

## **Vodka, my little water**

**Steven Olson**

Vodka, or “little water,” is the water of life of Russian, Eastern European, Scandinavian, and many other cultures, and is by definition, a neutral spirit that can be made anywhere, from virtually anything that grows in the ground and can produce sugar for fermentation. Although most quality vodkas are made from grain such as wheat or rye, or potatoes, others are distilled from the fermented sugars of corn, sweet potatoes, sugar beets, and even sugar cane.

Vodka is by definition innocuous, or without flavor. Vodka, being by design neutral, becomes a pure product of the distiller’s art, tasting only of the product from whence it is derived. Vodka is traditionally triple-distilled, usually today in column or patent stills, and is often filtered. The idea is to remove all congeners, to create a perfectly clean and neutral spirit. A well-made Vodka should be clean and bright and texturally smooth, which makes it the perfect vehicle for flavor. This is why we love to fashion cocktails with Vodka as a base. Though the origins of Vodka are ancient, the cocktails made with it we affectionately call New Classic Cocktails, reflecting its relatively recent popularity in the US, where the concept of the cocktail originated. It is this same ability of Vodka to be a vehicle for flavor that provokes us to infuse our Vodkas with unique flavors, from herbs and spices to fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The characteristics of Vodka also make it extremely friendly for matching with food.

Since the first spirits, the original products of distillation were often created for either medicinal or religious purposes. The idea of preserving herbs, fruits, vegetables and spices was often to carry these medicinal beverages into battle, or on extended voyages. Some were created to bring the imbiber closer to God. Some were used as preservative solutions, others for topical remedies, many to cure internal ailments.

Vodka has always been a natural for adding flavors. As the perfect vehicle for flavor, it tends to take to the added flavors remarkably, and without prejudice. These flavored Vodkas, although an ancient concept with many still existing ancient recipes, is a rather new phenomenon, which has seemingly taken the spirit world by storm, particularly as the base for New Classic Cocktails. There are many ways in which we can add flavor to Vodka. The most natural being by infusion (adding an element into the finished Vodka and allowing it to impart its flavors naturally) or maceration (crushing or soaking the flavoring elements, often fruits in Vodka, then adding it to more Vodka and/or...) or by distillation, or distilling the flavoring elements directly into the Vodka, often after maceration, so that the flavors can become well integrated into the clean, pure Vodka spirit.

Flavors added to Vodka are not governed by any sort of international laws, and therefore are not required to be natural. Some Vodkas are flavored with artificial flavors, which are then often added by compounding, or adding a syrup, usually with a sugar base, back in to already distilled product.

We first began to develop a fascination for Vodka by watching the news reels of WW II, where we saw the leaders of Russia, and of Eastern European and Scandinavian countries at the summit conferences toasting with Vodka. It was Hollywood that caught on to Vodka first, and it was billed as an elegant beverage with no flavor. You could catch a buzz without tasting the booze, so to speak.

In the 1950’s, we saw James Bond call for Vodka in his martini for the first time. The Moscow Mule (with ginger beer) was the cocktail of choice of the advertisements, designed for the

Hollywood set, and the fervor began. In the early 1960's, the consumer began to catch on, but, once again, it was bartenders who figured it out. They went back to the Classics, and began to rework the recipes to incorporate Vodka. The Orange Blossom, favored cocktail of the great writers of the round table at the Algonquin during Prohibition, soon became the Screwdriver, and the Red Snapper became a Vodka cocktail as the Bloody Mary. Soon to follow were the Salty Dog, the Greyhound, then others like the Sea Breeze, the Cape Codder, the Vodkatini, and later such new classics as the Cosmopolitan.

You may not choose to consider the Vodka cocktails as Classic cocktails by the classic definition, but one must certainly recognize that they are here to stay. These NEW Classic cocktails should be treated with the same respect that is paid to the classics: premium cocktails should always be made with premium ingredients, meaning premium spirits, fresh mixers, great glassware, and the proper garnish.

In 1967, Vodka passed Gin as the most popular white spirit in America. In 1976, Vodka became the #1 most popular spirit of any type served in the US, and since that time has only increased its stranglehold on the #1 position. Lately, its continued growth has been augmented by the introduction of flavored Vodkas to the market, and bartenders' willingness to create interesting cocktails from them. There has also been a huge influx of new, supposed "boutique Vodkas," so-called super premiums, which have helped to drive the category, as well as an increased awareness of the spirit, as witnessed by the popularity of new Vodka bars, and restaurants that feature Vodka lists and comprehensive programs. These new super premium vodkas have successfully marketed their products using the single- malt scotch, boutique tequila, and small batch bourbon phenomenon as models. Taste these so-called super premiums in blind tastings and see for yourself what they are all about. Make your OWN decisions. The proof is in the glass.