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Qi

Qi is the culmination of entrepreneur Brian Backus' 20-year fascination with Scottish single malts and medicinal herbal liqueurs in the Benedictine tradition. A dot-com refugee, Backus decided to update the great herbal liqueurs. He started by making infusions in his bathtub. "I was trying to make something that would be good for your health. What I didn't know was how to make something that would taste good," he says. A friend, John Scharffenberger, of chocolate fame, introduced Backus to Lance Winters, a nuclear engineer turned distiller at St. George Spirits in Alameda. Winters suggested tapping the oldest medicinal herb tradition — tea.

They went through 150 formulas combining herbs, spices and teas before going into final production earlier this year. The 80 proof Qi has a base of lapsang souchong tea, elevated by Tahitian vanilla and distilled orange peel.

Pronounced "chee" (meant to play off the Asian word for the life force), it drinks like a single malt, with a soothing, smoky taste. It's available at Napa's Sunshine Grocery, the Piedmont Grocery, Swirl in the Castro and Beverages & More stores in Northern California.