

# MOVING THINGS UP A NOSH

SERVING BETTER  
SNACKS CAN  
HAVE A POSITIVE  
IMPACT ON  
DISTILLERY  
TASTING ROOMS

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## SUGGESTED PAIRINGS

**C**heese cubes aren't usually green. The ones in front of me are. Normally, this may be unsettling. But not at New York's Summer Fancy Food Show. Cheese can be whatever color it wants at this annual three-day specialty food fete, if it's tasty. The cheese, an avocado-infused creation from New Jersey-based importer Epicure Foods, passes this important qualification. As I reach for a second cube of nuanced umami goodness, the guy next to me asked, "What do you think this pairs with? Beer? White wine?"

"Tequila," I hastily blurted. "That, or either mezcal or an agave-based spirit would totally work."

The server behind the green cheese pile, a diminutive young lady named Kim, grinned while nodding in agreement. "I like tequila when I'm eating chips & guac," she said. "Why would this cheese be any different?"

Fun, geeky discussions like this can easily happen in any distillery tasting room that dares to elevate their snack game beyond peanuts and pretzels. Heaven knows there's plenty of ways to up the edible ante. Spending three days purposefully roaming through 7,000 aisles worth of artisanal food product at the gargantuan Jacob K. Javits Convention Center puts me face-to-face with a wealth of ready-to-serve, surprisingly cost-effective snack ideas ready to kick the boring stuff to the curb, from approachable cheese and charcuterie options to borderline funky fare (smoked oysters, anyone?). "Ready-to-serve" is the key that unlocks these snack choices. Unless the law suddenly require permits for opening bags or pulling back can tabs, there's not a thing to worry about.

The numerous craft food vendors I talked snacks and spirits with would also like to see better snacks in tasting rooms. That's the expected answer, but it's not given in the name of higher profit margins. It turns out that a lot of artisan food folks dig on small-batch spirits, and they primarily see elevated snacks as an expansion of the tasting room experience they want to enjoy.

"Oftentimes, when I go to a distillery or a brewery, there's not always an interesting option to snack on," said Jordan Ashcraft, regional manager of the Washington State-based seafood purveyor SeaBear Smokehouse. "There's plenty of pretzels and that kind of stuff, but that's disappointing. There can be so much more to offer."

Lifting your snack game can do more than make your patrons happy. Kicked-up snacks could theoretically encourage them to linger longer in the tasting room — a bonus for distilleries permitted to serve cocktails. According to Ashcraft, bringing in elevated snacks can at least give distillers the chance to have extra fun with their product.

"Heritage Distilling did a launch party with us in one of their tasting rooms," he said. "They paired four of our smoked salmons with different drinks selected by their master distillers and tasters. The guys at Heritage had amazing ideas and created some unbelievable pairings. To me, the fact that we put them together in a tasting room without a full kitchen provides further evidence that quality bites can absolutely work." <sup>AS</sup><sub>M</sub>

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Deciding to elevate the quality of your tasting room snacks is a big decision, but it can leave you with an even bigger conundrum: What should you serve? The answer to this depends on the spirit. While some snacks like cheese and charcuterie can be generally harmonious — remember, we're not talking a four-course wine pairing dinner here — some bites do work better with specific liquors.



**GIN** If your distillery's hallmark is a killer gin, you'd be wise to break out some Spanish tapas. The reason, oddly enough, is tradition: Spain consumes more gin per capita than any other country in the world.

"It may surprise a lot of people, but Spain's national drink probably should be gin and tonic," explained Jeffrey Shaw, Marketing Director of the Madrid-based culinary organization Foods from Spain. The good news here is there are plenty of ready-made snacks to select, from Iberico ham and hard cheeses like Manchego to Marcona almonds and canned seafoods (again, popular in Europe). Even something basics like stuffed Spanish olives can tie with the theme. "They're really easy to keep at a bar," Shaw said. "All you need to do is open the cans and drain them, and they're ready to go."



## VODKA

If you're a small-batch distillery rocking freshly dried ink on your LLC application, you may be pumping out vodka bottles in-house while you wait for the more complex stuff to mature. You may also want to serve a snack that not only works well with vodka but also ups your distillery's intrigue. If so, consider conservas: tins of seafood packed with anchovies, mussels, smoked oysters, and other underwater delights. These tins, which are popular in Europe, may initially look like a strange choice. This unorthodoxy goes away after the first briny bite, as the salt and fat add hearty depth to the neutral spirit. You can also serve pickled veggies if you find canned fish too freaky.



## WHISKEY

Whiskey's a complex spirit with a simple reputation. This inherently provides distillers with an easy out to serve cheap peanuts and be done with things. Yet it also provides the perfect excuse to serve an alternative legume: Chickpeas. On their own, chickpeas possess a nutty yet nuanced earthy flavor, making them slightly more deviant than peanuts without being radically different. Not enough variance? You're in luck — snack companies are doing the flavored chickpea thing, producing everything from hot beans coated in chili powder to honey-roasted deliciousness.

## AQUAVIT

There's an obvious justification to aquavit's cachet as a hip spirit — it's damn delicious when it's done right. Its herbaceous, citrus-kissed base of caraway, dill, and other like-minded spices are the perfect match for smoked salmon. It's a pairing that also plays to the spirit's Scandinavian roots, since salmon plays a sizeable role in Northern Europe's culinary milieu.

"Aquavit's an herb liquor," explained Ashcraft. "Sure enough, a lot of those botanicals and herbs in aquavit are what you'd want to use on top of a European salmon — think gravlax and dill. Serving the two together becomes a pairing of similar flavors that works really well."



## BOURBON

Finding a good snack food to stand up to bourbon's richness can be a challenge, particularly since kitchens and craft distilleries don't often mix. It requires some out-of-the-box thinking, and pâté offers tremendous rewards for those willing to escape the box entirely.

"Pâté would be the perfect item to put in a tasting room where bourbon's served," said Alexandra Tierney, VP of Operations at Alexian Pâté in Neptune, New Jersey. "It's nice, hearty food that keeps your stomach full." While pâté's unctuousness can stand up to bourbon, Tierney said some styles particularly stand out. "I immediately think of pairing bourbon with a pork-based pâté, since pork and bourbon pair so well in other settings," she said.

## RUM

Rum practically demands a chocolate pairing. However, there are a few concessions to make before giving in to the spirit's will. You don't want something to overpower the liquor's sweet, spicy essence, so milk chocolate is right out. You also don't want any chocolate infused with pepper or sprinkled with sea salt, as the extra stuff just runs interference between the desired experience. Straight-up dark chocolate is what you need here. However, make sure the cocoa content hits around 60 to 75 percent. This range compliments rum's flavors properly, and anything higher may make the pairing bitterly imbalanced.

