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## FOOD

SPIRITS

Jason Wilson

### How to pick an apricot

For years, apricot brandy occupied a dusty corner of the liquor store that I avoided. It confounded me. Most of what was there wasn't even brandy, and most of it was awful: cloying and full of artificial flavoring and coloring.

For me, the brandy brought bad associations; it seemed to be the sort of thing people down on their luck bought in pints and drank out of little paper bags. As a young person, I remember classmates buying pints of Jacquin's Apricot Flavored Brandy for illegal parties in the woods. Later, I had a friend who ordered apricot sours, and I was always vaguely embarrassed when she did that, particularly in dive bars.

As it happens, I had good reason to be skeptical about apricot brandy. Even the best bottles that bartenders use — say, Marie Brizard Apéry from France or Rothman & Winter Orchard Apricot from Austria — are liqueurs and not technically brandies. You'll rarely find a bottle of the stuff, good or bad, that's higher than 60 proof. Because of that, apricot brandy will not work well as a base spirit in a cocktail.

And yet, and yet. . . . Something about apricot brandy has appealed to generations of cocktailmakers. Just look in classic cocktail guides such as "The Savoy Cocktail Book" (1930) or Patrick Gavin Duffy's "Official Mixer's Manual" (1934), and you'll find plenty of recipes calling for the spirit.

Apricot brandy isn't just a one-trick pony, either. You see it popping up in gin cocktails, rye cocktails, bourbon cocktails, pisco cocktails, even absinthe/Chartreuse cocktails such as the Yellow Parrot.

It seemed to be used wherever people enjoyed cocktails. In pre-Prohibition New York, you had a gin cocktail called the Frankenjack (equal parts gin, vermouth, Cointreau, apricot brandy) and its more popular variation, the Darb. Further south, you had the Baltimore Bang, a tasty mix of bourbon, apricot brandy and lemon juice: an apricot-y whiskey sour. And even farther south, in Havana, you had the Nacional, which combined rum, apricot brandy and lime juice (my own version of which is the Winter Daiquiri).

I e-mailed a few bartenders to see whether they embrace or reject apricot brandy. Frankly, I was shocked by how positively they view it.

"Yeah, it's really quite useful," replied Derek Brown of the Columbia Room, who says his favorite is the Baltimore Bang.

"I especially like the Marie Brizard," wrote Todd Thrasher of PX and the Majestic. "I have been using it quite a bit with the classics."

"I've always enjoyed apricot," wrote Adam Bernbach of Proof



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#### Winter Daiquiri

1 serving

This simple, elegant cocktail is based on a classic daiquiri variation called a Nacional, invented at the Hotel Nacional in Havana.

In this version, the Nacional's lime juice is replaced with a combination of lemon and clementine (or tangerine) juices. The original probably used white Havana Club rum, which is not available in the United States. Instead, use a flavorful white rum agricole from Martinique or a white rum such as Rhum Barbancourt from Haiti, El Dorado from Guyana or the new Banks 5 Island, a blend of rums from four West Indian islands plus Java.

Never garnish a daiquiri.

From Spirits columnist Jason Wilson.

#### INGREDIENTS

- Ice
- 1½ ounces white rum, such as rum agricole, Rhum Barbancourt, El Dorado or Banks 5 Islands
- ½ ounce apricot liqueur, preferably Rothman & Winter
- ½ ounce freshly squeezed clementine juice (may substitute freshly squeezed tangerine juice)
- ½ ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice

#### STEPS

- Fill a cocktail shaker halfway with ice. Add the rum, apricot liqueur and juices. Shake vigorously for at least 30 seconds, then strain into a chilled cocktail (martini) glass.

**NUTRITION** (Per serving: 180 calories, 0 g protein, 8 g carbohydrates, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 0 mg sodium, 0 g dietary fiber, 9 g sugar)

Recipe tested by Michael Taylor; e-mail: [questoons@food.washingtonpost.com](mailto:questoons@food.washingtonpost.com)

[www.washingtonpost.com/recipes](http://www.washingtonpost.com/recipes)

• Darb

and Estadio, who called the hard-to-find Hans Reisetbauer Apricot eau de vie "one of my all-time favorite spirits."

Fair enough. I figured I should explore apricot brandy a little deeper. So for the past week, I've been tasting and making cocktails with a number of the available brands. Mostly, I've been pleasantly surprised and excited by what I've found.

My conclusions: First, most apricot brandies are labeled "apricot-flavored brandy," meaning they are liqueurs made by adding sugar and flavoring to cheap grape brandies. You'll only find a few that are actually distilled from apricots. The most widely available true apricot brandy is Blume Marillen Apricot Eau-De-Vie, imported from Austria by Hans Alpenz, though, to be sure, "most widely available" still translates as "difficult to get one's hands on." The only others I've seen are the Hans Reisetbauer from Austria and Zwack Barack Palinks from Hungary. (And if you own either of these bottles, can you send me a little refill?)

I enjoyed the Blume Marillen neat, the same way I'd sip a kirschwasser or poire Williams after dinner. It's very dry and doesn't have a ton of cocktail applications. But I liked it with gin, subbing in for dry vermouth, in a sort of martini variation with a dash of orange bitters.

Most of us, however, will have to make do with apricot liqueurs such as the Marie Brizard and the Rothman & Winter (also imported by Haus Alpenz). I do not recommend sipping those on their own. They're cloying, like drinking apricot jam without the toast. But in a cocktail, I have to admit they bring something — an odd, rich, not-too-sweet sweetness — to the table that no other liqueur does. I've included two recipes with this column, and on the Food section's All We Can Eat blog on Friday, I will post at least two more.

A word to the wise: Apricot is one category where you probably don't want to venture too far from the top shelf. The other apricot brandies I tasted — from Hiram Walker, Bols and Jacquin's — probably should remain in that dusty corner. In a pinch they'll suffice, but they're a far cry from the real thing.

Still, flipping through those old books, I can't discern that there ever were halcyon days of apricot brandy. Mostly the same brands pop up then as now. Perhaps apricot brandy has always confounded. And, likewise, perhaps it has always pleasantly surprised.

Wilson is the author of "Boozebound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits" (Pan Speed, 2010). He can be reached at [jason@jasonwilson.com](mailto:jason@jasonwilson.com).