



# Distiller Success Guide: The Virginia Cocktail Games

Thank you for your interest in the 2025 Virginia Cocktail Games! Sponsored and produced exclusively by the Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office (VSBMO), this event is a two-round hybrid cocktail competition created to foster collaboration and innovation between bartenders, distillers and licensees and to educate the public about the incredible diversity of spirits and mixology that abound in the commonwealth.

As a distiller, you will have the opportunity to partner with bartenders from eligible licensee establishments to raise the profile of your brand and teach consumers how to mix cocktails with your products. There is no cost to participate, and we highly encourage you to use this opportunity to form strong working relationships with local bartenders.

***Remember, you are prohibited from incentivizing bartenders or licensees from using your products or promoting your brand. You may, however, inform licensees about the competition and, generally, encourage them to participate.***

The contents of this guide include:

- Eligibility criteria for bartenders
- Competition theme, structure, rules and prizes
- Distiller success tips
- Links to resources to support your successful participation



# ELIGIBILITY

## ALL APPLICANTS MUST:

1. Be currently employed as a bartender at a licensee in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Changes in employment status or employer at any point during the competition may result in disqualification.
2. Create a cocktail using one or more spirit(s) included on the approved spirits list provided by the Virginia ABC. This list ensures that the ingredients you use are widely available across the commonwealth, which may exclude small batch and limited distribution products. We do have exception criteria and procedures in place for bartenders that would like to use products from a distillery that may have limited or no Virginia ABC distribution.

## How Are Eligible Spirits Selected?

The Virginia ABC is a crucial partner in the effort to raise the profile of all Virginia spirits. Because the primary goal of this cocktail competition is to increase awareness and appreciation of ALL locally made spirits, we want to make it as easy as possible for consumers to read a cocktail recipe and walk out of their local Virginia ABC store with all the ingredients they need to create the drink at home. As such, we have chosen to focus on driving consumers toward spirits that are widely available.

However, we have made the following provisions to ensure that this competition remains inclusive of all Virginia distillers:

- Any product available in ABC stores across Virginia will be listed as an “eligible product” on the approved spirits list.
- Those Virginia distillers who do not currently distribute through the Virginia ABC will be listed in the document as well. Bartenders will be made aware that they can contact those distillers directly to learn about what spirits are available in their portfolios.
- Any bartender who wishes to work with a “hero ingredient” that is not on the approved products list or any distiller with a product they feel has been wrongfully excluded from the list may reach out to the Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office to request an exception.
- To request an exception for a particular product, please send an email to [info@virginiaspirits.org](mailto:info@virginiaspirits.org) with the following information:
  - Product name
  - Product type (whiskey, rum, vodka, etc.)
  - Product retail price
  - Product availability (how does a licensee or a consumer purchase the product?)

*Click here*  
→

**VIRGINIA ABC APPROVED SPIRITS LIST**

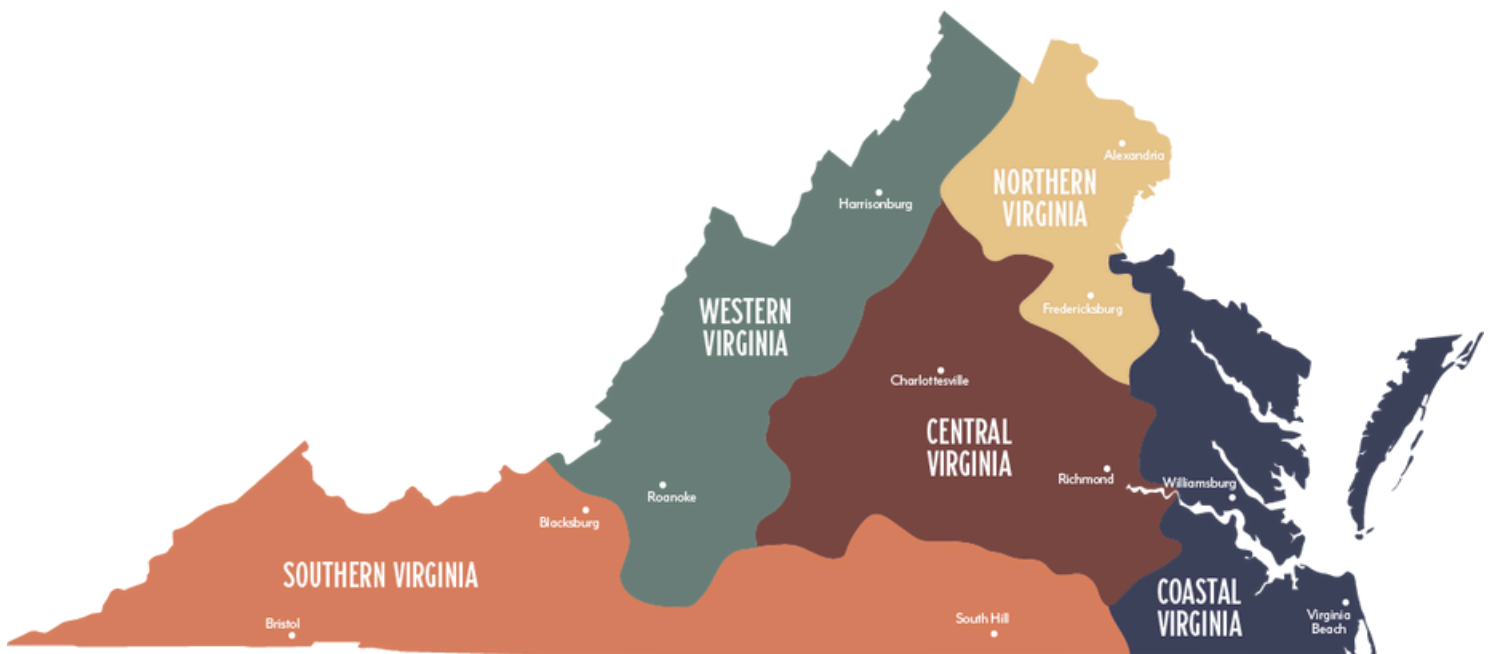
# THEME

## Theme: Off the Beaten Path

Everyone has a special place they enjoy for both its sensory qualities and the feelings it evokes. For some, this might be a spot in nature (a hiking trail, creek, seaside or forest), and for others it may be situated in a built environment (a city park, stretch of road, historic neighborhood or coffee shop). Maybe there are other factors necessary to unlock the portal to your perfect spot: a time of year with a specific aroma or quality of light, the company of your favorite person or pet or maybe a little ritual you perform there.

Our ask for the first phase of the 2025 Virginia Cocktail Games is that bartenders create an original cocktail that expresses the qualities of their special spot via flavor and presentation. The cocktail they submit in their application to participate in Round 1 must celebrate a specific "hidden gem" location or area in their region of Virginia.

To ensure regional representation and better inclusion of all distillers, the cocktail submitted must feature at least one eligible locally distilled product from within their region. If they are uncertain about the region in which they tend bar, they may consult the Map (below) on [The Virginia Cocktail Games resource page](#) or contact the VSBMO for detailed information.



[DOWNLOAD THE MAP](#)

## Application Process: Round 1

The first round of this competition will require bartenders to fill out a simple application describing their cocktail concept, including:

- Employer/region details
- Eligible spirits/cocktail ingredients
- Cocktail name and concept
- Recipe and mixing instructions

*We will not require that bartenders include precise measurement details for this application phase. However, if someone is selected to compete, we will require them to submit formal measurements before the online voting period begins).*

## JUDGING

This application will be vetted by a panel of application adjudicators (comprised of representatives from the Virginia Spirits Board, the Virginia bar community and Virginia distillers).

The panel will evaluate your application on the following criteria:

- Adherence to theme (Off the Beaten Path)
- Creative use of local/regional ingredients
- Accessibility & replicability (can others replicate their creation?)
- Flavor & balance (using information supplied in the application)

The panel will select 5 submissions from each region (25 total) to square off against each other in the first, digital round of the competition, where members of the public will cast votes for their favorite cocktails from each region.

## SEMIFINALISTS WILL RECEIVE:

- A Virginia Spirits swag bag with a custom embroidered bar apron and other fun gear
- A special copy of Jim Meehan's The Bartender's Pantry (\$35 value)
- \$100 to help with ingredient and equipment costs
- A subscription to Cocktail Camera 101 (\$200 value)

# ROUND 1: DIGITAL COCKTAIL COMPETITION

## FINALIZING THE RECIPE

If selected by the committee as a semifinalist, bartenders will provide the following:

- ☒ A full recipe/drink spec for their cocktail, including instructions
- ☒ Two (2) high-resolution images of their cocktail (one in landscape orientation, one in portrait orientation)
- ☒ One HD vertical format video (no longer than 90 seconds) showing you making the cocktail

These assets will be used to promote the competition and encourage folks to vote for their favorite cocktails during round 1, the digital portion of the competition.

## Voting Protocol

From August 4 - 18, 2025, these digital assets will be posted on a competition landing page on [VirginiaSpirits.org](https://VirginiaSpirits.org), where visitors may vote daily for up to one bartender/cocktail submission from each region. Voters may cast one vote per registered email address, per day for up to one cocktail from each region during the voting period.

At the end of the voting period, the total votes for each cocktail will be tabulated, and one finalist from each region (5 total) will be announced and will move on to compete in a live, professionally judged cocktail competition at Virginia Distilled (event at Virginia Museum of History and Culture) in Richmond, Va., on September 13, 2025.

NOTE: The first round of the competition is designed so that bartenders are competing against each other within each region, not statewide. This ensures bartenders from less populated regions are evenly judged with those from more populated regions.

## AS A REWARD FOR ADVANCING TO THE FINAL ROUND, FINALISTS WILL RECEIVE:

- \$250 cash prize
- \$150 travel stipend and complimentary hotel accommodations for the Virginia Distilled event in Richmond, VA on September 13, 2025 where the final round will take place.
- Feature in regional media
- Professional headshots, action shots and videography during Virginia Distilled

## How It'll Work: In-Person Cocktail Showdown

Once selected, the five finalists will be provided with a new prompt and asked to create a new original cocktail to present to a live panel of professional judges at Virginia Distilled. Finalists may not use the same Hero Ingredient(s) they used in the digital round, but will be free to use ingredients produced by the same distillery, if they choose.

A full competitor guide, including a detailed cocktail prompt and judging rubrics, will be provided to finalists upon advancing.

### JUDGING

Because the finals will be adjudicated by a panel of professional judges, presentation and storytelling will be an important component of the judging criteria. There will also be an audience choice element to the competition that will require batched samples to be created. We will partner with bartenders to ensure that the batching goes smoothly so that bartenders can focus on presenting to the judges.

After the judges' scores and audience choice votes have been tabulated, the winner of the 2025 Virginia Cocktail Games will be announced.

### THE WINNER WILL RECEIVE:

- Title of Winner of Virginia Cocktail Games
- \$500 cash prize
- Featured, with your fellow semi-finalists, in a full-page statewide print ad, publication TBD
- A Conference Pass, economy air travel and hotel accommodations to USBG's 2026 Bar Summit professional development conference.

# TIPS FOR DISTILLER SUCCESS



## APPLICATION

During the Virginia Cocktail Games, you must continue to abide by the same state and federal rules and regulations and restrictions that govern the legal operation of a distillery in the Commonwealth of Virginia, especially with regards to promoting spirits, bartenders and licensees. You may NOT incentivize or promote a bartender or licensee to participate in or during the competition. However, there are ways to ethically raise your profile and improve your odds of having one or more products featured in this competition. The Virginia Cocktail Games provides a fantastic opportunity for you to engage with bartenders and licensees in your region! Below is a summary of recommendations for succeeding at each phase of the contest.

## INFORMING BARTENDERS

- Make a list of licensees in your region that produce consistently good cocktails. Use existing contacts or social media to determine how to best inform managers or individual bartenders about the competition. A printable flyer with applicant information will be made available for you to print and hand out to local bartenders
- Be very clear about which of your products are eligible for the competition. Consult the document we've provided from the Virginia ABC for a definitive list.
- Think of ways to educate bartenders about your products. Opportunities for them to gain hands-on experience with your spirits or facetime with your distiller(s) or owner(s) will be very valuable.
- Reach out to any local bar guilds or chapters of the USBG to inform them which of your products are eligible for this competition.

## VOTING

-  The further a bartender advances in the competition, the more exposure your brand/product(s) will receive. If they advance to the final, in-person round, it's entirely possible that they will choose to work with your product(s) again.
-  Set reminders for yourself and your team to vote every day during the competition.

## LONG-TERM VALUE CAPTURE

- If you had a particularly good experience with a bartender, think about ways to collaborate in the future. Think of ways to scale the value you received from the competition.
- Make a point to share future distillery events and provide regular content to the VSBMO so that they can amplify your brand presence over their network of email subscribers and social media followers.

## RESOURCES

The VSBMO has contracted with Eric Kozlik of [Direct Fire Consulting](#) (based in the DC Metro area) to assist with the end-to-end planning and production of this inaugural event. Eric is a spirits consultant, professional spirits judge, host of [The Modern Bar Cart Podcast](#) and Principal Consultant at Direct Fire Consulting, where he helps spirits and hospitality brands spark consumer imaginations. He has extensive experience planning and executing cocktail competitions for distillers.

If you have any questions about the Virginia Cocktail Games, you may contact Eric at [eric@directfireconsulting.com](mailto:eric@directfireconsulting.com) or reach out to Jack Gorman, executive director of the VSBMO, at [director@virginiaspirts.org](mailto:director@virginiaspirts.org).

Please see below for a list of other resources:

- [Virginia Regions Map](#)
- [Virginia ABC Approved Spirits List](#)
- [Printable flyer to distribute to restaurants within your region](#)