

Getting into the spirit of vodka

Chef-Tested: It's now the top selling liquor, so what's the best brand?

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Bartender Jessica Smith loves making martinis: vodka martinis. Most people, especially young people, she said, don't even know that gin can go into a martini, too.

Now with the burgeoning flavored-vodka market, with flavors from elderberry to blueberry to pear, fruitier martinis have become customer favorites at the Bubble Lounge in Fairfield, where Smith tends bar four nights a week.

According to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, vodka dominates the spirits industry, accounting for 31 percent of sales, and flavored vodkas account for 16 percent of all vodkas sold. While vodka is generally thought of as a mixer, the popularity of drinking it straight, especially pre-

mium brands, is increasing, the council reports.

We asked Smith to taste six of the more popular brands of vodka sold at the bar, which are all 80 proof. The shots were rated on aroma (the first step of the tasting), texture (mouth-feel) and taste. She also rated the vodka's mixability — how well it would work in cocktails.

First place was a tie with Swedish vodka, Absolut, made from winter wheat, and Vesica, a potato-based vodka from Poland, both scoring 97 points. Vesica seems low priced and may be hard to find in some areas.

Chopin from Poland, also a potato-based vodka, scored perfectly in texture and taste. Grey Goose from France, Ketel One from Holland and Stolichnaya from Russia are all made from wheat. Prices were taken from online retailers.

ABSOLUT

Price: \$21.95/750 ml bottle
Aroma score (out of 30): 30
Texture score (out of 10): 8
Taste (out of 60): 59
Total score: 97

Comments: The aroma was on the sweet side, which Smith said she prefers in vodkas. Taste was strong and powerful, but not harsh.

Mixability: This vodka is great straight, said Smith, who recommended using it as a base for a Dirty Martini (because it would mix well with olive juice, she said) or combined with fruit juices, such as in a Cosmopolitan.



VESICA

Price: \$12.98/750 ml bottle
Aroma score (out of 30): 29
Texture score (out of 10): 9
Taste score (out of 60): 59
Total score: 97

Comments: Sweet aroma, but not as strong as Absolut. Texture was a little burning with a strong aftertaste. Smooth, but powerful taste.

Mixability: Best for martinis and fruit-based drinks.

CHOPIN

Price: \$37.99/750 ml
Aroma score (out of 30): 26
Texture score (out of 10): 10
Taste score (out of 60): 60
Total score: 96

Comments: Not much of a scent, said Smith, but has a smooth, sweet finish that she liked.

Mixability: Good for martinis.



STOLICHNAYA

Price: \$23.99/750 ml
Aroma score (out of 30): 10
Texture score (out of 10): 7
Taste score (out of 60): 40
Total score: 57

Comments: Smooth texture, little aroma and lacks the sweet finish she likes.

Mixability: Serve well-chilled in a martini.



GREY GOOSE

Price: \$34.99/750 ml
Aroma score (out of 30): 15
Texture score (out of 10): 4
Taste score (out of 60): 30
Total score: 49

Comments: Mild scent. Strong aftertaste, but not burning.

Mixability: Nice for vodka tonics topped with lime or mixed with club soda and lemon.

KETEL ONE

Price: \$23.99/750 ml
Aroma score (out of 30): 10
Texture score (out of 10): 2
Taste score (out of 60): 20
Total score: 32

Comments: Slight burning going down. Harsh tasting of the six vodkas tested.

Mixability: Wouldn't use it in a martini. Suggests mixing it with a fruit juice to mask the strong taste.

