

Fast Horses and Slow Whiskey

SAGAMORE SPIRIT BRINGS THE REVIVAL OF MARYLAND RYE TO SAN FRANCISCO

story by Deborah Parker Wong / photos by John Curley

It's not common knowledge that rye whiskey production originated in Pennsylvania and Maryland, where it reached its zenith in the late 19th century. Historically, each state produced a different style: Pennsylvania rye was spicy and bold, while Maryland rye traditionally presented more well-balanced flavors.

After Prohibition, rye whiskey almost disappeared altogether. The production of a few surviving brands moved to Kentucky, where an early-2000s revival largely favored the Pennsylvania style. But in 2013, trading on Maryland's distinct rye pedigree, Sagamore Spirit launched a renaissance of its own.



Debora Fernandez serves as General Manager at San Francisco's KAIYŌ.

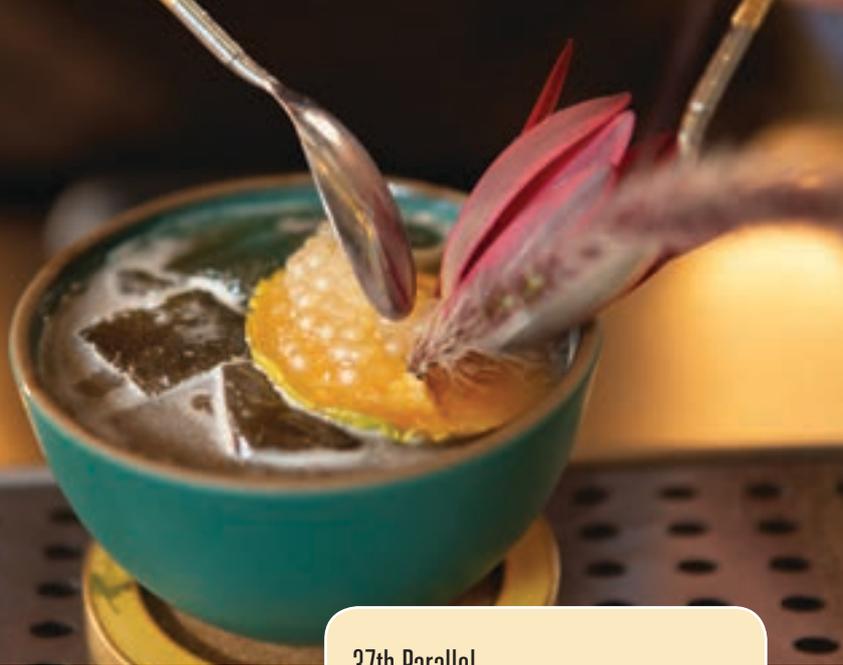
The name Sagamore—and the brand's three-diamond emblem—pay homage to Sagamore Farm, an active thoroughbred-racing and -training facility in northern Baltimore County once owned by the Vanderbilt family. The team uses spring-fed water from the farm's Spring House to proof every bottle of Sagamore at their waterfront distillery in Baltimore's Port Covington neighborhood.

Corn plays a supporting role to rye in the Maryland-style mash bill. According to company president Brian Treacy, Sagamore relies on two mash bills: One is "high rye," while the other is "low rye," a rye-dominant blend that includes corn. The whiskeys are aged separately, blended, and brought to proof with the aforementioned spring water.

KAIYŌ's Luffy the Pirate King cocktail combines Sagamore Rye with Sherry, saké, and accents of mango and honey.



Joshua-Peter Smith (above) is the Bar Manager at Mourad in San Francisco. Featuring Sagamore Rye, Mourad's 37th Parallel cocktail (right) evokes a citrus- and spice-poached pear.



37th Parallel

Created by Joshua-Peter Smith, Mourad, San Francisco

- ▶ 1½ oz. Sagamore Rye Whiskey
 - ▶ ¾ oz. pear liqueur
 - ▶ ½ oz. Francisco Ruibarbo Fernet
 - ▶ 1 oz. fresh grapefruit juice
 - ▶ ¾ oz. lapsang souchong honey syrup
 - ▶ 2 squirts cardamom bitters
 - ▶ 2 squirts applewood-smoked anise tincture
- Shake and strain into a snifter or tulip glass. Garnish with a torched dehydrated grapefruit segment topped with pear-tapioca pearls and dusted with lemon-balm powder.

Luffy the Pirate King

Created by Debora Fernandez, KAIYŌ, San Francisco

- ▶ 1¼ oz. Sagamore Rye Whiskey
 - ▶ ¾ oz. Koshino Sesshu junmai nigori saké
 - ▶ ½ oz. Lustau Amontillado Sherry
 - ▶ 1½ oz. honey mango puree
 - ▶ ¼ oz. honey syrup
 - ▶ ¼ oz. lemon
 - ▶ 3 full droppers pink-peppercorn tincture
 - ▶ 3 dashes Regan's Orange Bitters
- Shake all ingredients with ice and double-strain into a tulip glass. Fill with crushed ice and garnish with a mint bouquet, pink peppercorns, and powdered sugar.

There's nothing a bartender likes better than an authentic spirit with a storied past, and Joshua-Peter Smith, Creative Bar Director at Mourad in San Francisco, is no exception. Smith is a career bartender who helped reshape the bar scene in Colorado as a member of the opening teams at Justice Snow's in Aspen and Williams & Graham in Denver, among others. While at Denver's Twelve Restaurant, Smith created a different cocktail menu every week for more than two years; in the process, the once-aspiring actor realized that "the bar is the greatest stage on earth"—or so he quips as he strains a shaken Sagamore Rye cocktail to remove the ice crystals that would otherwise dilute the flavors. "The profile of Sagamore is more fruit-driven and has a moderate attack with a fresh ginger note, versus being overtly spice-forward and brawny," he says.

At Mourad, the ten-ingredient cocktail is alive and well. "The flavors that clients encounter in our cuisine are nothing less than exotic—the Moroccan ras el hanout spice blend has no fewer than 12 ingredients—and our cocktail menu mirrors the complex spices in the cuisine," says Smith. A good example from the fall list is the 37th Parallel, a Sagamore Rye-based cocktail that evokes a citrus- and spice-poached pear.

When creating a bespoke cocktail with Sagamore, Smith dares to push some emotional buttons. He'll ask customers three things: the meaning of their name, their favorite color, and a favorite vacation spot. Using those clues for inspiration, he creates a drink that's sure to surprise and delight, "playing off the characteristics that

make this rye so distinct by using tart, dark cherries, vanilla, and almond as well as orchard fruits and stone fruits," as he explains it. In so doing, he builds a flavor profile he describes as a "dormant orchard."

Rye's comeback can be attributed in part to an up-and-coming generation of bartenders whose love affair with brown spirits is no secret. Enter Debora Fernandez, General Manager at KAIYŌ in San Francisco, where she takes a refreshing, cross-cultural approach to cocktails.

A native of Lima, Peru, Fernandez worked at San Francisco's Forgery before joining restaurateur John Park and the opening team at KAIYŌ nine months ago. KAIYŌ specializes in Nikkei cuisine, which emerged when Japanese immigrants to Peru incorporated local ingredients. It's a brilliant combination of the best of both worlds: Yakitori becomes *anticuchos* (skewers from the grill, including classic beef heart), and poached butterfish in huacatay sauce is served side by side with sushi-style rolls, nigiri, and sashimi. On the backbar, Sagamore Rye takes up company with Peru's traditional spirit, pisco.

There's a whimsy to Nikkei cuisine that's evident in KAIYŌ's anime motif, which runs from the wallpaper to Fernandez's cocktail Luffy the Pirate King. Monkey D. Luffy, a character from the manga series *One Piece*, "is out to become the one true king of the pirates, so it's a nod to exploration, fun, and adventure," says Fernandez. "I'm looking for an elegant attack, and I like Sagamore here because it isn't spice-dominant, but it elevates all the components."

Those components include a particularly dry nigori saké and a nutty Amontillado Sherry for a result that's tropical and fruit-forward, yet without the sweetness that can prevail in tiki-inspired cocktails. Like Nikkei cuisine, it merges several cultures into something that's truly of the moment. ■■