

Drinks International

PURITY
THE SPIRIT OF SWEDEN PURITY VODKA
VODKA

Thomas Kuuttanen
BY THOMAS KUUTTANEN, MASTER BLENDER



IMPORTED VODKA
40% ALC. BY VOL.
80 PROOF

**The World's
50 Best
Bars – with
this issue**

Special report International Spirits Challenge Awards night
Spirits focus Vodka | Whiskies of the World | Rum | Brandy
Wine focus Spain | South Africa

Vodka redefined

Discerning consumers are looking to identify differences in the taste and character of vodka. Hasse Nilsson helps with a new way of tasting

Vodka is the world's best-selling spirit and, strangely enough, also the one we care the least about. But something is happening on the international drinks market. Just as with whisky and cognac, modern vodka consumers veer away from traditional mass-produced brands toward interesting newcomers with character and body.

Vodka is often described as the world's most versatile spirit, which of course is a nice way of saying it lacks flavour. According to US regulations, vodka should be a neutral spirit without distinctive character, aroma, taste or colour. For some brands this is actually true. In fact, some of the best known vodkas are not even produced by the brand owners, but supplied to them by industrial producers of neutral grain spirits.

As these brands do not stand out in character they are instead trying to distinguish themselves by pricing and marketing. However, anyone who claims that all vodkas taste the same is certainly not a vodka drinker. And it does not take vodka in a sniffer at room temperature to discover the differences between brands and styles of vodka.

So, what is it then that creates the differences between vodkas? The key variables in order to define vodka into styles and categories are: raw material, distillation, filtration and the water used for dilution.

Raw material

Vodka can be made from anything containing starch able to be converted into fermented sugars. Cereal grains are the most common, although molasses and corn are becoming popular for low-priced, mass-market products. At the same time a



Hasse Nilsson is a journalist and copywriter who has been writing about whisky and wine in Scandinavian drink and food magazines for 15 years. He is also the author of the book *Feel Famous for Maxxium*

great number of innovative ingredients are chosen for the growing number of inventive newcomers. The most common ingredients for vodka production are:

Wheat – produces smooth, sweet, fresh and bready vodka with a vinous texture, not uncommonly with a hint of anis on the finish. Soft winter wheat is generally the preferred choice for high quality vodka.

Barley – offers the finest quality of starch and the lowest level of fatty oils which results in clean, crisp and rather light vodka, sometimes with a delicate sweetness in the background.

Rye – provides soft, clean, slightly sweet and delicate aromas with a light oiliness. The major cereal used in Poland.

Potato – results in a vodka heavy in style with a creamy texture. As the preparation is labour intensive and the yield is low, mainly high starch varieties are used for vodka production. Mainly used in Poland and Norway.

Grapes – controversial and rather new



ingredient to vodka production which, depending on grape variety, results in anything from very neutral to a refreshing spirit with characters of citrus and bubble gum.

Molasses – produces a neutral, clean spirit which often lacks balance due to its overly sweet character. Inexpensive ingredient extensively used for low-priced brands.

Corn – provides a neutral and low-cost spirit with little body. Generally considered to produce inferior spirits. Corn is mainly chosen when pricing is the key issue.

Multiple ingredients – as consumers are becoming more demanding, vodka blenders have started combining multiple ingredients to compose a complete experience which transcends individual characteristics. One example of this is Ultimat, which Ed Blinn, commercial director at the Patrón Spirits Company, describes as “unique



in that it combines the richness of potato, the smoothness of wheat, and the complexity of rye to create a perfectly crafted, exceptionally high-quality spirit”.

Distillation

Traditionally, all vodka was made using pot stills and single batch distillations, just like cognac and single malt whisky. Pot still distillation results in alcohol which is rich in character and body and contains the delicate aromas and flavour elements of the crop from which it was produced. The downside is that this production method is slow, labour-intensive and expensive.

However, the major problem is the fact that



Nilsson's flavour chart shows that many vodka newcomers in the premium sectors have a flavour profile with more body and 'character' than the well established brands



nowadays, most markets have regulations stipulating that vodka must be distilled to a minimum of 95% or 96% abv, which is not possible in traditional pot stills. Recently, a modern version of the pot still has been developed with positive results which may lead to a revival for artisan vodkas.

Since the 19th century, vodka producers have moved on to column stills (aka continuous stills) which perform numerous distillations in a single process, allowing large batches of neutral alcohol to be produced industrially at low cost. The column still produces neutral spirit with little or none of the character of the raw material.

A third option, which brings out the best of both worlds, is to marry the distillates from the two distillation methods in balanced proportions.

Distillation is basically a matter of separating a more volatile component, alcohol, from the less volatile component, water. The process results in ethanol (good), methanol (bad) and small amounts of impurities, including fusel oils, esters and acids collectively known as congeners. Most other spirits keep small amounts of congeners as they, if correctly used, contribute to positive flavours. But most vodka producers strive to remove impurities through a rectification process. As a result, whiskies and cognacs contain one hundred times as many congeners than standard vodka, which is one of the reasons why many vodkas are light and neutral in style.

The aim of vodka producers is either to remove all traces of impurities in order to obtain the cleanest flavour possible or to preserve flavours and characteristics which make their products unique.

Filtration

For some brands, distillation and rectification are not sufficient. In order to reach complete neutrality many brands filter their vodka. Charcoal is the most common method and is considered to be particularly effective for removing oily contaminants, even though there are many other filters with similar results. For example, French Grey Goose is filtered through limestone, Finland's



Finlandia uses glacial rock and Poland's Ultimat has a repeated copper filtration system.

In recent years, a multitude of new filtration methods have been presented, including marble, silver, gold, platinum and even diamond filters. Whether these methods make a difference or are just a marketing device is difficult to say.

However, not everyone is completely in favour of filtering their vodka. Thomas Kuuttanen, master blender of Sweden's non-filtered Purity vodka, says: "The slow, 34-times distillation process in our proprietary pot still results in a spirit so pure that no filtration is necessary. All character and flavours preserved after the distillation are there for a reason."

Water

An old Polish saying claims that "water breathes life into vodka" and this is a well known truth for all vodka connoisseurs. The final step in the production process is to reduce the alcohol to drinking strength. Accounting for as much as 62.5% of the product, the water can have great influence on the vodka.

Different water sources deliver significant variations, even on vodka distilled from the same ingredients. However, as with filtration, the marketing departments of the vodka companies often tend to play up the significance of the various waters they use. The truth is often that the water is allowed to keep little of its original qualities. In the worst cases, vodka producers



use distilled water – this can be described as a hollow water which brings no qualities to vodka. Most common are waters which, to different levels, have been filtered and deionised. Least common is natural water which gives the best result, but the minerals tend to merge and become visible in the bottle and therefore are rejected by most producers. The general rule is the less the producer tampers with the water, the more interesting the end result.

The connoisseur's vodka

For a long time vodka has been a drink of image and marketing rather than substance. However, in recent years the vodka industry has developed in a new direction. Many new vodkas back up their high profiles with quality and character quite different to the traditional brands. First up were super-premium vodkas such as the

extremely successful Grey Goose, together with Polish Belvedere and Dutch Ketel One. Stolichnaya subsequently raised the bar with its ultra-premium Stoli Elit, followed by the Polish multi-grain vodka Ultimat, Russian Kauffmann Vintage and the French grape vodka Ciroc, which all aim for a growing connoisseur market.

As the presence of super and ultra-premium vodkas has increased so has consumption. The traditional brands are losing market share to newcomers which often cost twice as much, but offer a different quality and taste profile.

The great vodka tasting

I recently made a comprehensive tasting comparing the new style of ultra-premium vodkas with traditional brands. The result was quite fascinating, as many of the newcomers are producing vodkas loaded with character and flavour, which implies new patterns of consumption. The tasting compared different categories, varying from value to ultra-premium vodka, with a base of traditional brands as a reference.

To sample such a great number of examples of a spirit for which taste and flavour span are somewhat limited requires methodology and accuracy. As many of the tasting notes tend to be rather similar, a flavour chart was

developed using a coordinate system based on two axes: light to full-bodied; and neutral to character (see page 25). Vodkas were positioned on the chart according to their respective characteristics. The evaluation was based on character/neutralty as well as how light/full-bodied the vodkas were perceived to be. The blind test used numbered glasses and all varieties were tested at the same time, with several breaks. They were grouped according to aroma and taste. The outcome was clear. Many of the brand leaders ended up far down the left side of the coordinate system, where the simpler varieties could be expected, while most super-premium vodkas were placed slightly above the middle and virtually all ultra-premium brands were diametrically opposite the traditional brands, up in the top right of the coordinate system.

To appoint a “winner” from such an extensive tasting is unfair as taste is individual and many of the best vodkas have a taste profile which is rather similar. But the brands found to be more interesting than the majority are presented here.

The conclusion from the tasting is that the world of vodka is changing and anyone who claims that all vodkas taste the same is certainly not a vodka drinker.

Kauffmann is an extremely expensive Russian vodka produced in small batches, sometimes with the vintage designation. The flagship of the portfolio is the Kaufmann Luxury Vintage. It is fresh and delicate with pronounced wheat and soft mineral sweetness. Outstandingly well-balanced. Kauffmann has gained a reputation for producing one of the world's most exclusive vodkas.

Purity Vodka is an organic, unfiltered Swedish vodka based on wheat and barley. Small-batch distillation in a pot still results in an astonishingly smooth vodka loaded with character. Its oily texture is dominated by minerals and umami, backed up by delicate tones of white chocolate, vanilla and liquorice. Purity Vodka is the crown jewel of ultra premium vodkas.



Ultimat is a Polish luxury vodka made from wheat, rye and potatoes, where the multiple ingredients contribute to an impressive whole. It is smooth, fresh, spicy and tasty with a significantly rich, oily tone. The producers claim this is the vodka which set the standard for the ultra-premium category – and it is very good.

Oval 42 is a subtle, rather sweet and peppery vodka in a wheat-drenched style. Quite flavoursome and full of character with some burn to the finish. It is produced by using a patented distillation technique based on molecular theory.

Level is oily, fruity and spicy with citrus tones. Its rather robust presentation makes it somewhat unbalanced. Level is produced by the Absolut Company, combining continuous distillation and batch distillation.

U'Luvka is a small batch vodka from Poland which uses a blend of rye, wheat and barley. It is crisp, clean vodka which goes from a nutty, cereal-grain grassiness to a sweet, flowery tone, and is balanced with spices and sweet anis.

Stoli Elit is made with Russian winter wheat, fermented in soft glacial waters. After fermentation the mash is distilled twice and the “heart” of the distillate is slowly filtered three times. It is fresh, clean and remarkably silky with a sweetness and an almost creamy richness that is matched by notes of tangy citrus.

Cavalli is an Italian grain vodka in an incredibly beautiful bottle. It is soft, light and neutral with a pleasant tone of minerals, but with an unfortunately aggressive burn in the finish.



Vodka in brief

Vodka is a clear spirit produced from fruit, grain, vegetables or potatoes. The word ‘vodka’ is Russian and means ‘the little water’. Bottling strength ranges from 37.5% to 50% abv, but the original Russian vodka is always 40%. Vodka is a protected name in the EU. It has to be distilled to at least 95% abv and not watered down to below 37.5%. Vodka is categorised as low price, standard, premium, super-premium and ultra-premium.