

# The spirit of vodka

by Justin King

Vodka is the most popular spirit category in America, accounting for 20% of all distilled spirits sold. Quite an accomplishment for a product that the federal government didn't even classify as a separate category until 1951. Vodka is defined by the Feds as a spirit without any distinctive character, aroma, taste or color and that has been one of the secrets of its success, since vodka's chameleon-like nature allows it to mix well with almost anything.



The historic origin of Vodka is a mystery. The Russians and the Polish are two groups that lay claim to discovering it, in each of the countries it is drunk with meals. Its influence is recorded as far back as 988 A.D., the year the Grand Prince of Kiev was told by his ambassadors that Islam forbade strong drink. Consequently the Prince became a Christian and was sent plentiful supplies of communion wine from Byzantium, the seat of orthodox Christianity. They discovered that with extremes of temperature in that part of the world the higher alcoholic strength of vodka did not freeze.

Because vodka is highly neutral, with flavoring substances largely removed during processing, it is possible to make it from a mash of the cheapest and most readily available raw ingredients. Potatoes were traditionally used in Russia and Poland but have largely been supplemented there and other vodka producing countries by cereal grains. The key to distillation is the separation of alcohol from the water content of fermented liquid. The eastern Europeans were able to separate the alcohol by freezing fermented liquid during the winter months. As a result they were left with a drink of higher strength than that produced by fermentation alone.

Most vodka has no color and carries only the clean aroma and character of pure spirit. It has a characteristically light and very slightly oily texture. There is a long heritage of making flavored vodkas in Europe, going back to the days of home distillation, when vodka was flavored with herbs, spices and fruit. Nowadays natural flavorings such as cherry, lime, orange, mint, etc. are added in the final distillation. Water also is important in the final product, since over half of what is in the bottle is water. Distilled water or any highly-treated water will not taste as good as water fresh from a virgin spring. So, the eventual quality of the vodka is often determined by the finishing processing method of distillation used, the equipment used, the water used and other factors.

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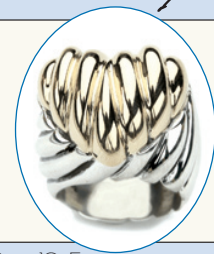
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