Over the last few years, many of the country’s best bartenders have been feverishly creating cocktails. But these tasty drinks aren’t just for bar menus — they’re for cocktail competitions sponsored by spirits companies. In an attempt to win over both mixologists and the public, many of the biggest brands, including Absolut Vodka, Domaine de Canton and Drambuie, have all recently sponsored shake-offs.

For years there may have been flair bartending competitions (think Tom Cruise in the movie Cocktail) but up until recently there were just a few cocktail contests in America. This recent trend is indicative of just how much spirit companies now rely upon bartenders for creating new drinks and for driving drink trends. It also helps that these events almost guarantee media attention for the brands.

COCKTAILS AND LIMERICKS
These competitions, of course, revolve around bartenders who mix up drinks featuring the sponsor’s brand. But some spirit companies add a twist. The annual International Finlandia Vodka Cup has an Iron Chef-like round where bartenders are given a mystery basket filled with 10 items (of which they can only use four) and have just 15 minutes to come up with and prepare an original drink. Hendrick’s Gin, which is known for its creative promotions and unusual botanicals, held a competition this winter where bartenders from across the country not only had to create a cocktail but also perform a limerick. “I wanted to put the emphasis on the personality of the bartender just as much as the taste of the cocktail – rewarding showmanship and entertainment,” says Charlotte Voisey, Hendrick’s Gin brand champion. “The competition was designed to further the spe-
cial relationship that Hendrick’s enjoys with bartenders all over the USA.” To build nationwide buzz, the Scottish spirit held preliminary contests in eight cities, including New York, Boston, Miami and Las Vegas, with the finals held in Los Angeles.

**JUDGING THE JUDGES**
These contests not only draw talented bartenders from top bars but also impressive judges. Last spring, Rhum Clément’s annual New York Cocktail Challenge was judged by an all-star bench, including Tony Abou-Ganim, who created the cocktail program at the Bellagio Resort; Julie Reiner, who co-owns New York hotspots the Flatiron Lounge and the Clover Club; Jim Meehan, co-editor of the cocktail book *Mr. Boston* and general manager of New York’s PDT; and Toby Cecchini, author of cocktail memoir *Cosmopolitan: A Bartender’s Life*.

**SERIOUS TIPS**
One reason these competitions have become popular is that they offer bartenders a way to meet their colleagues from around the country or around the world. “We give the bartenders a forum,” says Markku Raittinen, Finlandia Vodka’s global brand ambassador. These competitions also offer contestants something else more tangible: travel and prizes. For one thing, the finals of many of these contests take place in exotic locations. Marie Brizard brought 36 finalists from 30 countries to Bordeaux for its International Bartender Seminar and Cocktail Competition. (The East Coast preliminary round was held in New York’s Madison Square Garden.) And the finals of the mid-winter International Finlandia Vodka Cup are held in a giant snow dome up in the Arctic Circle. Unfortunately, the site’s low temperatures can wreak havoc with certain ingredients, like honey which hardens in the cold. Still, there is at least one advantage of the weather: “The best part is that you don’t need to cool down your glassware,” says Finlandia’s Raittinen.

Slightly warmer, the final mix-off for the contest sponsored by the bittersweet Italian liqueur, Averna, took place on a terrace overlooking the Sicilian Ionian Sea in Italy. “Going to the finals is the prize,” says Don Lee, a New York City-based bartender who won the Averna contest with his inventive take on a rum and Coke, which doesn’t actually call for soda. (The aptly named “La Cola Nostra” is made with Averna, Zacapa rum, lime juice, simple syrup, pimento dram and Champagne.) In addition to the trip, Lee was also awarded a $1,500 American Express gift card for his winning creation.

**NEW COMPETITIONS FOLLOW THE TREND**
While Finlandia has been holding a cocktail competition for over 10 years, many other brands have only recently started offering contests. The sweet Scottish liqueur Drambuie, which is made according to a recipe created over 260 years ago, began holding cocktail contests around the country for the first time last August. The brand held contests in seven cities, including New York, Portland, Denver and Austin and in each town, 10 local bartenders battled it out. Some of the winning recipes were very simple, like the “Ginger Dram” created by Mindy Kucan from the Hilton Hotel in Austin, which calls for just Drambuie, Grey Goose and orange blossom water. Others were much more complicated like the “Drambuie High Plains Drifter” a creation from David Shenaut of the Teardrop Lounge in Portland, which featured five ingredients including gin, rosebud-infused honey syrup and lemon juice. Drambuie is planning on holding another series of competitions this year and a national contest in 2010.

The ginger-based liqueur Domaine de Canton also held its Bartender of the Year Competition for the first time this past March. The finals of the contest took place...
on the beautiful island of St. Martin and top bartenders from across the country competed for bragging rights and a $10,000 prize. John Lermayer of the Florida Room at the Delano Hotel in Miami came out on top. His winning cocktail was called “Earth, Wind and Ginger”, which called for Canton, fresh muddled pineapple, fresh muddled sage, passion fruit nectar and Angostura bitters. The event was such a success, Canton is already planning next year’s competition. And beginning this June the brand is also going to start holding a Bartender of the Month Competition online. Mixologists will be able to submit recipes on the Canton website and each month’s winner will get a $500 prize and their recipe gets posted online for the whole month.

But some of these competitions offer even heftier prizes. This past winter Absolut and LXTV.com set out on a mission to “Search for America’s Top Bartender.” The 10 finalists from across the country competed for one of the largest purses ever to be offered by a cocktail contest. The competition was filmed and serialized like a reality television show. The drama-filled episodes were shown on LXTV.com. The winner was Las Vegas bartender Amanda Gager who was awarded an oversized check for $100,000 and also made an appearance on NBC’s Today Show. Not a bad tip for a few rounds of tasty cocktails.

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**Domaine de Canton Bartender of the Year Competition**

“Earth, Wind, and Ginger” by John Lermayer, the Florida Room at the Delano Hotel in Miami

- 2 oz Domaine de Canton
- 1/2 oz passion fruit nectar
- 5 large pineapple chunks
- 5 dashes Angostura Bitters
- 5 sage leaves

_Muddle pineapple chunks. Then add the passion fruit nectar, sage, Domaine de Canton and bitters. Shake. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Top with 3 dashes of bitters and a sage leaf._

**International Finlandia Vodka Cup**

“The Quicky Tini” by Radya Dimas, Dubai

- 1/2 part Finlandia Cranberry Fusion vodka
- 1 oz strawberry liqueur
- 1 oz lemon juice

_Shake all the ingredients together and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with a lemon slice and a mint tip._

**Rhum Clément’s New York Cocktail Challenge**

“Bitches Brew” by Daniel Eun, PDT in New York City

- 1 oz Rhum Clément Première Canne
- 1 oz Pampero Anniversario
- 1 oz fresh lime juice
- 1/2 oz St. Elizabeth All-Spice Dram
- 1 oz Demerara syrup
- 1 egg

_Combine all ingredients in a shaker, dry shake, add ice, shake and strain into a fizz glass._

**Averna HAVE A NEW LOOK**

“La Cola Nostra” by Don Lee, PDT in New York City

- 1 1/2 oz Zacapa 23
- 1 oz Averna
- 3/4 oz Lime
- 1 oz simple syrup
- 1/4 oz Pimento Dram
- 2 oz Champagne (Moet & Chandon White Star)

_Shake all ingredients except for the Champagne. Strain into long glass with ice. Top with Champagne._

**The Drambuie Bartender Showcase**

“Ginger Dram” Mindy Kucan, Hilton Hotel, Austin

- 1/2 part Drambuie Liqueur
- 1 part Grey Goose Vodka
- 1/4 tsp orange blossom water

_Chill all ingredients in a shaker filled with ice. Strain into a champagne glass that has been rinsed with ginger liqueur. Garnish with candied ginger._

**Hendrick’s Gin Bartender Limerick Cocktail Competition**

“A Cotswold Afternoon” by Peter Vestinos

- 2 oz Hendrick’s
- 1/2 oz lemon juice
- 1 drop orange flower water
- 1 heaping tablespoon of orange marmalade

_In shaker add one heaping tablespoon of orange marmalade. Shake and double strain into clear glass cup. Top with caraway seed foam*. Garnish with toasted caraway seeds. (*Caraway Seed Foam: Toast 1/4 cup caraway seeds. Add to 1.5 cups water and 1 cup demerara sugar, place on low heat to dissolve sugar and allow to simmer for 10 min. Turn off heat and allow to seep for 3 hours. Then strain.)_