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# Regardless of how you like your vodka, there's a vodka maker (and marketer) out there with something just for you

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

When my editor assigned me this story on vodka, little did he know that my New Year's resolution was to drink more cocktails. (I'm a firm believer in making resolutions I can keep.) It's a 12-month permission slip to periodically reach over the wine list in favor of the mixed-drink menu and enjoy variety's spice.

I knew research would be critical for this project, but I'd have to concentrate and not let my resolution turn into a social problem. I also reasoned that if I focused on the entire rainbow of vodka drinks and not on vodka itself, I'd be missing the whole point.

These days, vodka is not just an ingredient in a drink. It's increasingly refined and enjoyed straight up. Though vodka is often described as colorless, odorless and flavorless, side-by-side comparisons of various brands of premium vodka reveal surprising differences.

## slight, subtle, sublime

The idea that there's such a thing as flavorless vodka is "inherently false," says Sarah Beth Greene, Ciroc vodka's brand ambassador. "You can never totally eradicate the agricultural ingredient."

Different ingredients and production processes yield "a different taste, absolutely. Very slight, but still perceptible," says Herve Pennequin, sommelier at Nikolai's Roof in Atlanta and the first American to be selected as a finalist in the 2004 Best Sommelier in the World Competition. Pennequin knows a lot about wine, but he's no slouch on vodka, either, as Nikolai's prides itself on the longstanding reputation of its first-class selection of vodkas.


While Nikolai's guests were sipping fine vodkas long before it was cool to do so, for most of the past 20 years most Americans looked at vodka differently. "Vodka in the 1980s was really used to mix cocktails like screwdrivers and greyhounds," says Sue Hearn, public relations director for Skyy vodkas. "One reason for that was that the mixer masked the taste of the vodkas. As people became connoisseurs, they wanted more taste."

## attack of the super-premiums

First introduced to Americans by Russian Vladimir Smirnoff in the 1930s, vodka is now the No. 1 spirit in the United States, and second worldwide only to rum. In 2004, vodka accounted for 25 percent of the U.S. spirits market. "It was biggest in consumption and biggest in sales," says Shawn Kelley, public relations director for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS). Compared to 2003, overall vodka sales volume for 2004 was up 5.3 percent to 44.1 million cases, while sales revenue was up 12.6 percent to \$3.3 billion.

DISCUS tracks sales in four price segments: value brands \$10 or less for 750 milliliters; premiums \$10 to \$13; high-end premiums \$13 to \$21; and super-premiums over \$21. "Super-premium is leading in growth," Kelley says, "but value brands make up most of what was sold." Last year, super-premium sales totaled 2.6 million cases, an increase of 38.1 percent over 2003, while value vodka sales increased 3.5 percent to a total of 20.8 million cases.

"What's fueling the growth is flavors as well as high-end products," says Tiziana Mohorovic, director of information services for Adams Beverage Group. She points out that in the past five years, more than 80 percent of beverage alcohol introductions were either high-end, flavor-oriented or a combination of the two. "Higher-end products are capturing a higher percentage of market share, whereas lower-end products are declining. What's



While it sounds straightforward, infusing vodka with flavors takes a good deal of time to develop. Ciroc uses its pineapple-infused vodka to make this pineapple martini.

# shaken, stirred straight Up &X

happening is that consumers have become more status- and brand-oriented, and they're willing to pay for them."

## we're no. 1 somewhere!

What do you get by choosing, say, a super-premium over a premium? Hopefully you come away with improved taste, quality and purity. Better ingredients cost more, as do multiple filtrations and distillations. Import taxes, if they apply, also raise prices. But the biggest component of the price is packaging and marketing.

"Image and branding are an extraordinary part of the [vodka] category," says Michael A. Venezia, director of education for Atlanta's United Distributors. "You don't want to be just *another vodka*. You have to be perceived as above the rest."

"It's the bottle, the name and the product. Behind that is marketing," says David H. Van de Velde, president of Luctor International, which imports Vincent Van Gogh Vodkas in the artistic bottles inspired by the Dutch impressionist. "They may say 'best in market' because some panel somewhere picked it, then use it in advertising to convince the customer. There's

a lot of fluff in the industry." He says to be skeptical about stories proclaiming "the finest winter grains from the summer harvest." Often such claims are nonsense.

"A lot of it is hype," says Craig "Bubba" Smith, assistant manager of Sherlock's Town Center in Atlanta. "Every week some rep comes in and says, 'Our vodka is No. 1 in this magazine,' and the next week another comes in and says theirs is No. 1 in a different magazine. What are you supposed to believe? The best way is to try the different vodkas yourself. It all depends on personal taste preferences."

With those little 50 milliliter bottles readily available, it's easy to find out just what your preferences are. Sampling just eight, I discovered some surprises and new favorites. With 300 vodkas on the market (and an endless curiosity), who says my resolution has to expire at midnight on New Year's Eve?

## when vodka flavor is not enough

Apparently, my quest for new taste experiences is not unique. "People are always looking for something new," says Venezia. This partly explains why flavored vodkas were introduced about 20 years ago.

COURTESY OF CIROC

Flavors — which range from lemon and mango to chocolate and pepper — are added through maceration, infusion or circulation. Such vodkas may sound like just another marketing gimmick, but they are very tricky and expensive to make. The limited presence of sugar in vodka means “weak flavors are especially difficult because there’s no molecule to carry the flavor to make it strong and bold,” says Van de Velde.

The fun factor aside, I wanted to find out if flavored vodkas offer any advantages, so I headed back to the research lab and mixed up a side-by-side comparison of two cosmopolitans. Cosmo “A,” made with triple sec, though tasty, had a stickier mouthfeel than Cosmo “B,” made with orange-flavored vodka. So maybe there is something there, but more research is required than my editor’s deadline will allow.

But don’t take my word for it. Make your own resolution — and your own taste decision.

*Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.*



Above: SKYY Spirits spent over \$25 million to create SKYY90, a vodka that not only has a sleek, eye-catching bottle, but is distilled multiple times.

At right: Distillers use new flavors to create more consumer interest in vodka, such as Van Gogh's espresso flavored vodka.



### leading brands of vodka in the united states

(Based on 2004 Sales)

1. Smirnoff
2. Absolut
3. Gordon's
4. Stolichnaya
5. Skyy
6. Popov
7. Grey Goose
8. Barton
9. Skoll
10. Ketel One

SOURCE: Adams Beverage Group



## HOW TO TASTE VODKA

The basic principles of wine tasting apply to vodka, with slight modifications. For maximum accuracy, sample vodkas at room temperature; when comparing them, stick with small flights of three or four.

**appearance:** Look through the spirit. Is it clear or cloudy?

**smell:** Swirl the liquid then hold the glass a few inches below the nose — any closer may desensitize it. Is the alcohol hot or soft, strong or discreet, aggressive or elegant? Do you sense any toast, earth, lemon, lime or vanilla characteristics? In flavored vodkas such as orange, note differences mimicking those between the fruit's more concentrated peel or softer pulp.

**taste:** Take a small sip, just enough to thinly coat the front of the tongue — more may dull the palate. Does the taste live up to the smell? Are they compatible? Balanced in complexity? Do you note starch, earth or fruit flavors? Is it smooth?

**mouthfeel:** Does the spirit feel clean? Crisp, viscous, oily or sticky?

**finish:** Is swallowing a pleasant experience or does it burn?



Banking on glamour by association, Siku turns to Playboy to market its vodka. From left to right, Brande Roderick, Baywatch star and Playboy's 2001 Playmate of the Year; Christina Santiago, 2003 Playmate of the Year; Jennifer Walcott, Playboy's Miss August 2001; Cara Zavaleta, MTV's Road Rules star and Miss November 2004; and Tamara Witmer, Miss August 2005.

## PLAYBOY SWINGS INTO THE VODKA GAME

Is anything truly hip before *Playboy* pays attention to it?

The ultra-premium vodka Siku (pronounced see-KOO) may or may not have been cool before teaming up with the vaunted men's magazine for a string of nationwide golf events, but now the question is moot. Siku and the Playboy Golf Tournament are touring 25 major cities across the United States and Canada and will stop to drive a few balls in Atlanta on Oct. 2 and 3. Siku says they have a great reason to pick *Playboy* as a partner.

“Our marketing strategies have been to partner with companies and events that offer an ultra-premium experience for our target audience,” says Julie Johnson, Siku's director of marketing and communications. That target audience, says Johnson, includes *Playboy's* readers — people who have disposable income, who want to experience the finer things in life and who like to introduce new brands to others.

Playboy will host a VIP party at The Blue Olive in the Park Place shopping center across from the Perimeter Mall on Oct. 2 at 8 p.m., while Atlanta's Cobblestone Golf Course hosts the golf event on Oct. 3 at 1 p.m. Get more info at [www.playboygolf.com](http://www.playboygolf.com), or for more local information, contact *Playboy's* regional event manager, Kim Johnston, at [kjohnston2@comcast.net](mailto:kjohnston2@comcast.net).

And by the way, freeloaders: In order to attend the VIP party, you've got to be in the event itself as either a sponsor or a golfer.

— Steve Stevens