

Historic Spirit Auction Set for Christie's New York

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The New York branch of Christie's auction house has sold many treasures over the years, but tomorrow it will put something on the block that hasn't been auctioned in this city for almost 88 years: distilled spirits.

A bottle of straight rye whiskey made from George Washington's 200-year-old recipe.

Even though Prohibition, which began in 1920, was lifted in 1933, the auction of distilled spirits was still not allowed in New York State. That was recently remedied through an effort by Christie's in collaboration with the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS).

Jay Hibbard, the vice president of DISCUS's eastern region, said that the restriction made "no sense" since New York is the auction capital of the world and wine has been legally auctioned there since 1994. Previously, private sellers of spirits were forced to send their bottles to London, if they were to avail themselves of Christie's service. Seven other states allow spirits auctions, including Illinois and California.

"We've opened the door into a large room," said Richard Brierley, head of American wine sales for Christie's, "and you're never really sure how large the room will be."

The response by private owners was impressive. The auction house hopes to bring the gavel down on 720 bottles and estimates their collective value at \$250,000. Among the items are a bottle of Macallan Scotch whisky from 1926 that was aged in oak for 60 years (est. value \$20,000-\$30,000) and a bottle of straight rye whiskey made from George Washington's 200-year-old recipe in the recently rebuilt still house at Mount Vernon in Virginia (\$10,000-\$20,000).

Also for sale is a Scottish whisky super lot of over 700 bottles of single and vatted malts, as well as blended Scotch (est. \$70,000-\$100,000). Also available are some fine Cognacs that date back almost 200 years. Frank Coleman, senior vice president of DISCUS, said, "It is to Christie's credit that they instantly saw the value of this."