

# Being a First-Time Judge at ADI

by Jake Emen

It's 9 a.m. on a February Monday, and across the country, the rank and file have assembled *en masse* at their workplaces and in front of their computer screens. It's a workweek like any other... except I'm not sitting in front of a computer screen, I'm sitting in front of a flight of eight white whiskeys. I'm just outside San Francisco in Tiburon, California, serving as a first-time judge at the American Distilling Institute's Annual Judging of Craft Spirits, and this is about as daunting as it gets. I've been thrown to the white-whiskey wolves.

I've reviewed hundreds of spirits over the past several years as part of my work as a freelance journalist, but never quite like this. Never as part of a four-day judging event; never as part of a team tasked with analyzing nearly 900 spirits across every classification and category; never with my palate being stretched to the far extremes by handling dozens of spirits in a single session before lunch is served; never with the feedback I provide—good and bad—being placed right into the hands of the distillers who made the stuff.

This is the gig though, and while the worker bees in front of their computer screens on their routine Monday mornings may not want to hear about it, and may scoff at the notion of this being “difficult work,” it is indeed an intensive and rigorous challenge. It is not for the faint of heart—or liver, for that matter.

The first flight served as a particularly grueling indoctrination into the world of spirits judging, but sip by sip, my self-confidence grew. I learned to trust my own notes and grades, along with my instincts. I got into a personal groove and developed my own system for how to smoothly move from one spirit to another.

I came to the realization that I deserved my seat at the table, while at the same time being entirely humbled by my position at that table. As much as my self-confidence grew, so did my awareness of the things that I didn't know compared to so many of the spirits veterans in the room.

That's part of the beauty of serving as a judge with ADI. There's a staggering, unparalleled collection of talented professionals in the room. And all sides of the industry are covered, with a diverse mix of insight and expertise being offered at each table, with distillers and blenders; bar owners, retailers and wholesalers; distributors and importers; consultants and journalists.

The entire experience was irreplaceable as firsthand on-the-job training, and my fellow judges were an invaluable resource. After detecting a flavor note, I could ask a Dan Farber what the distiller did wrong to create it, or a Nancy Fraley that note's chemical name. Next time I recognize it, I'll know how to classify it, why it happens, and what it means. That's invaluable insight, and it means as much to me on this side of the table as I can imagine it means to the distillers reading their tasting notes on the other side of the exchange. I can only imagine one being filled out on my performance...

**Category:** *American Judge with 0–1 Years Judging Experience*

**What's good about this judge?:** *Solid foundation, but youthful. Seems adaptable and overall bright. Mature, given age.*

**How could this judge be improved?:** *Needs more seasoning. Can't replace more time spent in the judging room. But shows promise for the future. Moving in the right direction, keep going.*

*Jake Emen is a spirits and cocktail writer based in Washington, D.C. where he writes for Eater National and Whisky Magazine. He visits many distilleries in the USA and internationally each year and is a large supporter of American craft spirits. Emen can be found on the internet at <http://mantalkfood.com>.*