

Map: The most popular liquor in every Virginia city and county

By **Ned Oliver** - November 27, 2019

Every year, Virginia's state-run liquor monopoly puts out a roster of its best-selling products. And this year, just like the year before, Tito's Handmade Vodka took the top spot.

But those overall sales figures conceal a rich and varied tapestry of local liquor preference.

Courtesy of freshly compiled data by the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority, here's a never-before-seen look at which booze brands residents of every city and county spent the most money on during the fiscal year that ended June 2019.

It's Tito's in the suburbs.

There are some exceptions — rural Bath County, for instance, which perhaps not coincidentally is home to the luxury Omni Homestead Resort — but the state's suburbs and Northern Virginia in particular go hard on Tito's Handmade Vodka.

In addition to being the highest grossing liquor in the state, it's the highest grossing in the country — a feat of marketing that saw the Texas-based distiller's top-shelf, "craft-spirit" branded product rise from relative obscurity to the top grossing liquor in both the state and country in the span of a few years.

Ad Age **named** the brand "Marketer of the Year" in 2017 for the effort, which focuses on folksy billboards, magazine ads and an overall strategy that operates

“under the philosophy that ‘if you have a liver, we deliver.’”

Statewide best sellers in FY2019

1. Tito's Handmade
2. Hennessy VS
3. Jack Daniel's 7 Black
4. Jim Beam
5. Fireball Cinnamon

“It’s a pretty meteoric rise in comparison with some of the other top selling brands have staying power because they’re just older brands that have been around for a lot longer,” said Taylor Thornberg, a spokeswoman for the state liquor authority.

A deep valley of whisky drinkers.

Jim Beam and Jack Daniel’s 7 Black have carved up the Shenandoah Valley with no obvious rhyme or reason.

Unlike Tito’s, both brands are mainstays in Virginia. Jack Daniel’s, in particular, held the top-selling spot for as long as the state has been tracking it up until 2017.

Crown Royal, a Canadian whisky sold in velvety fabric bags presumably intended to evoke luxury, remains a best seller in exactly three counties: Tazewell, Buchanan and Pittsylvania.

Why one county prefers one over the other, we cannot say, and neither can the state experts.

“Really, no idea,” said Thornberg. “But it probably comes down to a combination of tradition and brand recognition and then marketing by that brand and vendor. And also price point.”

Cities tend toward Hennessy.

Hennessy V.S., an exceptionally popular cognac, enjoyed one glorious year in 2017 as the state’s highest grossing liquor between the fall of Jack Daniel’s and the Tito’s invasion.

“Coincidentally, that’s also when Drake released his Billboard top hit ‘One Dance,’ and the chorus features Hennessey,” Thornberg notes. “So I can’t say correlation or causation, but, it was declared song of the summer.”

Hennessy remains the most popular liquor in the state’s biggest cities and in southeastern Virginia.

Ultimately, as is the case with the other contenders, Thornberg suspects it comes down to demographics and marketing efforts undertaken by the brand.

Radford likes its bottom shelf vodka.

The data revealed a few, shall we say, anomalies.

Among them: The city of Bristol and nearby Smyth County really like their Fireball — a sweetened cinnamon-flavored whisky that's risen to become the fifth best seller statewide but takes the top spot nowhere else.

The city of Radford, meanwhile, was the only in the state where a bottom shelf vodka was the highest-grossing product. The brand, Aristocrat, is traditionally a favorite among broke college students and while there might not be a ton going on in Radford, it is home to an eponymous university with a strong reputation for partying.

Finally, there's Southampton County in Southside Virginia, where Old Taylor Bourbon holds the top spot. The relatively little known brand retails for just under \$20 a handle.

A clerk at the county's only ABC store relays her theory via Thornberg: "She thinks their high sales might have something to do with being in a rural area with lots of hunting enthusiasts who enjoy it."

Ned Oliver

Ned, a Lexington native, has a decade's worth of experience in journalism, beginning at The News-Gazette in Lexington, and including stints at the Berkshire Eagle, in Berkshire County, Mass., and the Times-Dispatch and Style Weekly in Richmond. He also has the awards to show for it, including taking a pair of first-place honors at the Virginia Press Association awards earlier this year for investigative reporting and feature writing. He is a graduate of Bard College at Simon's Rock, in Great Barrington, Mass. Contact him at noliver@viriniamercury.com

