vinetur

U.S. Defines American Single Malt Whiskey

New federal rules give the fast-growing spirit a legal identity after years of lobbying by distillers

Monday, May 11, 2026



The federal government’s new definition of American single malt whiskey, which took effect in January 2025 after years of lobbying by producers, is reshaping how one of the fastest-growing spirits categories is made, labeled and sold in the United States.

Under the rule, a whiskey can be labeled American single malt only if it is made from 100% malted barley, distilled entirely at a single distillery, mashed, distilled and matured in the United States, aged in oak casks no larger than 700 liters, distilled to no more than 160 proof, or 80% alcohol by volume, and bottled at 80 proof, or 40% alcohol by volume, or higher. The standard gives distillers a clear legal framework for a category that had long existed in practice but lacked an official federal definition.

The change matters because American single malt had been one of the few major whiskey styles in the country without a formal regulatory identity. The last time the federal government added a new whiskey category was in 1968, when it recognized light whiskey. Producers say the new rules should reduce confusion for consumers, strengthen labeling practices and give distilleries more certainty as they invest in production and export markets.

The American Single Malt Whiskey Commission, formed in 2016, spent years pushing for the definition. Distillers involved with the group have also said they intend to use clearer labels and marketing materials to avoid misleading buyers. Many plan to identify the city and state where the whiskey was distilled and bottled.

The new standard leaves American single malt with more flexibility than Scotch whisky in several areas. Scotch single malt must follow stricter rules on cask history and maturation. American producers can use any oak cask up to 700 liters, whether new or previously used, which gives them room to experiment with barrels that once held wine, beer or other spirits. That freedom has already encouraged distillers to work with native oak species and a wider range of finishing casks.

The category has been developing for decades before the rule was finalized. McCarthy’s Oregon Single Malt, first released in 1996 at Clear Creek Distillery, is widely regarded as the first American single malt. St. George Spirits in California filled its first casks in 1997 and released its first single malt in 2000. Stranahan’s in Denver followed with its first bottles in 2006. Westward Distillery in Portland, founded in 2004, has become one of the best-known names in the category in the United States and abroad.

Today, industry estimates put the number of active American single malt distilleries at roughly 200 to 250. Many are clustered in regions where local grain farming and brewing traditions have shaped production methods. In the Pacific Northwest, distillers often emphasize locally grown barley and brewing techniques. In the Midwest, farm-based distilleries have leaned into grain-to-glass sourcing. On the East Coast, cooler weather has encouraged slower maturation and flavor profiles that some producers compare with Scotch-style whisky.

Climate also plays a major role in how these whiskeys age. In Texas, annual evaporation losses can reach 10%-15%, while Colorado may see losses of about 4%-8% and the Pacific Northwest around 2%-5%. Those differences affect how quickly whiskey develops flavor and how long it stays in barrel before bottling.

Producers say that regional variation is becoming one of the defining features of American single malt even without formal geographic designations. Pennsylvania distillers, for example, have pointed to the state’s agricultural history, barley production and four-season climate as part of their identity. Other states are building their own styles around local grain varieties, barrel choices and warehouse conditions.

For distillers, the new federal definition offers both protection and pressure. It protects them from having their products lumped together with unrelated whiskies that do not meet the standard. But it also raises expectations that bottles labeled American single malt will share enough common ground for consumers to understand what they are buying.

That clarity could matter most outside the United States. As more bottles reach markets in Europe and Asia, exporters will now be able to present American single malt as a recognized category rather than a loose description. For a spirit that has spent years trying to define itself, that may be as important as any flavor note coming out of the barrel.