with whiskey. It might be difficult to say a whiskey has (for example) a bit of bitterness, but much easier to say whether it is more or less bitter than another whiskey.

There are various ways to use this technique. If you are just beginning to learn about whiskey, you might try a scotch and a bourbon side-by-side to better notice the most pronounced flavor components of each. Start with a couple of whiskeys you know will be vastly different. As you progress, perhaps try comparisons of two somewhat different bourbons. Next, compare two bourbons that are similar expressions from the same distillery.

After you reach a point of familiarity with certain whiskeys, you may establish some personal standard whiskeys you like to use for comparisons - for example, a favorite highland single malt with which you

compare other highland single malts. Another approach is to pour a taste of a whiskey, have an initial sip, then try to think of another whiskey that you believe is very similar. Pour a sip of that second whiskey and make a comparison between the two.

Blind Comparison Tasting

Once you start to gain some skill at tasting whiskey, you can push yourself a bit farther in your journey by doing some blind comparison tastings. This means finding a way to taste a whiskey without already knowing *exactly* what whiskey it is.

The point is simply to test your own ability to identify whiskeys by their characteristics, and to stop preconceived notions cloud your perception. It's not a particularly easy thing to do and it will make you focus even more keenly on your senses.

Here's how to do a blind tasting:

1. Mark the bottom of the glasses you will use by putting a numbered sticker on the bottom of each. (Make sure they are the same color stickers and identical glasses.)
2. Pour a taste of whiskey in each, remembering or writing down which glass number contains each whiskey.
3. Have someone mix the glasses up. (Or see below for a method to do this yourself.)
4. Taste the whiskeys and try to identify which glass contains which whiskey.
5. Once you think you have them sorted, look at the bottom of the glass to see if you were correct for each whiskey.

A good way to start is with the most simple case: compare two whiskeys that are very different from each other, such as a smoky Islay Scotch and a sweet bourbon.

As your skills improve, you can increase the difficulty by increasing the number of whiskeys compared. This probably means 5 to 6, tops. Even three is pretty difficult. You can also choose to compare whiskeys that are more and more similar to each other. Trying to sort out 3 or 4 bourbons can be quite a challenge.

The other way to increase difficulty is to have someone else choose and pour the whiskeys without you knowing which ones they have chosen. This means that not only are the whiskeys mixed up, you don't know what is in any of the glasses. (Although, if you're at home, you probably have some idea of what's in your whiskey cabinet.) This is especially challenging, so starting with very different whiskeys is, once again, a pretty good idea.

But what if you are alone? You may decide you want to do a blind tasting when there is no roommate, friend, or significant other present. How can you mix up the glasses?

The simplest technique is the use of one of those turntable devices sometimes found on round restaurant

tables, and commonly known as a "lazy Susan." You will need only a small one, but it needs to rotate freely, with little friction.

Simply pour your whiskeys for a blind tasting, as outlined above, and arrange them in a tight circle around the center of the turntable.



Using a lazy Susan for a solo blind tasting.

Give the turntable a very, very gentle spin and quickly turn your back. **(CAUTION: A very, very gentle spin, unless you want your whiskey spilled and your glasses flung from the turntable.)** Wait until you hear the turntable has stopped. Switch around some of the glasses and gently spin the turntable again. Repeat this process a few times.

You now can't even rely on the relative order in which the whiskeys were originally placed. On with your solo blind tasting!

Whiskey Blending

Another fun activity (alone or with others) is to try your hand at blending together two or more whiskeys.

In its simplest form, this is a lot like making a cocktail, but one in which all the components are just different whiskeys. This means combining whiskeys, usually with very different flavor profiles, to come up with something greater than the sum of its parts.

One caution on doing this: keep it simple. Start with one good whiskey as a base and add a second whiskey that has a flavor you want to add. Taste the mixture. If you find something is lacking, perhaps add a third whiskey. Or, maybe add a bit more of one of the first two whiskeys to change the balance. If you find yourself combining 8-10 whiskeys, you are probably not going to be especially happy with the results.

If you want to be able to later recreate your whiskey blend experiment, make sure to measure the amounts of each whiskey, and write down each as you go. And, remember to take extremely small sips. Drinking any significant amount of your blend will change the ratios of it to any additions.

One important fact about blends is that they often change over time. This is why distilleries will blend together several barrels and let the mixture set for some time to let them "marry" before the lot is bottled. No matter what blend experiment you try, it will be worthwhile to save the result in a small bottle and try it again in a month. You may be quite surprised what a bit of time together does for the mixture!

KEEPING, STORING, AND COLLECTING WHISKEY

Some folks buy a bottle of whiskey, drink it, then think about the next bottle to buy. That's a fine approach and works well for many people. But once you begin to learn about whiskey, you may find yourself buying a variety of bottles and begin to see the advantage of having a few bottles of whiskey always available. Once this process begins, you may find yourself in possession of 20 bottles or maybe 200. Here is some advice to help manage your collection.

Whiskey Storage

Whiskey is not a particularly fragile beverage, and with a bit of care bottles can be successfully stored for years. Here are some pretty universally accepted guidelines:

- *Store your bottles out of direct sunlight.* Ultraviolet rays will react with the chemical compounds in the whiskey and change the flavor. To be extra safe, store your whiskey in a dark area to protect it from reflected UV rays.
- *Store your whiskey at moderate temperatures.* Generally, keeping the whiskey at a temperature range that is comfortable for humans will work well.
- *Store your bottles upright,* not on their side like wine bottles. The higher alcohol content of whiskey will cause cork stoppers to deteriorate.

If you let your whiskey get just a bit too hot or too cold once or twice, it's probably still fine. Just don't subject it to too many of these temperature swings.

One optional practice is to tip each bottle over to wet its cork every 3-6 months. Some say that doing so will keep the cork from drying out and shrinking. Others suggest that wetting it too often will just lead to the alcohol degrading the cork integrity. Opinions on this vary, so you'll need to decide on this one for yourself.

By the way, save the corks and caps from every *different* bottle you finish. (You can skip duplicates.) Sooner or later you'll open a bottle and only the top half of the cork will come out. Removing the remainder of the cork is easy enough with a corkscrew. If bits of cork fall in the bottle, filter the whiskey through a strainer, return to the original bottle, and replace the cork with one from your supply of spares.

Mishaps can also occur with screw-tops, so save those, too.

Whiskey Age

While whiskey tends to not deteriorate with age, neither does it improve. Unlike wine, which changes over time in a well-kept cellar, whiskey does not age once it's bottled.

A twelve-year-old whiskey will always be a twelve-year-old whiskey. The age of any whiskey is the age at which it was put in the bottle. It's actually the age of the youngest barrel used to produce that bottle.

You may occasionally hear of a whiskey enthusiast seeking out an older bottle. This is not because the older bottle has aged, but is usually because that type of whiskey produced today is made a bit differently than the same bottle produced in past years. This can happen as distilleries undergo changes to ingredient availability, barrels used, management strategies, and a variety of other factors.

Opened Bottles

Once a bottle of whiskey is opened and the first drink is poured, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that the whiskey will change a bit due to the introduction of additional oxygen into the bottle. This is not something you can really prevent and most accounts seem to point toward the whiskey actually improving in flavor. This is so common that the first pour of a bottle is known, in some whiskey circles, as the "neck pour" and is thought to not be a reliable indicator of the true taste of a bottle of whiskey.

The generally accepted wisdom is that opened whiskey bottles can last for months, or even years, with a bit of care.

The exception to this is bottles that are only one fourth or so full. It's widely believed that at this stage there is so much oxygen in the bottle with the whiskey that the interaction of the whiskey with the oxygen will cause the flavor to go awry in a few weeks.

There are several ways to deal with this:

- Drink the rest of the bottle. You don't need to do this in one sitting, just make that bottle your favorite for a while and try to finish it up in the next couple of weeks.
- Pour the whiskey into a smaller bottle. This will leave less room for air (and oxygen) in the bottle and prevent the accelerated interaction.
- Displace the air using spray cans of inert gas (often used for wine preservation) and seal up the bottle with Parafilm. This is also a good idea if you are going to just put the bottle away for a while, even if it's mostly full.

The good news is that you can actually use all three of these methods in combination and figure out an approach that works well for you.

Infinity Bottles

The concept of an Infinity Bottle started as another measure to prevent spoilage of the last part of bottles. An Infinity Bottle is simply a bottle into which you pour the last drink or two of each of your bottles, to avoid those bottles setting mostly empty on the shelf and going bad. It gets its name from the fact that it is being refilled on an ongoing basis and stays at least half full even though you periodically drink from it.

To start an Infinity Bottle, pick a nice looking bottle and label it appropriately. Every time you have a bottle that is near its end, just pour the remaining contents into the Infinity Bottle. Have a drink from the Infinity Bottle whenever you like, as long as you keep it at least half full.

Collection or Tasting Library?

Once you begin buying bottles of whiskey at a slightly faster rate than you are consuming them, you'll find yourself with several bottles on the shelf. Many a whiskey novice has gone to their whiskey shelf and suddenly realized they actually had something of a collection started.

To be clear, there is absolutely nothing wrong with finishing one bottle of whiskey before buying the next. But, once you begin enjoying the various different flavor profiles whiskey can offer, it's likely you'll find you want more than one bottle on your shelf. That is also okay.

Many people find they have accidentally started a whiskey collection. It might not have been their intent, but sometimes these things just happen. If you find yourself in such a situation, here are some key questions to consider:

- Are you starting a collection or a tasting library? A tasting library is a bunch of bottles to try out, enjoy, and share with friends. A collection implies treating some bottles as a museum would, which means keeping them unopened. While you might hold some bottles for your collection, you'll probably still want other bottles to just enjoy freely.
- What is your intent? If you hope to speculate in bottles that eventually might become rare, remember there is no market for opened or damaged bottles, and that all your collectible bottles will need to be stored with care to maintain their integrity. Or, you may decide to start a collection simply for the sake of having a collection, much as one might collect seashells.
- What is your focus or guiding principle? Some whiskey enthusiasts want to accumulate a wide variety of types of whiskey. Others seek out only the strange and unique. Still others may focus on a single style of whiskey, such as bourbon or rye. If you are a novice, having one bottle to represent each major style of whiskey you enjoy is probably a good place to start.

Once you find yourself with a collection or tasting library, another question will arise: How many bottles should you have open at once? There is no easy answer to this. Some folks open each new bottle as soon as they get it home. Others limit themselves to only a very few open at once, to lessen their worries about deterioration. Most whiskey enthusiasts end up with an approach that is somewhere in between.

Bottle Tracking

If you find you have accumulated several bottles, at some point you will find yourself at the store staring at a row of bottles trying desperately to remember if the bottle you see "on sale" is one you have, one you almost bought a few weeks back, or one you bought and finished.

For this reason, it's a really good idea to have some way to track the whiskeys you have. There are several mobile apps and websites for this, or you can even just start a spreadsheet to keep track of what you already have. Each solution offers different features and limitations, so you may need to try a couple to find what works for you.

WHISKEY EVENT BASICS

We are about to delve into various types of whiskey events, such as tastings and parties. No matter what format you choose, here are a few good ideas that will generally improve the experience.

No One Left Behind

There might be folks at your function that are not drinking whiskey, for a variety of reasons. You should make a special effort to see that they are well accommodated. There are many ways to make their experience a good one.

If your event is a whiskey tasting and someone shows up and says, "I don't drink whiskey and I don't like it," you might well wonder why they are even there.

It's a fair question, but don't make them feel out of place. Offer them something they do like to drink and make them feel welcome. They may be a hapless significant other, dragged along to the event by the whiskey lover in their life. Or, maybe they just like being around people. Point out that even if they don't drink whiskey, they might enjoy learning about it and exploring the aromas on the nose. Whatever the circumstance, never pressure anyone into drinking whiskey.

It may also be the case that you have non-drinkers at a function who are there as designated drivers. Offer them something non-alcoholic to drink and make them feel welcome. They can certainly still learn a bit about whiskey if they'd like.

For designated drivers that actually DO like whiskey, but are skipping it just so they can drive others home, an extra bit of respect is in order. These self-sacrificing folks are probably making it possible for one or more of the other attendees to relax and enjoy themselves. They should enjoy minor hero status.

Treat them well. In fact, you should strongly consider giving them "driver's drams," which are small (50-100ml often) sample bottles of each of the whiskeys tried in the tasting. Several distilleries have been known to practice this kindness, much to the delight of many a designated driver.

Water, Water Everywhere

Your guests will need some small containers of water for adding a few drops (or maybe a splash) to any whiskey they are trying. I recommend using filtered water so that the water doesn't add its own flavor notes to the whiskey. If the water in your area is really bad, maybe even consider bottled water. Along

with the water for mixing, include a pipette, eyedropper, or small spoon so that guests can add just a small bit of water to a glass without overpouring.

In addition to the water for mixing, make sure each of your guests has their own glass or bottle of water for drinking. Encourage the use of water to cleanse the palate between tastes and model good behavior by frequently drinking water yourself. In addition to cleansing the palate, hydrating with water can help prevent hangovers.

If the format of your gathering requires that your guests reuse their glasses for multiple whiskeys, in between pours you can suggest they rinse their glass by filling it with water, swirling it around, then drinking the water. It cleans out the glass a bit, and also gets a bit more water into the guests.

Food

It's helpful to provide some type of food between tastes to cleanse the palate beyond what water alone will do. One staple for this purpose is some type of unsalted or lightly salted crackers, such as oyster crackers or water crackers. Even salted ones will do in a pinch.

If the point of the event or party isn't to just dig into the flavor profiles of the whiskeys, you might want to also offer your guests foods that will complement and enhance the flavors of the whiskeys. Some common suggestions are dark chocolate, unsalted roasted almonds, and various types of cheese. There are many food flavors that will work well. Pairing food with whiskey is a combination of art and science, and sometimes the result is unexpected. It's wise to try the foods and whiskeys you select together, in advance, to make sure they match as well as you imagined.

No matter what food you are serving, try to have plenty available. There may be guests who did not have time for a meal or snack prior to your event, and lots of alcohol on a completely empty stomach is a formula that often does not end well.

Glassware

Among experienced whiskey enthusiasts, the Glencairn glass has largely become the standard glass for tasting. It offers a nicely rounded shape that tapers up to be narrower at the top. This concentrates the aromas from the whiskey, making nosing easier.

Similar to the Glencairn is the Copita glass. It's a bit like a Glencairn with a stem. Beyond that are many other types of glasses that make claims to being the best for tasting or the best for a particular type of whiskey.

There are also rocks glasses, old fashioned glasses, brandy snifters, small white wine glasses, and a variety of other glassware that might work to taste whiskey. If possible, pick something that is narrower at the top, and not too large or small. Shot glasses would probably be a last resort, since they do nothing to

concentrate the aromas of the whiskey for your nose to detect, and they may encourage guests to just throw back the whiskey without actually tasting it.



A glencairn glass is considered the standard tasting glass by many.

When serving large numbers of people you might find it necessary to use plastic "glassware." Plastic can be the best option for certain situations, but make sure to test the vessels you've chosen in advance. Do this by pouring a whiskey you know fairly well into the plastic "glassware" and into a similarly-shaped glass. Let both set for a few minutes, then try each as you would for a tasting. Make sure the plastic is not giving off a chemical aroma and the whiskey taste is not impacted.

The number of glasses needed depends on the number of guests and how the whiskey will be served. If whiskeys are poured one at a time, you'll need one glass per guest. They'll need to rinse their glasses between tastes but that can be a good excuse to have them drink some water.

If several whiskeys are poured in advance for each guest, you'll need one glass per whiskey per guest. That quickly gets into a lot of glassware. (8 guests x 5 whiskeys = 40 glasses) If this is your situation, you might consider renting glasses from a local banquet or party rental shop.

Notes

Whether your guests are novices or enthusiasts, they will probably want to take some notes on the whiskeys they try, even if their only note is a list of the whiskeys they want to buy for themselves later. The simple solution is to provide each guest with a sheet formatted for notes, with a place for each whiskey to note the following:

- Name of the whiskey
- Appearance (color, legs)
- Nose
- Palate
- Finish
- Maybe further comments or overall rating.

The exact format of any notes sheet will depend on a few factors, such as the type of event expertise level of the guests. A blind tasting to rank whiskeys will need a spot for the ranking. Notes sheets for more expert guests will likely require additional space for each whiskey, since they may identify 5-6 aromas and 7-8 flavors for each whiskey. Novice guests might be happy if there is a large area for free-form notes for each whiskey that they can fill with whatever occurs to them.

If you want to be really nice to your guests, small tasting notebooks are a nice touch as a sort of party favor. Or, if you are feeling generous, more substantial notebooks formatted for many dozen whiskeys can be purchased for a few dollars each.

Tasting Notes Sheet

Whiskey 1	
Appearance _____	Nose _____
Palate _____	Finish _____
Overall _____	
Whiskey 2	
Appearance _____	Nose _____
Palate _____	Finish _____
Overall _____	
Whiskey 3	
Appearance _____	Nose _____
Palate _____	Finish _____
Overall _____	
Whiskey 4	
Appearance _____	Nose _____
Palate _____	Finish _____
Overall _____	
Whiskey 5	
Appearance _____	Nose _____
Palate _____	Finish _____
Overall _____	

An example formatted sheet for taking notes.

Off the Charts

Another helpful tool for guests is something to assist with aroma and flavor identification. This can take the form of a flavor wheel or a list of flavors and aromas, and can be broken down into sections, such as spices, foods, woods, plants, etc.

Plenty of these charts are available online. They are especially helpful for novices, since it takes a bit of practice to connect the sensations in the nose and palate to previous life experiences. Having a list of likely aromas and spotting "jasmine" is much easier than nosing the glass and tumbling through your mind to find the word "jasmine" to express what you are experiencing.

The Dump Bucket

Make sure guests have access to a dump glass or dump bucket in which they can pour excess whiskey. Sometimes a guest may try something they just don't like. Other times they may love all the whiskeys but are trying to keep their intake moderated. Either way, give guests an easy way to get rid of whiskey they don't want. The houseplants you save may be your own.

The More You Know

Your event or party may include some information about the whiskeys the guests are tasting and about whiskey in general. The obvious advice is to keep the information appropriate for the experience level of your guests. Explaining what a mashbill is to a group of enthusiasts is probably a waste of time, but to a group of novices it's great information.

There are two factors that can complicate this. The first is that many events are going to include a mix of people of various levels of experience. The second is that some people can be hesitant to admit they don't already know something.

With these two factors in mind, it's generally a good idea to include some pretty basic information. You need not limit the information to only a novice level, but do make sure to include definitions of terms. For example, before detailing what the mashbill of the first whiskey is, explain what "mashbill" means. That way every person there is informed. Those already familiar with the term can feel a little bit cooler that they are already in the know.

Safety First!

Be careful! You're dealing with people who are consuming alcoholic beverages, so there are plenty of ways for things to run off the rails. Here are a few tips to help:

- For tasting a whiskey, a small pour is sufficient. Usually ¼ to ½ ounce is plenty. This means that if someone tastes six whiskeys over two hours time, they will generally not be overly intoxicated.
- Keep an eye open for those approaching inebriation and slow their rate of consumption.
- In the invitation to your event, encourage the use of public transportation and designated drivers.
- Be prepared have inebriated guests stay until sober (maybe the next day) or arrange transportation for them.

WHAT IS A WHISKEY TASTING?

Sure, every time you drink whiskey, you are going to taste it. But a "whiskey tasting" is a specific type of gathering for the purpose of trying whiskeys and learning something about them. (Even if the only thing you learn is the names of a couple of new ones you like.)

Usually, a whiskey tasting:

- Features a curated set of whiskeys, often with a theme.
- Includes information about the whiskeys, such as history, background, and flavor profile.
- Has fairly small individual pours, since several whiskeys will be tried.
- Is usually led by a whiskey sommelier or knowledgeable enthusiast who can give background information, share insights and tips, and answer questions.

Formats

Most whiskey tastings are a variation of one of four formats:

- *Pre-poured.* Guests arrive to find a place set for each of them, with between three and eight whiskeys poured. A whiskey sommelier leads them through the whiskeys sequentially.
- *Guided pours.* Guests are poured one whiskey at a time by the whiskey sommelier, as they are guided through tasting each one.
- *Staffed station(s).* One or more tables around the room have a whiskey sommelier to pour whiskeys for the guests, usually in the order of their choosing.
- *Self-pour station(s).* One or more tables around the room have whiskeys and usually some printed background information on each. Guests serve themselves. This is almost not really a tasting, but I've included it here because it might be the only workable option for some events.

Each of these formats is explored in greater detail later in the book.

Themes

Usually the selection of whiskeys for a tasting is around a central theme. The following are a few examples.

An overview of the various types of whiskey is often a great choice if the guests are mostly novice or intermediate level in their whiskey expertise. Choose whiskeys that are very typical of their respective

types and avoid exotic or rare bottlings.

A survey of one type of whiskey by its regions might be of interest to enthusiasts, but can also be of interest to novices. Examples of this theme would be the whiskey regions of Scotland, or bourbons from various locations in the United States. Again, try to choose a typical whiskey for each region.

A tasting of whiskeys of a single type allows participants to explore and understand the taste impact of differences in mashbills, barrel type, aging duration, proof, and other factors. The tasting will be most enjoyable if you choose whiskeys that vary in flavor profile and have distinctive differences. This is more for intermediate and enthusiast level guests, but even novices can at least make some comparisons to learn more about which whiskeys they like best.



Setup for Pre-poured tasting of Japanese whiskeys. Note the small pour sizes, since eight whiskeys are being presented.

A comparison of whiskeys from the same distillery can be a lot of fun. Folks can understand what is typical of that distillery while also figuring out which bottling or expression is their favorite.

Another interesting tasting idea is to offer a set of *whiskeys that are considered rare, expensive, or premium*. For this, there may or may not be an underlying theme tying the various bottles together, but folks are often fairly eager to try some whiskeys they might not otherwise find.

Blind Tastings

One variation on the classic whiskey tasting is a blind tasting. This involves serving the whiskeys in marked or numbered glasses, to keep track of which is which, but withholding information about the whiskey inside them until guests have thoroughly tasted each one.

Blind tastings can be structured in a couple of ways.

The first is to have each guest rank all the whiskeys tasted in order of their preference. After each of the participants have created their list of the glasses in preference order the sommelier or host reveals which whiskey is in which glass.

This lends itself especially well to tastings of one style of whiskey, because it allows guests to really compare some similar whiskeys based on taste alone, without the influence of preconceived notions about price and quality. Guests are often surprised to discover they actually prefer a readily available whiskey to something more expensive or rare.

The second approach is to have guests either guess the styles of the tasted whiskeys, if they are of various styles, or to have them guess the specific whiskeys of a single type. In either case, it's extra fun to reveal the whiskeys in two stages: first, reveal all of the whiskeys in the tasting, but not which is in which glass. Give everyone a chance to then refine their judgments before revealing which whiskey is which. This "guess the whiskey" approach may not be too appealing to novice whiskey drinkers, since they'll probably lack the skills to have much accuracy.

Of course, you can have guests both guess the whiskeys and rank them, but be careful not to make things too complicated. After all, the point is for your guests to just relax and have fun.

Role of a Whiskey Sommelier

If you want to host a whiskey tasting, my best advice is to hire a whiskey sommelier for the event. They can help you plan the event, identify the key decisions and details, and make sure the event runs smoothly so that you have time to spend enjoying your guests. During the tasting, they'll be able to share a wealth of knowledge about whiskey and entertain your guests with stories explaining the history and process of making whiskey.

When I use the term "whiskey sommelier," I'm referring to someone who has a deep knowledge of whiskey and who uses that skill to guide and advise others about whiskey. They explain the concepts and

tell the stories to help people find whiskeys they enjoy and expand their understanding. This includes graduates of schools which train folks in whiskey knowledge, or anyone who has devoted considerable time and effort to learn about whiskey and how to relate that knowledge to others.

For a whiskey sommelier, the ability to assist and guide others is just as important as their deep knowledge of whiskey.

Hiring a Whiskey Sommelier for Your Event

Why hire a whiskey sommelier, when you are perfectly capable of pouring whiskey and discussing it? Well, the easiest way to explain is an analogy.

When I was a bit younger, one of my favorite hobbies was snorkeling. I became fairly experienced and got to see a lot of underwater life. I knew how to clear water from my mask and how to equalize the pressure in my ears when I dove down a few feet below the surface. I learned the names of many fish species and even taught a couple of other folks how to snorkel. It was a lot of fun.

Then I went snorkeling with my brother, a certified dive instructor.

He showed me the best place and technique for getting in the water without fighting against the waves. He could identify the species of fish I didn't know. He knew the spots among the rocks where we'd be most likely to find sea turtles (we saw several) and gave me some tips on equipment. At one point, he pulled off his dive glove and dangled it a few inches from some rock and coral, and it was attacked by an eel darting out of its hole; an eel I wouldn't have even noticed on my own.

In just a little over two hours, my knowledge and enjoyment of snorkeling were roughly doubled.

Can you plan and host your own whiskey tasting? Absolutely. Use the ideas and tips in the following sections and I'm certain you and your guests will have a really good time. I'm also certain that a trained whiskey sommelier can turn your event into a great time and earn you the acclaim of all those in attendance. (And, frees you up to enjoy the tasting without worry.)

TASTING FORMAT: PRE-POURED

A selection of whiskeys is poured for each guest. As they arrive, each takes their place at a set of glasses arranged before them. Then, the whiskey sommelier leads them through each whiskey sequentially.

Knowledge Levels: This format can work for all levels of knowledge, depending on the exact theme chosen.

Number of Guests: Two to fairly large numbers. The limiting factors are the number of glasses needed (1 per person, per whiskey) and how many helpers the host has available. Since the whiskeys are poured in advance, plan for plenty of setup time before the event based on the number of whiskeys and participants.

Details

This type of tasting requires a bit of advance work, but probably offers the best structure for actually learning about the whiskeys.

Before guests arrive, each of the whiskeys is poured for each of the guests so that the whiskeys are arranged before them as they take their places. Once everyone has arrived, the host begins with the first whiskey, directs the guests in its tasting, then works through each of the whiskeys sequentially while sharing stories and discussing tasting details.

As the tasting continues, guests may learn about the history of whiskey, the distillation process, and other specifics of the whiskeys they are tasting.

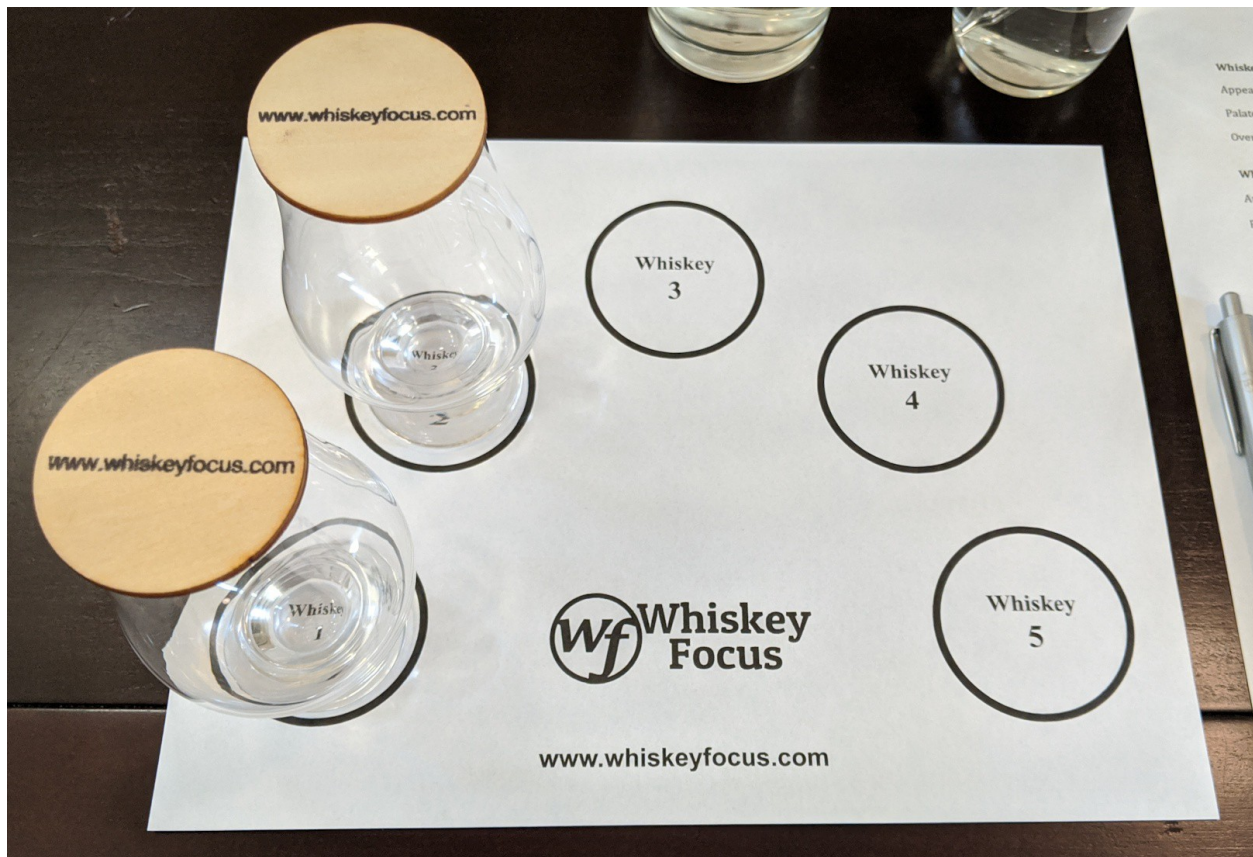
Each guest will have several glasses of whiskey before them. Of course, that means they need some way to keep track of which glass is which. This can be accomplished by:

- Labeling each glass with a wine glass marking pen.
- Putting a colored or numbered sticker on each glass.
- Attaching colored rubber bands (on some types of glasses).
- Placing the glasses on a flight board or placemat with a label for each position.

One advantage to this tasting format is that the guests have all the whiskeys before them at once. This means that the host can suggest that guests compare the whiskeys with one another along the way, which is a great way to accent the differences in flavor profiles. After all the whiskeys have been sampled by the

group, the host may even suggest blending two or more of the whiskeys together to discover the interplay of mixing. While this blending exercise may seem fairly pedestrian, it's something most people don't even think about, so it opens up new possibilities for them

Because the host is in control of the size of the pours and the pacing of the tastings, this format can help prevent guests from overindulging.



Example placemat layout for a pre-poured tasting.

Tips & Tricks

Because the whiskeys are poured in advance, each glass should have a cover to keep the alcohol from evaporating before the guests begin tasting. This can be a lid, a small disk, a note card, a business card, or some other cover. Even just a piece of paper can cover several glasses. It does not need to create a tight seal, but will just rest on top of the glass.

Since people may arrive at various times and the tasting starts for everyone at once, it is sometimes a good idea to serve a pre-tasting drink or cocktail while everyone waits., so that participants aren't faced with the prospect of just staring at whiskey set before them.

This is a really good format for blind tastings, since the whiskey is poured in advance and the bottles can be hidden away before the event begins. The host can then reveal them at the end.

It is usually a good idea to arrange the whiskeys from the lightest flavors to the heaviest or strongest. This means really sharp ryes and heavily peated whiskeys should probably go last. Don't forget to take Proof (or Alcohol By Volume) into account. Any whiskey with an ABV above 50% may need to be nearer the end than the beginning.

This format works best when each guest has their own seat, with some sort of table in front of them. It's nearly impossible to do in a cocktail party situation with all the guests wandering about.

TASTING FORMAT: GUIDED POURS

The whiskey sommelier prepares a selection of whiskeys to explore and pours each one in turn for guests so they may taste them. Each whiskey is discussed and tasted in turn, before moving on to the next pour.

Knowledge Levels: This format can work well for guests of all levels of knowledge, depending on the exact theme chosen.

Number of Guests: Not recommended for very large parties, since the time to pour each whiskey for each person can really slow the pace. You can speed it up with assistants and multiple bottles of each whiskey, but it's still going to require a lot of effort to keep things on track.

Details

This approach is similar to the Pre-poured Tasting, except that the whiskeys to be sampled are poured only one at a time.

There are a few options for glassware:

- Have each guest re-use a single glass for each whiskey, rinsing the glass in between pours, which greatly reduces the number of glasses needed.
- As each whiskey is served, have it poured in a fresh glass for each participant. This avoids the setup time needed for a pre-poured tasting, but does mean you'll need one glass per whiskey, per person.
- Use a hybrid of the two approaches: As each guest is served a pour in a fresh glass, their glass from the previous pour is removed and quickly washed and dried for the next round. This will require having an assistant or kitchen staff, since the glasses need to be cleaned quickly.

One practical advantage to this format, over the Pre-poured Tasting, is that it can be done with many fewer glasses, if needed. Also, because the host is in control of the size of the pours and the pace of the tastings, this format can still help prevent any guests from overindulging.

There are a couple of challenges for this format. The first is that the whiskey sommelier will likely find themselves trying to pour the next round of whiskeys while also answering questions and keeping the discussion moving. This is one more reason hiring a professional and/or an assistant is usually a good idea.

The other challenge of this format is that it robs the participants of the opportunity to compare the whiskeys in the tasting by revisiting earlier pours, unless the sommelier chooses to bring back those whiskeys in a sort of encore pour. Comparison of multiple whiskeys is helpful for novices, so you may want to consider carefully before choosing this format.

Tips & Tricks

This format can be tricky for blind tastings. It can be challenging to pour each glass without revealing the identity of the bottle. Even if you put the bottle in a paper bag, a few sharp enthusiasts may still be able to identify the bottle from just the upper neck. Also, a blind tasting is very difficult without the ability to compare the various whiskeys to each other, so only having one at a time is a large handicap.

Room setup can be very important, since the whiskey sommelier must be able to reach each guest's glass to pour each whiskey. Before you begin, make sure the room setup allows enough space and access for the whiskey sommelier to move around to pour for each guest. Consider seating guests along a bar or at tables in a U-shaped configuration.

This format is often used for whiskey tastings that are done in conjunction with a dinner, with each whiskey being paired with a different course. Including food in the event gives the sommelier (possibly with assistant servers) a bit more time to pour the whiskey for each course.

It is usually a good idea to arrange the whiskeys from the lightest flavors to the heaviest or strongest. This means really sharp ryes and heavily peated whiskeys should probably go last. Don't forget to take Proof or Alcohol By Volume into account. Any whiskey with an ABV above 50% may need to be poured nearer the end than the beginning.

This format works best when each guest has a spot at a table, or at least some place they will stay for a bit. It can be challenging to do this format in a cocktail party with all the guests wandering about.

TASTING FORMAT: STAFFED STATIONS

One or more tables or bars around the room are staffed by whiskey sommeliers, with each table featuring different whiskeys. Guests travel from table to table trying different whiskeys while the sommeliers serve the whiskeys and share information about them.

Knowledge Levels: This format can work well for guests of all levels of knowledge, depending on the theme and whiskeys chosen. Novices may actually prefer this format, since they can ask questions of the whiskey sommelier without drawing attention to themselves.

Number of Guests: This format works well for larger gatherings. In fact, this is what you'll usually find at whiskey conferences and other events with very large crowds.

To use this format for a somewhat smaller gathering or as a special feature of a larger event, you can opt to have a single whiskey sommelier at a single station pouring all whiskeys in the tasting. If you find that the number of whiskeys and/or size of the crowd is not workable for a single whiskey sommelier, you can have knowledgeable enthusiasts staff additional tables, prepped with some fact sheets about the whiskeys, furnished by the whiskey sommelier.

Details

There are a few advantages to this type of format:

- Larger crowds can be accommodated.
- Guests have a lot of freedom to create their own experience by choosing what they would like to try, and in what order.
- The stations (and therefore the guests) can be distributed evenly about the room.
- Since guests are moving at their own pace, everyone doesn't need to arrive by a specific start time. Guests arriving later can start whenever they show up.

Whiskey sommeliers for this format will give background information to each guest while pouring them whiskey, and this one-to-one format generally encourages questions. They would do well to have significant knowledge of the whiskeys they are pouring, since they are answering free-form questions more than working from a scripted set of talking points.

While each of the table hosts is controlling the size of pours, they have no idea how many pours each guest has had. This means extra care should be taken in monitoring guests for inebriation.

Tips & Tricks

This format can work for blind tastings but it isn't ideal. It can be challenging to pour without revealing the bottle. Even if you put the bottle in a paper bag, a few enthusiasts may still be able to identify the bottle from just the upper neck. Also, in a blind tasting it is often very helpful to be able to compare the various whiskeys, so only having one at a time is a big handicap.

Since guests will be moving about and will only have one whiskey at a time, a small notepad for taking notes of each whiskey can be very helpful.

You might also consider giving guests (especially novices) a list of whiskeys in suggested tasting order so they can progress from the lightest to the heaviest flavor profiles. You can even format it as a "whiskey passport" and have guests gather stamps from each station. Using this reference can prevent anyone from overloading their palate with heavy flavors too early and can be an easy way for those pouring to have some idea how many samples a participant has tried.

TASTING FORMAT: SELF-POUR STATIONS

One or more tables around the room have whiskeys and printed information about each. Guests travel from table to table trying different whiskeys and reading the available information on each whiskey. This type of tasting is very close to simply having a party with whiskey present, so it's not really the best format for guests to actually learn anything.

Knowledge Levels: This format can work well for guests of all levels of knowledge, depending on the theme and whiskeys chosen.

Number of Guests: This format can work for small or large gatherings, but assess the crowd before you try it. The wrong crowd combined with free pours can quickly let things get a bit out of hand.

Details

The key is to have the whiskey sommelier prepare an information card or sheet for each whiskey being served. Guests who really want to try things and learn will find this a bit less enlightening than a guided tasting, but should still be able to explore a bit.

If possible, a whiskey sommelier should be available at large to guests, answering any questions as they might arise. They could also demonstrate tasting techniques at the beginning of the gathering, especially if some guests are whiskey novices.

Some folks who attend this type of event will simply look around the room to spot their favorite or the most expensive whiskey and do nothing but help themselves to generous pours from that bottle. You might consider having multiple bottles of the most popular whiskeys, but keep only one of each visible at a time. Or simply close stations as the whiskey at that table runs out.

Hosts have little control over the consumption rate of guests, so exercise caution with your guest list and check that all guests are not inebriated before they leave.

Tips & Tricks

This format is challenging for blind tastings. Really the only way to make it work is to transfer each whiskey into a generic bottle of some sort before the event begins. Even employing this method, participants are likely to have difficulty keeping track of which whiskey is which.

Since guests will be moving about and will only have one whiskey at a time, a small pocket-size notepad for taking notes of each whiskey can be most helpful. You might also consider giving (especially novice) guests a list of whiskeys in suggested tasting order. Using this reference can prevent anyone from overloading their palate with heavy flavors too early.

TASTING VARIATIONS

No matter what format you choose, there are some interesting twists that can make things more interesting.

Novice Tastings

At some point you may have the opportunity to have a whiskey tasting for a completely novice group of folks. This may include many who are not even sure they actually like whiskey, but want to give it a try anyway. In order to give them a positive experience, consider a Novice Tasting.

Novice Tastings follow one of the general formats for a tasting, but with one difference: guests will be tasting fewer whiskeys, and they'll be served in several different ways.

For example, a tasting might feature three bourbons. Each person would taste each bourbon:

- Neat
- With a bit of water
- In an Old Fashioned or a Whiskey Sour.

This allows the guests to understand the differences in the flavor profiles, and trace those differences through the different presentations of each whiskey.

What this variation offers the novice is the chance to compare whiskeys to discover not only which whiskeys they might like, but how they might best enjoy drinking whiskey. And, if they find they really, really dislike drinking whiskey neat, they can limit their tastes to the mixed drinks and still have the opportunity to compare whiskeys.

Double-Blind Tastings

While a blind tasting keeps the identity of whiskeys from everyone but the host(or whiskey sommelier), sometimes it would be nice for the host to also be able to try to guess which whiskey is which.

This is only really practical at a Pre-poured Tasting, and works like this:

- The host sets up the glasses on the table or counter in groups, one group per whiskey with each group having one glass per guest. A label is placed by each group. (A, B, C, etc.)

- With no one else in the room, the host pours a whiskey in all glasses of group A, another in all glasses of group B, and continues until all whiskeys are poured. The host makes a note of which whiskey went in which group of glasses.
- A second host, or assistant, now enters the room and the host leaves. The assistant places the glasses on the tasting mats for each guest (and the host) but does so in an order of their own choosing. For example, they might place group A on spot 3, group B on spot 5, group C on spot 1, etc. They make a note of which group went to which spot.
- All guests, and the host, now enter to begin the tasting. The host is on the same journey of discovery as all the other guests.

So now, the host knows which whiskey went to which group, and the assistant knows which group went to which spot, but no one has both pieces of information to know which whiskey is at which spot in the tasting.

When using this method, the host will actually know which whiskeys are included in the tasting, so it's only fair to share that information with all involved.

Remote or Teleconference Tastings

You may find a want or need to conduct a whiskey tasting with participants not able to gather in a single location. This may be due to:

- Having a close group of whiskey-loving friends that happen to be scattered around the world.
- You are holding a whiskey tasting as a reward for a work team, who happen to be scattered around the world.
- People are staying largely at home and refraining from attending parties and large groups in person.

A word of caution: avoid trying to do a tasting with most participants together in the same room and a few that are individually remote. This inevitably ends with the remote participants being largely ignored by the larger group.

Doing a whiskey tasting via teleconference is possible, but it's important to note some differences:

- Each person will be pouring their own whiskeys, and may not regulate the size of those pours very well. Encourage folks to pace themselves with the group.
- Participants might be using their own glassware, and differences in glassware can mean wide variation in how each person perceives each whiskey.
- Some participants may have only one good whiskey-tasting glass and have to reuse it for each pour. This makes comparisons difficult.

Of course, the biggest single challenge of a remote whiskey tasting is just getting the set of whiskeys to

all participants. Here are some possible approaches:

- Each participant obtains their own bottles of the whiskeys to be tasted. The best approach for this method is to choose whiskeys you know to be widely available in small sample bottles, like those found on airlines. This will, however, severely limit the range of possible whiskey options.
- The host or whiskey sommelier prepares a sample bottle of each whiskey, for each participant, then ships a set of sample bottles to each participant. This is a bit labor intensive, but turns out to be the simplest method and has the greatest chance of success.
- Each participant chooses a whiskey, creates sample bottles of their chosen whiskey, and ships one bottle to each participant. This distributes the cost and effort among the group, but is logistically more complex, since every participant must follow through responsibly.

When shipping sample bottles of whiskey, there are a few things to note:

- You can purchase small sample bottles (50-100ml) easily online. Just make sure you choose a type that seals very well.
- Shipping alcoholic beverages is a bit tricky. Check the rules of the post office or your chosen carrier. They may require additional labels or fees, or not be willing to ship them at all.
- Any whiskey that is above 70% ABV (alcohol by volume) is actually considered a hazardous material, and exceeds the FAA limit for being shipped by air.



Sample bottles being readied for shipment.

Alternatives to a Whiskey Tasting

Guided tastings are fun and interesting, but just not appropriate or feasible for every circumstance. Not every whiskey-related event needs to be a formal guided tasting.

So, what to do instead? Try something different. There are many ways to incorporate the sampling of whiskeys into your parties and events. Whiskey can even take a central role in the party without turning the party into a guided tasting.

As you decide on a format for any party, remember to take your guest list into account as the key factor. The types of parties that might work will mostly depend on the number of guests, their level of whiskey knowledge, and their general comfort level with trying something new. If most of the group is deeply interested in whiskey, choose a type of party that is really focused on the whiskey. If most of the group has only a passing interest, choose something that makes it easy for folks to not really participate heavily.

Also remember it's fine to adapt any of these party ideas as needed to meet the specifics of your group. The ideas are just that: ideas. If you get inspired, make a change. The important point is for everyone involved to have fun.

Whiskey Potluck

One of the most common types of gatherings centered around whiskey is the simplest. It really just consists of folks bringing whiskey to share and enjoy together. If you'd like, have them also bring food for a double treat.

Knowledge Levels: This is fun for everyone, but don't let any whiskey snobs ruin it by making negative comments about the whiskeys others have brought. Saying you don't like something is perfectly fine. Saying it is substandard or terrible isn't gracious or acceptable.

Number of Guests: As many as the room will hold and for which you have glassware.

Details

This is probably the easiest type of whiskey-related party you can have. Each guest brings a bottle they are willing to share with the group. Over the course of the evening, guests try the whiskeys. At the end of the evening, each guest takes home whatever remains of the bottle they brought.

As host, you supply the glassware, water (for the whiskey), eye droppers (for the water), food, water for drinking, nice music, and more water for drinking. (Are you getting the point about the water? It really will be helpful to your guests in the long run if they drink plenty of water.)

If you have a large number of guests, you might consider asking everyone to bring their own favorite tasting glass with them. Doing this can help you avoid the need to rent glassware, and lets each guest taste the whiskey exactly way they normally might at home. Just make sure you do have some glasses standing by for those who forget to bring their own.

As guests arrive, just have them put their whiskey in a designated location, such as a table on one side of the room, and help themselves to a pour of something. Recommend small sample pours, since there will likely be many whiskeys to try over the course of the evening.

As a good host, advise guests that small pours will be best for tasting so many whiskeys, but keep an eye out for those who might overindulge. Limiting oneself to small pours doesn't really help if someone has 25 of them.

Tips & Tricks

It's a good idea for each guest to put their name on the bottle they bring, which can be easily done with painters masking tape (removes easily) and a pen. This makes it simple for each guest to identify the bottle they brought when it's time to leave. It also means that if someone has a question about a particular whiskey, they can read the name on the bottle, find the person who brought it, and approach them for possible further information. (Or, maybe compliment them on their fine taste in whiskey.)

If the group is very large, it's likely some folks will bring the same bottle. To avoid this, you may want to ask guests to mention what they are bringing in advance and make the list of whiskeys available to all guests.

Show and Tell

Remember how much fun Show and Tell was in grade school? It's even better when the topic is whiskey! This party format gives some or all of your guests an opportunity to share information about a bottle of whiskey they've brought to the gathering. If done well, this can basically turn into a crowd-sourced guided tasting.

Knowledge Levels: This type of gathering can be workable for all levels, but it's helpful if the novices involved are willing to do a little research if they'll be telling the group about a whiskey.

Number of Guests: Probably best for small to medium-size groups. The limiting factor is that each whiskey is going to be poured for each guest as it is about to be discussed. If there are many guests, everyone will spend more time waiting for whiskey and less time drinking and learning.

Details

For this type of party, some or all guests (depending on the total number) bring a bottle of whiskey for the entire group to taste. The host arranges an order in which the whiskeys will be tasted and generally keeps things rolling along.

As it is their turn, each person who brought a bottle to share pours a taste for each guest, then shares some information about the whiskey.

When arranging this type of party, it's best to ask for some guests to volunteer to bring a bottle to share, but limit the total number bringing whiskey to a maximum of six or so. (Okay, maybe eight if several of your friends are a bit flaky and might not show up.) This approach will result in the total number of tastes to be reasonable without causing anyone to get drunk.

If properly planned, this can essentially turn into a guided-pour tasting with multiple presenters. This is especially true if you can coordinate with guests so that the whiskeys all support a central theme.

Tips & Tricks

Make sure each guest has water to rinse their glass between whiskeys.

Since some guests will have almost no experience really talking about whiskey, it's a good idea to help them prepare for the event. The simplest way to do that is to send them a list of possible discussion topics at least a week prior to the event and suggest that they prepare a few brief notes.

Other guests may have plenty to say about their whiskey. As host, you'll need to notice if someone is going on a bit too long, and intervene to keep things moving along. Sometimes a lot of knowledge is great, but watch the crowd to notice when their attention seems to be drifting.

Here are some suggested points to cover for each whiskey:

Basics (the bare minimum)

- Name of the whiskey.
- Type of whiskey.
- Distillery or producer.
- Proof or ABV.
- Why you chose this whiskey.

Additional Information

- Any reason this whiskey is special. (Limited release, etc.)
- The mash bill.
- Aging and finishing information. (Time and cask type)
- Background information about the distiller or producer.
- Tasting notes from the distiller or producer.

Really Interesting Information

- Your own tasting notes, especially any that differ from those of the distiller.
- A story about something that happened while you were drinking this whiskey one time.
- A story about the details of how the distillery was started.
- A short history of the particular type of whiskey.

Whiskey-Themed Party

One fun and interesting type of party features whiskey as the centerpiece of the party, but loses a bit of the structure of a tasting and allows even non-whiskey drinkers to fully participate. The idea is to feature one type or style of whiskey, and build the party around that choice.

Knowledge Levels: Someone who's a real whiskey enthusiast may find this type of gathering a bit unfocused, but it can still be fun for everyone.

Number of Guests: This works well for a fairly large party, such as groups of 10 or more. If your event is only three or four people, this could be overkill and seem a bit silly.

Details

This type of party is all about the theme whiskey. Begin by choosing a style of whiskey (or perhaps a country or region for the whiskey). That will, of course, be the style of whiskey that is served at the party.

The whiskey style selection then becomes the guiding idea for all other aspects of the party. Food that is appropriate for the style or region is served. Decor and music can be chosen that support the theme. The hosts (and perhaps the guests) may wish to dress in clothing appropriate to the region or type of whiskey.

Some examples:

Scotch - Serve Scottish salmon, or maybe even haggis with tatties and neeps. Decor can include tartans and the flag of Scotland. Feature some bagpipe tunes mixed in with other traditional Scottish music. Guests are encouraged to wear their kilts. (If you'd like, you can even focus the whisky on a specific whisky region of Scotland, such as Speyside.)

Rye - Some of the earliest whiskey in the U.S. (actually, The Colonies, at that point) was made from rye. To be true to the historic period, feature basic foods such as turkey, potatoes, and cornbread. Some drum and fife music mixed in with fiddle tunes might be in order. Entertain your guests with a history of how drinkers in the U.S. turned from rum to whiskey as the British embargoed sugar cane.

Irish - This theme really needs no explanation to anyone who has ever been to a St. Patrick's Day party. Just please, please don't put green food coloring in the whiskey.

Texas Whiskey - This is a region more than a style, but still offers the opportunity for some Country & Western music, cowboy hats, and barbeque. What could be more fun than that?

A few other examples, which I'll leave more to your own imagination:

- *Japanese* - Sushi, kimonos, and gagaku music, anyone?

- *Canadian* - A bit of hockey decor and dishes featuring maple.
- *Whiskeys of the Pacific Northwest* - Twin Peaks? Twilight? Grunge music?
- *Moonshine and White Dog* - Wear your dress overalls in the best moonshiner tradition.

Tips & Tricks

How deeply you dive into a particular theme depends on you, your time, and your budget. You might simply serve food that is appropriate for the whiskey type and have a couple of table decorations that fit your chosen idea. Or you can go all in, with decor, music, mode of dress and every other aspect of the party.

If you really want to go deeply into the chosen theme, you might consider hiring a whiskey sommelier. In addition to knowledge of the whiskey at the party, they can usually give you historical and cultural information about your chosen theme whiskey type to help in the planning.

You may want to plan certain party themes for certain times of the year. For example, tying rye to the Revolutionary War for a Fourth of July party could be fun. Or a Scotch party for Robbie Burns Day (January 25) would be appropriate.

Make sure your invitations tell guests what to expect, and whether or not they are encouraged to dress in a theme costume of any sort. Being the only guy at the party who's not wearing a kilt can be a bit annoying.

One last tip: Please be a bit mindful to avoid cultural appropriation. No one's likely to mind if you wear a cowboy hat and don't own cattle, or wear a kilt when you're not from Scotland or Ireland. But, some cultures have had a lot of their most meaningful traditions and customs used in some fairly disrespectful ways. So, try to have enough grace to avoid a celebration of another culture that turns into a parody. Trust me, you will still have a lot of ways to celebrate and enjoy a great party!

Pink Elephant Whiskey Gift Exchange

This is just a variation on the age-old party to exchange silly gifts. A "White Elephant" is typically a fairly novel and often useless type gift, but the fun is in the method of exchange. The "Pink Elephant" name is derived from a cartoonish idea from decades ago that someone deliriously drunk would hallucinate pink elephants.

Knowledge Levels: Enjoyable to all levels, since this is nothing to take too seriously.

Number of Guests: Probably more than 6, since it can be a bit boring with too few. Also, crowds of more than 50 will take considerable time to complete the entire exchange.

Details

Here's a summary of a generic White Elephant gift exchange, just in case you've never participated in one:

- Each guest brings one wrapped gift. Usually this is specified to be a gag gift of some sort.
- All of the packages are placed in a central location, such as on a table.
- Guests each draw a numbered slip from a hat. (The slips are numbered 1 through the total number of guests.)
- The guest who has drawn the number 1 takes their turn by choosing one of the gifts and opening it, announcing what it is and holding it up for all to see.
- The guest who has drawn the number 2 takes their turn. They have the option of either choosing a wrapped gift from those remaining, or "stealing" the opened gift from another player. (In this case, it's only the first guest.)
- If the number 2 guest chooses a wrapped gift, they unwrap it and announce it just as guest number 1 did.
- If the number 2 guest "steals" the opened item from guest number 1, then guest number 1 replaces their stolen gift by choosing and opening a wrapped gift.
- Play proceeds on through the numbers held by guests, with each one having the option of opening a wrapped gift or "stealing" any already unwrapped gift from another guest.

To turn this into a whiskey party, simply specify that each guest bring a bottle of a "White Elephant" type whiskey. (Make sure it's clear this must be an unopened bottle.)

In the party invitation, you will probably want to give guests some hints and guidelines about what a "White Elephant" whiskey might be. Some examples:

- Anything strange or novel.
- A re-gifting of something given them by a well-meaning friend or relative.
- Whiskeys generally considered substandard among your guests.

You may also want to put some parameters around the definition of "whiskey" to let folks know whether flavored whiskeys are acceptable. Either way is fine, so long as everyone understands the guidelines in advance.

Of course, all guests are admonished to NOT open any bottles of whiskey until all guests have completed their turn.

There are some interesting variations to this game you may wish to try:

- Rather than have each guest bring a bottle, the host can purchase a sufficient number of "airline size" small bottles to have one per guest. This removes the burden of preparation from the guests.
- Rather than specifying novel or sub-standard whiskeys, suggest each guest bring a bottle of something they really like. For this, specify an upper price limit.
- Use the "steal blocking" rule: if someone gets a bottle they really like, they can prevent it from being "stolen" by opening it and pouring a 1 ounce drink from it for themselves and for each guest that requests it. (In a large crowd, this may actually finish the bottle.)

Tips & Tricks

Some White Elephant rules allow a guest who has just had a gift (bottle) stolen to steal from someone else instead of choosing a wrapped gift. I'd disallow this option because it quickly becomes quite chaotic, with each victim of a steal then stealing from someone else.

As with most White Elephant gift exchanges, someone will inevitably forget to bring their gift bottle. A wise party host will have 2-3 extra gift bottles standing by already wrapped for just this possibility.

Bring Out Your Dead

This is a fun way for a group of whiskey drinkers to finish off their "near the end" bottles.
(Acknowledgement to Monty Python for the borrowed title.)

Knowledge Levels: Enjoyable by all knowledge levels, although those who have something of a whiskey collection are more likely to have bottles that are ready to be finished.

Number of Guests: The more the merrier, although very large numbers will complicate overall logistics a bit in terms of space and glassware.

Details

Any whiskey drinker who has several bottles of whiskey is likely to have one or more that are near their end, say less than one quarter full.

The main point for this type of very informal party is to help each other finish up those bottles to make more whiskey cabinet space available.

The approach is simple. Invite your whiskey-drinking friends and tell them to bring any bottles they are currently working to finish off. The bottles are put in a designated area, and all guests are invited to try any whiskey they like from the assembled collection.

For extra fun, whoever actually pours the last drink to finish a bottle is required to perform a "sacred bottle-down ritual." This is typically saying a few words or singing a song. Details should be agreed upon at the beginning of the evening. Other guests may want to get a photo or video of the spectacle to share later. All's fair in love and whiskey.

Tips & Tricks

It doesn't hurt to have 2-3 bottles of pretty good whiskey on standby, just in case 20 people show up but only 3 had unfinished bottles to bring. It's not likely, but can happen. (If your friends are fairly serious about whiskey, it's more likely that several of them might bring 3-4 bottles to finish off. This is not a bad problem to have.)

At the end of the evening, there may still be a few bottles that are unfinished. There are a few options for handling this:

- Stick them away for the next similar party.
- Let the host give them away to whatever guest expresses the strongest interest.
- Have each person write their name on the bottles that they bring, and let each bottle's owner give them away to another guest or just take them back home.

The Blending Contest

Give guests a chance to demonstrate their skills at creating interesting whiskey blends.

Knowledge Levels: This is probably not for the whiskey novice, since they may not be skilled enough at identifying flavor notes to really blend well. Still, no harm in trying.

Number of Guests: Any number is probably workable, depending on how the contest is structured. For larger groups, most guests can simply be observers and judges, or contestants may work in assigned teams. The limiting factor is the number of sets of equipment needed for the competition.

Details

The basic idea is for some or all of the party guests to try their hand at creating the best blend with selections from the same set of whiskeys. The contest has two parts: the first stage when the blending is taking place, and the second when the results are being judged. Like most contests, this may also be structured in a tournament format as long as you keep things moving along at a good pace.

It's usually a good idea to set a time limit on the blending stage of 15-20 minutes, depending on the number of contestants. This prevents the process from becoming too tedious and also helps keep the contestants from over-thinking their blends and destroying them with too much tinkering.

Blending contestants all work from the same limited number of whiskeys. Making 10 to 12 whiskeys available will result in a wider variety of blends, while limiting the contestants to use of 4 to 6 whiskeys will prove to be a greater comparison of their blending skills.

Make sure to tell all contestants that they need to produce enough of their blend so that each judge (some or all party guests) can be served a ½ ounce pour for judging.

Each contestant will need:

- A blending vessel (a mason jar or a large glass will do).
- Something to measure whiskey, such as a jigger or measuring spoon.
- Their own tasting glass for sampling their blend. (Drinking directly from the blending vessel is NOT allowed.)

There are several variations in how to structure this contest:

All In - For smaller parties (maybe less than 8), it is fairly workable to have each party guest try their hand at blending. Since all contestants are also all acting as judges, it is best to do the judging as a blind tasting. (See the chapter on whiskey tasting variations.)

No Guts, No Glory - For larger parties, let folks volunteer to compete in the blending contest. There will typically be some who are more sure of their skills, but some cajoling may be needed with others. Having 3-6 contestants is probably a good number unless you intend to set up a tournament-style set of heats.

The Blending Duel - Two guests who are very confident in their blending abilities face off in a blending challenge. If you've ever watched the television show *Iron Chef*, you'll have some idea how to arrange this contest. To have some real fun, the host (or the funniest person at the party) can provide running commentary on what the contestants are doing. Also, a special "secret ingredient" whiskey can be revealed at the beginning of the contest. This format may be so much fun that you end up having several contests in one evening.

Tips & Tricks

Not every party guest needs to be a judge. Depending on the exact format it could be a subset of everyone not competing, or even just 3 guests whose palates are considered fairly experienced.

If you really want to kick this type of party up a notch, hire a whiskey sommelier to:

- Advise you on which whiskeys to offer for blending.
- Use their presentation skills to emcee the contest.
- Be on the panel of judges.

The selection of whiskeys available for blending can make a big difference. Using only top shelf whiskeys *can* result in a nice blend, but it might then be hard for the contestants to blend something that is actually better than any one of the component whiskeys alone.

Using only mid-range or fairly common whiskeys gives the blender an opportunity to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is usually the way to go.

Offering only bottom-shelf, cheap whiskeys could make creating a tasty blend a real challenge. But, a really successful blend will give all guests some good ideas to try with their own under-appreciated bottles at home. If you plan to go this route, avoid whiskeys that have any odd flavor notes and try to stick to those with nice flavors, but perhaps not robust.

You might offer all blending contestants a bit of good advice: don't get too complicated with so many whiskeys. A good approach is to start with a solid base, add another to change up the nose and palate, then maybe a third whiskey to fine tune or fill a flavor gap. Going beyond three or four whiskeys in a blend will likely result in a flavor cacophony, basically the flavor equivalent of hearing an orchestra while they are tuning.

If the event or party is a group that meets regularly, you may want to save all the blends and re-judge them after 2-4 weeks. Blends change over time as the flavors marry and you'll likely find that some

improve with a bit of time together. If the group will not be together within a month or so, consider sending everyone home with small sample bottles of each contestant's blend so they can try them again after a couple of weeks. (You'll need to determine this in advance, so each contestant can make enough of their blend in the contest.)

20 Whiskey Questions

This is basically 20 questions with whiskey. You can even play this in a bar, since no advance planning is really needed.

Knowledge Levels: This can be enjoyed by anyone, but it's really more fun when all participants have about the same level of whiskey knowledge.

Number of Guests: Really best for a small group. For a larger party, a few folks can participate and others might watch, or split the party into groups in different rooms.

Details

One person is given a pour of whiskey, but they don't know what it is. They will try it out, then begin trying to guess the whiskey, aided by the fact that they can ask 20 "yes or no" questions about the whiskey during their guessing process.

A group of others know what the whiskey is, and will provide answers to the questions.

It's best to have a committee of 2 to 4 people to answer the questions since a single person may not know all the answers.. And because the questions may be fairly detailed, those answering are allowed to use the internet to look up answers they don't know. Providing answers is something of a small team effort.

Remember that the person guessing will be tasting the whiskey, so their first questions will likely only be to confirm the style or region. Getting down to the details, though, gets pretty difficult. You might want to consider limiting the options to fairly well-known whiskeys, just to be fair. This is especially true if most participants are whiskey novices.

Here are some examples of the types of questions that might be used:

- Was this whiskey distilled in Scotland?
- Is this whiskey a single malt?
- Was this whiskey aged in new casks?
- Does this whiskey state how long it was aged?
- Is this whiskey a blend?
- Is this whiskey produced on an island?

Before beginning, it's best for the group to establish some ground rules about how exact the whiskey guessing must be. For example, is it sufficient to know the whiskey is Glenfarclas, or must Glenfarclas 12 be specified to win? Set the rule based on group consensus, and hopefully based on the actual skill level of guests.

Tips & Tricks

If you are playing this in a location where the selection of whiskeys at hand is in plain view of the guesser, it basically becomes a bit of a multiple-choice guess. To make the guessing more difficult, arrange to do the contest in a different room or area from which there is no view of the selection of whiskeys at hand.

For this game, it's probably better not to have scorekeeping or prizes. Expect a few questions to be answered incorrectly. You can set the record straight, but don't get into figuring out if it changed the outcome of the game. Just enjoy learning whiskey facts and improving your tasting abilities.

Adult Easter Egg Hunt

Why should kids get to have all the fun? Let your guests get in touch with their inner child by having them search for whiskey. Also, there is absolutely no reason to wait for one special day for this. Do it any time of the year.

Knowledge Levels: This doesn't really require any particular knowledge of whiskey, so all levels will likely find it enjoyable.

Number of Guests: This is workable for as few or as many guests as you'd like, subject to your budget.

Details

This is basically an adults-only standard Easter Egg hunt, but with those miniature "airplane size" bottles of whiskey. The same basic rules apply, so no need to go into that very much here. Basically, if you find a whiskey, it's yours. Just make sure everyone knows to play nice.

NOTE: Make sure to map your hiding area and mark the location of each bottle, so you can later make sure all were found. You don't want unclaimed bottles left to be found by youngsters later.

It's a good idea to have about 3 to 5 of the small bottles per guest. Inevitably, a few overachievers will find many more than their share, so having plenty should mean that even the least ambitious guest can go home with a tiny bottle or two.

If you have a decent whiskey collection, you can use sample bottles of your own whiskeys instead of buying those miniature bottles. Just make sure each bottle is clearly labeled with what whiskey is inside and is very well sealed.

If you really want to be fancy, there are jumbo-size plastic eggs that will hold one of the miniature bottles, so you could actually make it a true Easter Egg hunt. Be warned that it's a lot of extra effort to put the bottles in the eggs and also know that bottles are actually a much easier shape to hide.

Tips & Tricks

Find hiding places that are out of the sun. Ultraviolet rays are not good for whiskey, and neither is heat.

If the weather is too hot or too cold, it's best to hold this party indoors. If you do so, limit the area set aside for the hunt so guests aren't invading your bedroom and trying to find hidden bottles in your underwear drawer.

Sample Sharing Party

This is a good way for folks to share their whiskey with friends, but in a way that allows relaxed enjoyment of several whiskeys at a later date.

Knowledge Levels: Enjoyable by all levels.

Number of Guests: Small or large groups can work, although smaller groups are more the norm. It somewhat depends on the details of how many whiskeys are to be shared or swapped.

Details

Guests will be sharing sample bottles (50ml or so, size decided in advance) of special whiskeys from their collection or tasting library. This is a good way for a group of friends to get to try some new whiskeys.

There are a number of options to consider for this type of gathering:

When to prepare the samples? There are a couple of workable approaches for this. The easiest is to just ask each of the guests to bring sample bottles already filled with the whiskeys they want to share. The advantage is that each guest can decide, in advance, how many samples to share. Alternatively, each guest can bring the whiskeys they wish to share and fill the sample bottles (provided by the host) at the party.

Are we swapping or sharing? It's good to set expectations about this in advance. One approach is that each bottle shared is for one in return. This involves trading samples on a one-for-one basis. The other approach is for each person to just share their samples with those that request them, and ask for samples from other guests that have whiskeys they'd like to try. This is a lot more free-form and fun, but may lead to situations in which demand exceeds supply for samples of the more popular whiskeys.

What are the whiskey guidelines? Sample swaps work best if there is some equivalence in the whiskeys being swapped. Some groups of serious whiskey enthusiasts hold sample swaps to exchange expensive or hard-to-find whiskeys among themselves. It's understood that each person is bringing a whiskey that is a bit rare, so that the value of samples is somewhat (only somewhat, mind you) evenly matched.

Other groups swap samples of whiskeys that are somewhat novel, but not exactly rare. This might include a normally released bottle that someone in the group discovers before the others, or maybe something available only directly from the distillery.

Groups of whiskey novices may find it enjoyable to simply swap whatever whiskey they've found that they believe would be new and exciting to the group. If the folks in your group have only ever tried 20 different whiskeys, it's not hard to find something to expand their whiskey experience.

The point is to make sure guests know what the aim and general guidelines are, so they bring something

appropriate and are not disappointed by what others have to offer. It may even be helpful to publish a list of what folks are bringing in advance of the event, so folks can see that their whiskey is in line with the others. If you do that, give folks the opportunity to change their mind about what whiskey they intend to bring.

How many samples? If you are having a sample swap with a fairly small group, one sample for each other guest can be okay. That means if there are 6 guests, each person brings 5 samples of whatever they are sharing, and goes home with 5 different samples, one from each other guest.

For larger groups, one sample per other guest just isn't workable, since that could take the better part of a standard size (700ml or 750ml) bottle. In such cases, it's better to set a certain number of samples to bring. This means not every guest gets a sample of every other whiskey, but those are the breaks.

Tips & Tricks

The actual swapping of samples can take very little time to accomplish, unless the format chosen leads to negotiations of trades. It's a good idea to also supply food and some whiskeys to sip on while folks relax, make their trades, and talk about whiskey.

Make sure no money (or other thing of value) is changing hands. This needs to be a hard and fast rule. If folks are negotiating their swaps, sooner or later someone will want to "sweeten the deal" with money. Once this starts, it will grow until you are essentially running an impromptu whiskey market. Keep money out of the mix. It's also wise to ban two-for-one trades.

INCLUDING WHISKEYS IN OTHER PARTIES

Okay, so it's fair to assume that not every party you host or attend will be a whiskey-themed party. It's an imperfect world, so that's bound to happen sometimes. Still, there are a few ways to add whiskey enjoyment to many parties (even ones you're not hosting) to enhance the experience.

Party Favors

One simple idea to add whiskey fun to any party is to give each guest a small "airline size" bottle of whiskey as they leave as a party favor. You might decide to buy several bottles of your favorite whiskey or simply buy an assortment of different styles and let the guests choose as they leave.

Alternatively, if you have a favorite whiskey in your collection or tasting library, guests might appreciate a small sample bottle of it as a party favor. Just make sure you label each bottle. Remembering what the whiskey is after a really good party could be a challenge.

Bringing Whiskey to a Party

Bringing along whiskey to someone else's party can get pretty complicated, since you'll need to consider the circumstances, proper etiquette, and what you know about the hosts and other guests. Let's consider a few scenarios and key factors.

Let's say you are invited to a party of some sort. You have several options:

Bring a flask of whiskey to enjoy. This is usually a pretty safe approach. If it turns out that the party is really not right for drinking, just keep the flask in your pocket. On the other hand, if everyone else at the party is drinking wine and beer, grab a wine glass and pour yourself a whiskey from your flask. You'll be surprised at how similar some whiskeys appear to wine. By the way, never store whiskey in a metal flask for more than a few hours. Unless the flask is glass, it will probably change the flavor over a few days.

Bring a bottle of whiskey as a gift for your hosts. This is always a nice gesture, especially if you know that the hosts like whiskey. Plus, there is a pretty good chance they'll want to open it right away to share with you and the rest of the folks at the party.

Bring a bottle of whiskey for all at the party to enjoy. This is also a very nice idea. Just beware that some hosts will assume you've brought it as a gift for them, and might take the bottle (as they are taking your coat, etc.) and stick it away somewhere. You may need to make your intentions more clear by opening the

bottle just after you enter and announcing, "Let's get some glasses. I can't wait for you to try this." (By the way, it's considered good form to leave whatever remains of the bottle at the party when you depart. The exception might be when no one seems to have any interest in the whiskey. In that case, why let it go to waste?)

Bring several (3 to 6) whiskeys for everyone to try. This can be fun, especially for smaller parties. Make sure your hosts know this is your plan. Also, be prepared with a bit of information about each whiskey, such as an interesting story, or at least some ideas on how the whiskeys differ from each other.

So, how to decide what is the best course of action?

First of all, if you are close friends with the party hosts, they'll probably know of your love for whiskey and you'll understand the general mood for most of their parties, so you'll likely already know what is acceptable. If you can't figure out what might be best, just ask. They're your friends, after all. For example, when I'm invited to a party by friends, I will often ask if I might bring a few interesting whiskeys to try. This has now become somewhat expected among my circle of friends.

Beyond that it gets a bit trickier. You'll need to evaluate what you know about the drinking habits and preferences of your party hosts. From the party invitation, try to figure out all you can about the party, including the purpose, theme, and any directives or requests. Hosts will often give you quite a bit of information about the party, such as suggested mode of dress, food to be served, what's available to drink, entertainment, and other important details. If the invitation explicitly mentions beer and wine, the hosts may have made a decision to not serve any hard liquor in order to try to limit the guests' levels of inebriation. (This is a bit misguided, since many people have no problem getting really, really drunk on beer and wine. But, I digress.)

Here are few examples when bringing whiskey might be a bad idea:

- Any Alcoholics Anonymous ceremony. (Duh.)
- A party in a restaurant or bar, unless you know they have a Bring Your Own Bottle policy, since bringing your own liquor is usually frowned upon and might be downright illegal, depending on the local laws.
- Any party that includes a risky physical activity, such as a skydiving party.
- Certain religious celebrations, depending on the religion and the celebration.

Beyond that, there are a lot of judgment calls and no easy answers. For example, if your family is going to a birthday party for one of your seven-year-old's best friends, bringing a small flask to share with a couple of the other parents while supervising the bouncy house could make you something of a hero with your co-supervisors. On the other hand, if the parent party hosts are teetotalers, your gesture might not be received so warmly.

Whiskey as a Gift

In addition to bringing whiskey for party hosts, it can also make a nice gift for birthdays, graduations, retirements, and other such occasions.

When giving whiskey as a gift, it's very important to be guided by the preferences of the person receiving the gift, rather than by your own desires and preferences.

First of all, never give a gift of whiskey in hopes of converting someone over to be a whiskey drinker. If your gift receiver really only drinks vodka, give them vodka. A gift should never be an attempt to change someone else's behavior or tastes.

Similarly, a gift should not be an attempt to change someone from one preferred style of whiskey to another. If you know the giftee is a dyed-in-the-wool bourbon drinker, giving them a bottle of Scotch in hopes they learn to like it is not the best course of action.

The best approach for whiskey gift-giving is to simply apply the same approach as when buying other gifts: it should be based on what you know the giftee already likes. For example, if someone likes baseball and occasionally goes to see the local team play, you don't buy them tickets to a football game, do you? No. You get them tickets to see their favorite baseball team play. If you want to make it a special gift, you get seats behind home plate.

The same is true for giving someone a gift of whiskey. Find out what they like and give them what they like. If you want to make the gift special, there are ways to make the bottle an upgrade from what they might usually drink. Most distilleries and product lines have special, more upscale bottlings. These are sometimes only available at the distillery or duty-free shops, or may simply be a limited-release bottling of a particular whiskey. They are often labeled as "Distiller's Choice," "Limited Edition," "Small Batch," or other similar terms. If your gift recipient usually drinks the 12 year old version of a certain whiskey, consider getting them the 18 year old version of that same whiskey.

A small word of caution about the above advice: There are two ways it can go wrong. The first is that some special releases are, by design, something a bit different from the usual taste profile for a particular whiskey brand. Read bottle labels, reviews, and information from the distillery to make sure you are buying a bottle that is within the normal parameters of that particular brand.

The second possible issue is that older does not always mean better, especially when matters of individual tastes are concerned. As a whiskey ages, its flavor changes. That usually means picking up a bit more flavor from the barrel and having some of the other flavors mellow a bit. I'd say the idea of getting a slightly older version of a favorite whiskey is still a solid idea but perhaps reading flavor notes to compare between age versions is a good research step.

One way to make a gift whiskey extra special is to simply sign the bottle. That way each time the

recipient has some of the whiskey, they will be reminded of you and of the occasion of the gift. If the gift is from a group, having everyone sign the bottle is an even more meaningful idea. The giftee may even save the empty bottle after the whiskey is gone. Make sure to use a permanent marker when signing directly on the bottle.

Extra Tips & Tricks

These are a few good ideas that you might find helpful, but which didn't fit easily into any of the other sections of the book. Enjoy.

Check Out the Bar

If you go to a restaurant, make it a point to walk over to the bar and see what whiskeys are available. If the bar is a small one, you can sometimes do this on the way to being shown to your table. Otherwise, wait until you have been seated and excuse yourself to go have a peek at the selection.

Why? Well, even if the place you're in has a printed whiskey menu, it will probably not be a very complete list of available whiskeys. What's often not on such a menu are the seasonal releases and various rare and allocated bottles. The menu will usually only list the bottles that they always have available and sometimes even that is out of date. Do yourself a favor and see for yourself what they actually have on the shelf. (With time and experience, you'll become better at recognizing bottles from just their shape, and this practice becomes much easier.)

By the way, also do this if seated at a booth or table in any sort of bar.

Bartenders are People

It can be a good idea to strike up a conversation with the bartender and maybe ask about a whiskey in which you have interest. See if they have any recommendations. Share the fact that you really like whiskey. Some of the possible benefits include:

- Getting your whiskey served in a more appropriate glass (maybe a wine glass) if they do not actually have glencairns. Just ask.
- Once it's clear you are seriously interested in whiskey, bottles not on display may appear or be mentioned.
- You'll sometimes get helpful information or tasting notes on a whiskey.
- Unless the bar policy is measured pours, you might find a bit extra in your glass.

Of course, there are rules for doing this:

- If the place is crowded or you notice the bartender rushing about, don't bother them. Just place your order and let it be.
- Be polite. I can't stress this enough. Bartenders are servers, not servants. Treat them well.

- Unless you are in a country in which tipping is not the norm, tip very well. Especially if the bartender has taken a bit of time to answer questions or find one of the three glencairn glasses they actually have stuck away somewhere. To many servers, tips are the main part of their income, not just a nice bonus.

Try this out and I'm sure your efforts will be rewarded.

Know Where You Are

First of all, dive bars are almost never a good place to find a wide variety of whiskeys. Over time, you should figure out 2 to 3 standard whiskeys that you like pretty well and just order one of those anytime you are in a place with a very small selection.

Second, for international travelers, recognize that the selection and cost of whiskey will vary considerably by country. In many places you may find yourself limited to only bottom-shelf whiskeys and what you can find will be significantly overpriced.

Ride the Tiger with Care

When you ride on the back of a tiger, care must be taken not to fall off, lest you become a tasty meal for the tiger.

Similarly, you need to make sure you are in control of the whiskey and the whiskey is not consuming you. Negative impact can take the form of alcohol abuse or addiction to the collecting of whiskeys. Both are potentially damaging.

Here are a few warning signs:

- A common recommendation from U.S. medical authorities is to consume no more than 14 servings (1.5 ounce of 80 proof whiskey) per week. If you are exceeding that limit on a fairly regular basis, you may be developing a problem.
- If you are buying whiskey but having difficulty meeting financial obligations, you are almost certainly developing a problem.
- If your drinking contributes to you having unpleasant interactions with law enforcement officers, you may be developing a problem.
- If close friends and relatives begin suggesting that you might be drinking a bit much, listen to them.

If you get any signs of a developing problem, try taking at least a week or two off from drinking and buying whiskey. If you find doing so difficult, seek professional help.

Have a Bit of Grace

As you learn more and more about whiskey, you'll very likely encounter someone spouting incorrect "facts" about whiskey. This might be in person or online. Some examples might be:

- That whiskey continues to age in the bottle, just like wine.
- All Canadian whisky is rye whisky.
- The only difference between types of whiskey is the grains used.
- All bourbon must be made in Kentucky.

Where I'm from, we have a saying: "Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and it annoys the pig."

If you are inclined, and the other person seems a bit receptive, you might try gently correcting their mistake. Be nice. Maybe even pretend you are discovering something also. For example:

"Yeah, I used to believe that too, but I looked online and found out (this bourbon) is made in Indiana. Check it out." (And show them your reference.)

Some people will still have none of it, so be prepared to just let it go.

By the same token, it's good to be confident in your own knowledge, but not overly so. If someone has additional or differing information, really listen and hear them out. You never know when you may find yourself explaining the distillation process, completely unaware that the person standing next to you has worked in a distillery and has done what you're describing many times.

The bottom line is to have some manners and grace. Don't be the person everyone avoids because they insist on constantly showing off their whiskey knowledge. Be the person everyone seeks out when they have a question about whiskey or when they just want to learn more.

CHEERS! SLÁINTE! KANPAI!

I hope this book increases the sheer enjoyment of whiskey for you and your friends. Hopefully you've gotten some new ideas for whiskey events and some insights into the details that will make those events a great time for all.

If you find some of the event ideas a bit daunting, or you'd like to hold a formal whiskey tasting, remember there are whiskey sommeliers who'd love to help. They'll bring the knowledge and experience to make your event an even greater success.

And finally, may we have the good fortune to meet each other at a whiskey event or other random place some day, so we can have a good discussion of whiskey and I can buy you a drink. May your glass be ever full and last call always in the distant future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elton Billings is a retired whiskey sommelier, user experience researcher, computer scientist, and musician. He has spent most of his life discovering and sharing techniques for making elements of people's lives more meaningful, simple, and fun