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Canada's Best Rye, According To The 2026 Canadian Whisky Awards

At the 2026 Canadian Whisky Awards, rye took center stage—showing how Canada's classic blended style now shares the spotlight with bolder craft, cask-driven whiskies.

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A glass of Canadian rye whisky with rye grain alongside
PHOTO, J MICALLEF

Canadian rye whisky has long been defined more by its distinctive aroma and flavor profile than by its mash bill. For decades, the country's best producers have built rye character through blending: a soft, corn-driven base for sweetness and texture, paired with "flavoring" whiskies, often rye-forward, to add herbal, spicy, and aromatic intensity. The result is a style that can be elegant and easy-drinking while still unmistakably rye.

The [Canadian Whisky Awards](#) (CWA) provide a clear annual snapshot of how that tradition is evolving. Founded in 2010 by whisky writer and historian Davin de Kergommeaux, the CWA is widely regarded as the first long-running awards program devoted exclusively to whiskies distilled and matured in Canada.

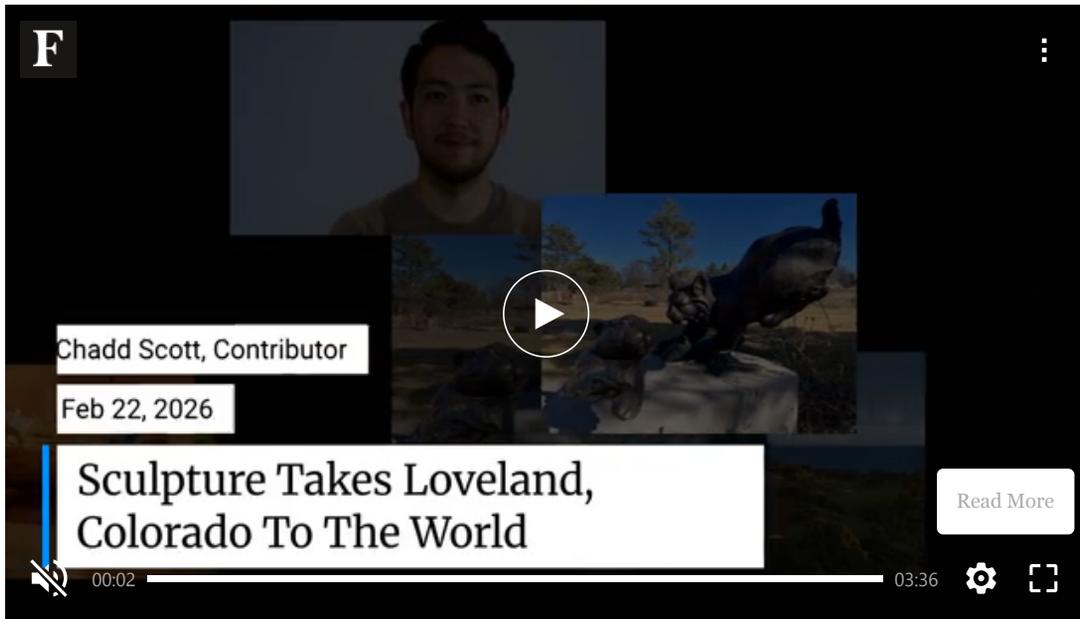
Winners are selected through blind tasting by a multi-judge panel and evaluated on aroma, flavor, balance, and complexity. Results will be announced at a gala in Victoria, British Columbia, during the [Victoria Whisky Festival](#) on January 15, 2026. Below are brief backgrounds and my tasting notes on four rye and rye-forward winners.

Canadian rye whisky is typically defined by a distinctive flavor profile developed through blending. Many Canadian producers distill multiple grain-based components separately, then combine a high-proof, corn-heavy “base whisky” for sweetness and texture with lower-proof “flavoring whiskies” made from rye-heavy mash bills, sometimes with a wheat or barley component, to provide aromatics and spice; finally, they blend them for balance.

The result is usually lighter-bodied than many American straight ryes, with a clean, polished texture and a profile that highlights rye’s aromatic side, featuring herbal and spicy notes of mint, wintergreen, cracked pepper, clove, and baking spice, along with dry cereal, vanilla, caramel, and seasoned oak.

“Canadian rye” is increasingly divided into two stylistic lanes. The classic blended style prioritizes smoothness and integrated spice, with restrained oak and an easy, cocktail-friendly structure. The newer craft lane showcases rye-forward mash bills, sometimes 100%, often distilled at lower proof to retain more congeners, bottled at higher strength, and sometimes finished in wine or fortified wine casks.

Those bottlings tend to be richer and more assertive, showcasing rye bread, earthy grain, pepper, baking spices, and a tannic grip, while still preserving rye’s signature herbal and minty notes that many drinkers associate with Canadian rye.



Wild Life Distillery, WLD Cask “King of the North”, 45.9% ABV, 750 ml.

King of the North was named Canadian Rye Whisky of the Year. The expression is part of their special-cask, limited-release program.

Wild Life’s house style is built on a local, rye-forward mash. It undergoes double pot distillation and assertive oak-driven maturation, while retaining an aromatic profile that showcases mint, baking spice, and dark caramelized sugars. The whisky is rich and concentrated on the palate, with flavors of rye spice, toffee, charred oak, and dry cocoa. The finish is long and spicy, with lingering notes of black pepper, herbal mint, and persistent oak tannins.



Whisky, 45.9% ABV, 750

h Whisky of the Year. This locally
n Canmore, Alberta. The distillery
nd aged on site, and highlights its
mash bill is 88% rye and 12%

malted barley.

On the nose, the whisky offers a classic Western Canadian rye aroma, with herbal notes of mint and wintergreen, plus cracked pepper, rye bread, vanilla, toffee, and seasoned oak. On the palate, it's rich, flavorful, and structured, with flavors of black pepper, cinnamon, honey, cooked cereal, and a subtle malted softness from the barley that enhances smoothness and creaminess without muting the spice. The finish is medium-long, drying, and spicy, with lingering notes of clove, mint, vanilla, and seasoned oak.

Sons of Vancouver Distillery, "The First Crack of a Crème Brûlée" Cask-Strength Wheated Rye, 57.9% ABV, 750 ml.

The [First Crack of a Crème Brûlée](#) was awarded Best Cask Strength Whisky and Best Whisky Aged 8 Years or Under.

Sons of Vancouver is a craft distillery in North Vancouver, British Columbia, known for small-batch spirits and experimental releases. This expression is a wheated rye with a mash bill of 72% rye and 28% wheat. Wheated bourbons are uncommon, though not unheard of, and are more prevalent in Canada than in the US. The maturation protocol is described as "new oak and ex-bourbon casks."

The "crème brûlée" cue suggests an aromatic profile of toasted sugar, vanilla custard, and browned butter, along with rye's minty, spicy notes and a high-proof ethanol note. The whisky is smooth, silky, and sweet on the palate, with flavors of creamy custard, caramel, and vanilla from the wheat component.

At the same time, the rye component adds pepper, anise, and spearmint. The new oak contributes caramelized wood sugars and a firmer tannic grip, while the ex-bourbon casks add vanilla and subtle baking spices. The finish is long and spicy, with lingering notes of charred oak, caramel, cinnamon, and a slight, cooling mint.

Sons of Vancouver Distillery, Wheated Rye, 50.5% ABV, 750 ml.

This Wheated Rye was awarded Best New Whisky.

This [wheated rye whisky](#) is based on a mash bill of 75% rye and 25% wheat. Maturation is in a mix of ex-bourbon barrels and new American oak, a regimen that tends to amplify vanilla and caramel notes while keeping rye's herbal spice prominent.

The whisky offers aromas of vanilla, honey, cooked grain, caramel, rye bread, mint, and baking spices. It's robust, smooth, and sweet on the palate, with flavors of rye bread, baking spices, black pepper, and herbal mint. The wheat component adds smoothness and a creamy texture, with pronounced mouthfeel. The finish is medium-long, sweet and slightly drying, with lingering notes of vanilla, rye spices, seasoned oak, and faint cocoa and rye toast.

These winners underscore what has quietly become the most crucial story in Canadian rye: the category is no longer defined by a single stylistic promise. The classic Canadian approach—blending for balance, clarity, and drinkability—still delivers and remains one of the best pathways to rye whisky's signature herbal-spice aromatics without harshness.

At the same time, distilleries like Wild Life and Sons of Vancouver are proving that Canadian rye can compete in a more assertive register, driven by rye-forward mash bills. These lower-proof expressions preserve character, while higher bottling strengths and wood programs are designed to add structure rather than softness.

In other words, “Canadian rye” is becoming a broader umbrella. Under it, you can now find everything from smooth, cocktail-ready rye built for integration to cask-strength, cask-detailed releases that trade politeness for intensity. The 2026 CWA results do not pick one lane over the other—they validate both—and, in doing so, make the case that Canada’s rye whisky’s identity is expanding, not changing.

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