

Smart Money

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THE Best OF EVERYTHING

From handbags to golf clubs, high-end goods are selling at record levels. But this year the biggest splurges are the ones that might be the hardest to spot. We take you through the very best in cashmere, cameras and a host of other understated luxuries.

BY MAGGIE DUNPHY

THE BEST OF

Liquor Cabinet

DOES A DRINK SOUND good right about now? No, we're not talking about fancy wines or a microbrew. We mean the hard stuff. And when it comes to booze, these days a home bar with just any brands won't do. You need the best of, well, everything—the best tequila, the best single malt, the best dark rum and the best vodka.

There's plenty to choose from here—there were 39 new kinds of vodka introduced last year alone. And vodka is especially tough to rank: Its flavor is far more subtle than that of other liquors, and it's the category that has been the most dressed up with showy bottles and fancy names. To help us pick the best on the most important matter—taste—we assembled a panel of experts at New York's legendary watering hole the 21 Club: two longtime regulars, Jennifer Fearon, who heads her own venture capital consultancy, and Kevin Kading, an entrepreneur and technology investor (the two friends met at 21 over a decade ago), helped along by 13-year veteran bartender Mirko Blaskovic. Sipping four different vodkas to start with, our experts agreed that **Grey Goose (\$30)** has a smooth, clean taste.

In tequila, the winner was **El Tesoro de Don Felipe Platinum (\$36)**, a high-end "blanco," or un-aged, tequila with a pure, peppery flavor. By comparison, Patron Anejo (\$52) was judged to be "medicinal." In rum, experts say you should skip the clear stuff and go with a dark rum, which is both more upscale and more versatile: You can use it to mix or to sip. Our panel was in agreement on **Gosling's Black Seal Rum (\$18)**, a sweet aged rum from Bermuda ("forget the pineapple juice," says Fearon).

In the last category, single-malt Scotch, our tasters came to a standoff. For his part, Kading went with his favorite, Lagavulin 16 year old (\$75), which Blaskovic usually knows to pour him. But since its musty taste can be a turnoff, we'll side with Fearon, who preferred the **Macallan Sherry Oak 12 years old (\$47)**. Blaskovic has another idea and reaches for a single malt that sells for \$50 a shot. But we resist. We've had enough to drink—and \$50 a shot isn't exactly understated.

