Alcohol is a very old recreational drug, and its use is common all over the world. Some alcoholic beverages have even become icons of the cultures that invented them, like tequila and Mexican culture, or sake and Japanese culture. As a beverage, alcohol comes in many different flavors, made from a variety of plant bases, but all alcoholic beverages fall into one of three (or four) categories: beers, malt liquors (often included in the category of “beers”), wine, and distilled spirits. Despite their differences—in ingredients, production, distribution, and consumption—each type of alcoholic beverage delivers the same exact chemical component that is responsible for the mental and physiological effects we feel when we drink ethanol.

What are the differences between the types of alcoholic beverages we consume?

Aside from the ingredients that go into their making, and the exact processes used to produce fermented alcohol, the most important difference between the four categories of alcoholic beverages is the percentage of ethanol contained in the drink.

**Beer**

Typically made from barley, though sometimes from wheat or rice, beer has the lowest alcohol content of the four types of alcohol, usually around 5% alcohol by volume.

**Malt liquor**

Malt liquors, also called lagers or ales, are often made of the same stuff beer is made of, though extra sugar or corn is added to increase the percentage of alcohol by volume. Malt liquors usually hover around the 6% to 7% alcohol by volume range, though some malt liquors might have twice that or more.

**Wine**

Most commonly produced by fermenting grapes, wine is generally more potent than beer or malt liquor. Most wines contain 10–15% alcohol by volume; they might sometimes contain less alcohol by volume, little more than an average beer, but rarely do wines contain much more than 15% alcohol by volume.

**Distilled spirits**

The most potent type of alcoholic beverage, spirits—referred to as hard liquors in the United States—are made by distilling already fermented beverages. The distillation process is designed to remove as much of the non-alcoholic content as possible. Distilled spirits have at least 20% alcohol by volume, and usually quite a bit more than that.

How do these types of beverages compare in practical terms?

In the United States, a standard drink is defined as a drink containing about fourteen grams of pure alcohol. What constitutes that amount varies depending on the type of alcohol a person is drinking, and the percentage of alcohol by volume contained in a specific beverage. This is a general guide to understanding a standard drink in terms of the different types of alcoholic beverages:

- One 12 oz. fl. glass of beer
- One 5 oz. fl. glass of wine
- One 1.5 oz. fl. shot of distilled spirits

The amount of malt liquor needed to produce one standard drink lies between the amounts required for beer and wine, depending on the percentage of alcohol by volume in the malt liquor. When in doubt about the amount of pure alcohol in a given beverage, check the label. All alcoholic beverages sold in the United States are required to explicitly state how much alcohol by volume is in the drink.