



league stepped in to pour us a sample of the St. George Single Malt Whiskey. Smoky and intriguing, it was minus the peaty punch of many Scottish single malts. Was it innovative? Perhaps more in the conceit than the taste.

As American chefs make menus more inventive and help diners rethink what to drink with their meals, it may also be time to try new food-and-beverage pairings. Qi White Tea Liqueur and Qi Black Tea Liqueur need to be on that list. Vodka-based, the White and the Black are as different as yin and yang. Each is delightful, odd, and compelling. The first uses white tea, orange, bergamot, and honey as flavorings; just the quaff to go with a perfect panna cotta. The second merges Lapsang Souchong and various spices to produce an almost single-malt quality, though very much anchored in tea essence. Served freezing cold with a smoked fish plate, it could trump any wine offering. As the product's name implies (it's pronounced "chee"), there is a certain spiritual energy to these complex infusions.

After a quick tour of the distilling area, we were beckoned back to the bar and offered a small tot from a hidden bottle—we had apparently asked enough questions to be worthy of the reserve. We were being let in on H1's "Alchemy" series of vodkas. Last year it was wasabi. Basil was just released. This day in our glasses: chipotle. It was a multiple-whammy of chile impact—that second distilling process builds layers of complex sensation. The burn was mild; the roasted vegetal aromas, wild.

Liqueurs and spirits have been around for centuries, effective storage systems of caloric energy and pleasurable intoxication. St. George, however, has dialed up the energy, and the result is even headier. As the tasting room staff recounted tales of recipe development and Alamedan idea-generation, it was clear that they take as much pleasure in pouring their products as their colleagues in the distillery do in making them. It represents what Jörg Rupf calls an expression of who they are—not what consumer consultants say the public might like. And given the brand-saturated market into which they need to sell, trusting personal passion is an innovative bit of business management. Terroir and tradition may be the bedrock of the old, but here beneath the East Bay cargo cranes, St. George is pulling newness out of the big blue sky. 🍷

The St. George Spirits tasting room at 2601 Monarch St. at Alameda Point is open Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 7 p.m., and Sunday noon to 6 p.m. www.stgeorgespirits.com; (510) 769-1601

St. George Spirits' vodkas and Qi liqueurs are truly interesting enough to be enjoyed neat or on the rocks, but their inventiveness is inspiring for amateur mixologists. Take your cue from Jürg and Lance—innovate!

ALAMEDA ISLAND ICED TEA

Inspired by its somewhat trashy East Coast cousin, this actually tastes of tea, and has rather fewer types of liquor. Plus, you don't need big hair to drink it.

1 ounce Hangar One Straight Vodka

1 ounce Qi Black Tea Liqueur

1 drop vanilla extract

1 teaspoon lemon juice

1 teaspoon simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water, heated to dissolve the sugar and then cooled)

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up or on the rocks.

Garnish with a sprig of mint.

THE DRAGON KILLER

The original Saint George had to use a sword to slay his reptilian foe. A couple of these might have been just as effective.

2 ounce Hangar One Chipotle Vodka

2 teaspoons cucumber juice (blend coarsely chopped, peeled cucumber and strain purée through cheesecloth)

4 fresh basil leaves

Moisten the edge of a martini glass with lime and rim with finely ground sea salt. In the bottom of a cocktail shaker, muddle basil leaves with a few grains of salt. Add vodka and cucumber juice and shake with ice. Strain into rimmed glass and garnish with a twist of lime.

THE NAVAL GAZER

There's no fuzziness to this drink, though after three your head might start to droop bellybutton-ward.

1 ¼ ounce Hangar One Mandarin Blossom Vodka

½ ounce Hangar One Buddha's Hand Citron Vodka

¼ ounce triple sec

2 teaspoons strained fresh orange juice

dash of Angostura bitters

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up or on the rocks.

Garnish with a twist of orange or grapefruit.

David Szanto is a food writer and consultant living in Montréal, where he relocated after studying in Italy for a year. Drawn back to the city of his youth by its food, dating pool, and affordability (in that order), he is discovering Québec's great pork and raw-milk cheeses, along with the occasional bagel and souvlaki. Last weekend he and a friend ate a whole roast pig's head.