

Craft Vodkas Stop Drinking Booze Designed For Non-Drinkers

Robert Haynes-Peterson

Vodka's probably the most fool-proof spirit. Whether you ask for Absolut, Stolichnaya, Grey Goose or a smaller brand for your vodka tonic or Moscow mule, they're all solid entries in a very crowded category. The problem with vodka in general (at least in the U.S.) is the limited range of what you can do in production.

According to the TTB (Alcohol, Tobacco and Trade Bureau), vodka must be a neutral spirit "without distinctive character, aroma, taste or color," distilled at 190 proof (which kills much of the flavor) and bottled at 80 proof or higher. The result is that 90% of the **vodkas** on the market are perfectly fine, but they're almost indistinguishable from one to the other.

There are, however, distinctions the concerned distiller can make — from the base sugar/starch to the number of distillation runs and the level of filtering — that impart a little flavor, richness and character beyond the norm. Many of these "vodkas with flavor" (not to be confused with flavored vodkas — Van Gogh's new PB&J, anyone?) are appearing on store shelves courtesy of innovative, headstrong craft distillers around the world.

Vermont Spirits Gold

"Anything that can be converted to sugar can be used to make vodka," says Vermont Spirits founder and CEO Steve Johnson. "But different sugars can affect the final product." With that in mind, Johnson and his team created Vermont Gold (made from 100% maple sap) and Vermont White (made from milk sugars). While White retains the creaminess and roundness of the milk sugars, Gold is rich (well... rich for vodka) with butterscotch, caramel and mild white pepper. "It has a very distinctive character and flavor," says distiller Harry Gorman.

Vermont Gold's proprietary slow fermentation process and specific yeasts ensure the retention of as much character as legally allowed. Fractional distillation columns are used for batch distilling, allowing for more accurate head, tail and middle cuts (that is, not so harsh). They do as little filtering as possible to retain as much body as they can. "Basically, I want to keep all the flavor we have," says Gorman. Pair VSG with cider, lemon juice and baking spice bitters, or substitute maple syrup rather than simple syrup to enhance this drink. If you get ahold of the Gold 2008 limited release, Gorman implores you to sip it chilled, not throw it in a cocktail. (\$35).

<http://www.vermontspirits.com>

Tito's Handmade Vodka

Before there were microdistilleries, there was this steampunkish indie Texas label, established in 1997. Founder and CEO Tito Beveridge (yes, it's his real name) went from geophysics to mortgage brokerage before discovering his true calling, according to brand manager Nicole Portwood. Beveridge built his own copper pot still (not realizing most vodkas are made in column stills for cheap, multiple distillations), providing a body and richness more commonly associated with eaux de vie and Cognacs. He opted for corn instead of wheat, and began making "vodka I like to drink: smooth going down, a nice, easy feeling, and clean in the morning." (Ever the rock star, he also hoped to meet girls, a plan he says worked: "I met my wife!")

"I think bartenders who don't like vodka enjoy Tito's because it has body," says Beveridge. And he's right: The corn base adds subtle notes of vanilla and caramel underneath all that ethyl alcohol. On the palate it is smooth and sweet, ideal for vodka martinis or other drinks where the booze dominates.

<http://titosvodka.com/>

Purity Vodka

"My ambition has not been to produce a vodka that pleases everyone, but a vodka I love myself," says the proper and kindly Thomas Kuuttanen, founder and distiller at Sweden's Purity Vodka. The organic booze uses a blend of winter wheat for a complex base and malted barley for roundness, flavor and viscosity. The result is a full-bodied, clean vodka that regularly beats out Grey Goose and Ketel One in blind taste tests that Kuuttanen hosts among finicky bartenders. He also uses a slow, labor intensive multi-distillation process and a minimum of filterings as well as a blend of un-distilled mineral water and deionized water. "The purpose of our slow, integrated distillation process is to maintain flavor, body and complexity." This vodka is ideally suited to light fruit infusions and summery cocktails. (\$40 for 750ml).

<http://www.purityvodka.com>

Ocean Vodka

It's always nice when the **booze** you're shooting back is also doing some good in the world. This 100% organic vodka out of Maui celebrates two things Hawaii has a lot of: sugar cane and ocean. Though the organic sugar cane for this crisp, clean vodka currently comes out of South America, the company recently purchased a certified organic 80-acre farm on Maui, and should be producing and distilling its own cane spirit within the year.

"A lot of potato and grain vodkas have a metallic aftertaste," says founder and native Hawaiian Shay Smith. "With cane, it's sweeter on the front. And though we extract the salt from the ocean water [Mahalo Deep Sea Water], it still leaves a lot of deep ocean minerals, adding to the viscosity." In fact, the faint smell and taste of the sea gives this vodka a roundness and mild flavor more commonly found in rums or

lightly aged whiskies. It also plays into a hot trend of adding a pinch of sea salt to cocktails. "I gave some at room temperature to a friend who is a Scotch drinker, and he said, 'Wow! I could sip this on the rocks for dinner!'" (\$30).

<http://www.oceanvodka.com/>

Fair Quinoa Vodka

Pronounced "kin-WA," Quinoa is an ancient pseudo-grain (and alleged superfood, perfect for celiacs and gluten-intolerants) originating in northern South America. Meanwhile, the French have produced hard spirits as long as anyone (only recently recognized beyond Cognac with products like Ciroc Vodka, G'Vine Gin and Citadelle Gin). Why not combine the two, with a touch of do-goodery? This nearly odorless grain vodka is most like the premium brands you're probably used to. "We wanted to invest our time and efforts in the order of priority: Fair trade, craft spirits, vodka and quinoa," says founder Jean-Francois Daniel. Helping farmers in Bolivia, while eschewing the corporate/government rules dominating France, Daniel and his team have created an uber-smooth, viscous vodka that competes favorably with Belvedere and Grey Goose minus the pomp. A single distillation of the quinoa mash (beer) preserves the essence of the grain (like a white whisky), while creating a wholly mixable vodka, perfect from Greyhounds to Bloody Marys. (\$33).

<http://www.fairspirits.com/product.html>

Karlsson's Gold

Dipping into an unfamiliar spirit is a bit like the ape-human in Stanley Kubrik's *2001* tentatively touching the mysterious obelisk before learning to brain his enemies with a bone: You recoil at the unfamiliar scent, tentatively taste it, and before long you're slugging Fernet Branca or absinthe or rye. Karlsson's, made from a blend of select Swedish heirloom potatoes (founder and CEO Peter Ekelund "rescued" a group of Cape Bjäre potato farmers from a developer buy-out), has that effect. The nose is strong, like potatoes in the storm cellar at the end of winter. "If you don't like it, don't drink it," insists master blender Börje Karlsson. (We're detecting a pattern among headstrong indie distillers.) "It sums up how we feel about vodka," says Ekelund.

"The vodka category has become so saturated. Instead of trying to fit the mold, we went back to basics." In addition to the terroir-ish devotion to specialty potatoes, you'll find a single-distilling process and minimal filtering to lock in flavors. Throw in a pinch of salt and some fresh ground black pepper onto the chilled vodka, and you'll discover a whole new world of sipping booze.

New this year is the release of Batch 2008, billed as the world's first single-varietal, single batch potato vodka, employing the 2008 (apparently a good year for vintage vodkas) harvest of the Gammel Svensk Röd potato. (\$27).

<http://karlssonsvodka.com/>