

Move Past Vodka

Bashing Into Greater Profits

by
Robert Plotkin



Vodka is the Switzerland of spirits. But who knew something ostensibly colorless, odorless and lacking any perceptible taste could cause such a fuss. Nevertheless vodka has sparked a heated debate within the drinks community about its place in contemporary mixology.

On one side you have practitioners who say the neutral spirit contributes nothing to cocktails but ethyl alcohol and that in almost every instance there's a more appropriate liquor choice. Furthermore, they contend its weed-like proliferation has stifled the growth of other more worthy spirits and the differences between new marques are growing indistinguishable.

Those in the other camp counter that denigrating vodka's neutrality is like condemning an artist's canvas for being white and unsullied. And like a blank canvas, it has afforded mixologists unlimited latitude, a free-styling creativity that has contributed greatly to the prevailing cocktail culture. And then there's the fact vodka accounts for nearly 30% of all the distilled spirits sold in the United States, inescapable evidence of its mass popularity.

So which is it? Will vodka eventually overrun America's backbars condemning us to a life of lackluster drinks and no-brainer cocktails? Or is it being unjustly maligned and is actually a creative panacea and tremendous source of profit?

In Jim Meehan's opinion, the majority of vodkas on the market are about as interesting as listening to static. The superstar mixologist and general manager of

Manhattan's cocktail-centric PDT would prefer the public spend their money based on more rational economic principles like supply and demand or the cost to produce and import a spirit instead of jumping from one flash in the pan to the next.

"The steady stream of new vodkas continues to divert attention from categories genuinely deserving of recognition, spirits like gin, rum, cachaça, pisco and blanco tequila. They've certainly contributed more significantly to the art of mixology than has comrade vodka." That said, Meehan does think vodka has had at least one positive impact on the business. "Because vodka costs far less to produce than other spirits, its market dominance has forced suppliers of gin, bourbon, rye, rum and brandy to keep a lid on their prices, which in turn allowed the cocktail renaissance to take root."

Aidan Demarest, director of spirits and beverages at The Edison in Los Angeles, says vodka accounts for about one out of every two drinks sold at his bar, so he understands the frustration his bartenders are feeling. "It's like asking talented chefs to work with nothing but chicken. It gets old quick. However, I'm not sure it's a question of bartenders bashing vodka as much as them wanting to bring other spirits to the forefront. We were able to resurrect a lot of classic

cocktails once consumers started responding to alternative spirits. To my way of thinking the Cosmopolitan is like a gateway drug for a Sazerac."

"I fully appreciate all of its shortcomings, but if almost 30% of your clientele prefer drinking vodka, then the savvy business move is to focus on its strengths and get to work," says Michael Waterhouse, owner and operator of Dylan Prime restaurant in TriBeCa. "I recently went to a popular bar with a friend who only drinks vodka. When to our amazement we learned the place no longer served vodka, we turned around and left. Now where are the percentages in that?"

As far as Waterhouse is concerned, embracing vodka has nothing to do with compromising professional standards and everything to do with catering to the wants and needs of the clientele. "Essentially what's gin before juniper and the botanicals are added, or whiskey before it goes into the barrel or liqueurs before the sugar and fruits are added? Vodka is the genetic building block linking most of the products on the backbar. Why not think of it in that sense and let it work for you."

Seeking Common Ground

Vodka will remain America's spirit of choice for the foreseeable future. Regardless of where you stand on its relative merits, becoming more adept at marketing high-end vodkas is an on-premise imperative. To that end, here's what the pros had to say on the subject.

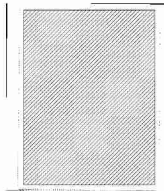
WHAT'S THE ATTRACTION? — How did a spirit as delicate and nuanced as vodka become so popular? For many, the draw is

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Livin' Large with Hot New Vodkas

Many vodka drinkers are driven by the desire to experience something new and exciting. For them it's like an urban adventure. So we've sifted through the new offerings and have selected our top ten. Guaranteed they'll look great on your back bar.

- 45th Parallel Referent Horseradish
- Blue Ice Organic Wheat
- Cold River
- Crop Harvest Earth
- Karlsson's Gold
- Sobieski Rye
- Square One Botanicals
- Triple Wheat Van Gogh Blue
- Vermont Gold



drinking something essentially pure. Achieving that effect is extraordinarily challenging. Aging spirits in wood can mask flaws and blemishes, but not so with vodka. No other spirit so thoroughly exposes its failings. Alone in the glass, stripped of its packaging, marketing and hype, vodka's an open book. Like a statuesque nude, purity is a thing of beauty.

"From a professional point of view, vodka presents mixologists with the opportunity to create original experiences for their guests," states Mac Gregory, director of food and beverage at The Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale. "Unlike other spirits, it enhances the overall cocktail without dominating the palate in any aspect. That flexibility is an enormously attractive."

BE DISCRIMINATING — Where's it

written that you need to stock every major brand on the market? Says Gregory, "We don't duplicate any flavor or specific style in our vodka portfolio. For example, we stock only one lemon vodka, one orange vodka instead of carrying an array of each. It's the same thinking employed when developing a wine menu. Especially in a down economy, it makes considerable sense to carry only those brands that fill a specific need."

VARIETAL STATUS — Like other noble spirits, vodka is a product of its environment and constituent ingredients. Of enormous importance is the character of the water used in its production, such as spring water, artesian water or water sourced from glaciers. It's a major point of differentiation between brands. Equally important is what the vodka is distilled from, e.g. corn, potato, rye or winter wheat. Each will produce a distinctively

different spirit. So too will how the spirit is distilled. Most are made in continuous stills, but increasingly more brands are being crafted in small batch alembic stills. Lastly, premium vodkas are very much products of their homelands and often reflect traditional styles.

Jim Meehan thinks that applying the concept of terrior to vodka would greatly enhance its perception. "I have a hunch that were brands to begin stressing the link between their products and their countries of origin, the more people would begin appreciating vodka as cultural icons rather than the chameleon of all spirits."

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