

Wine Spectator

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Vodka's Novel Flavors

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You've stumbled upon a purveyor of a palate-boggling array of flavors. His shelves offer everything from sweets-birthday cake, cotton candy, whipped cream, butterscotch, bubble gum-to spices and herbs-ginger, tea, black pepper, jalapeños, habanero, saffras-to fruits as common as orange, lemon and lime or as exotic as dragon fruit, pomegranate, açai and mango. A few different coffee choices are thrown in to boot.

But you're not in a sweets shop, a delicatessen or even a tricked-out Starbucks. What you've entered is a bar, and this fantastic taste spectrum is all bottled as vodka. The fastest-growing segment of the world's most popular spirits category is flavored vodka, and it's proliferating not just in volume, but in its vast-and sometimes odd-choices available.

Which, depending on your point of view, can be either very exciting or very confusing when you go to stock your liquor locker. Once described solely as tasteless, odorless and colorless, vodka was fairly straightforward. You made your purchase based on preferences like price and purity. Now you might also consider the theme of the entertainment you're hosting-is it a birthday bash, a tea party or tiki time? Or match to your personality (there's a lemon-lime vodka called Dude.)

Flavored vodkas have been around hundreds of years in the form of homemade infusions, and they've come bottled for at least half a century. It was in 1986, however, when they got serious.

Already a vodka-marketing phenomenon, Absolut introduced Peppar as a handy way to spice up a Bloody Mary, opening up the market to a kaleidoscope of taste. Such mainstays as Smirnoff and Stolichnaya soon developed their own fleets of flavors, and newer brands like Skyy flourished by mining the category. Even ultrapremiums-Belvedere, Ciroc, Grey Goose and Ketel One-have some entries in the taste race.

Most of the early flavors were fruits, particularly citrus. But it wasn't long before coffee (notably Van Gogh), vanilla and coconut vodkas appeared. Vodka also kept up with trends like so-called superfoods green tea, pomegranate and açai, and their purported health benefits.

And makers don't stick to one flavor in a bottle. All of the limited-release Absolut City series vodkas have been blends and all have been successful enough to become part of the permanent portfolio (e.g. its newest, Orient Apple, with ginger, was first tested as Absolut Brooklyn).

But the latest-and most novel-flavors come not from the mainstream, but from such brands as UV with its Cake, Pinnacle with Cotton Candy and Whipped Cream variants, and Hangar One with Dude and Bubble (as in bubble gum). And they are capturing the drinking public's imagination. Dean Phillips, president of Phillips Distilling which makes UV, says, "We've never had a product launch quite like Cake. Demand was created before its introduction."

It's a fashion category, says Phillips. If you're mad to know what cotton candy vodka tastes like, try it in a bar before investing. No sane guest will fault you for not having it on hand.



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Besides, if you chase fleeting flavor with a fury, it won't be long before there isn't room in your home bar for much else. It isn't as important to keep up with the latest flavor as it is to consider your personal taste, and the ease or convenience a flavored vodka might bring you. Remember, however, that these products don't have to adhere to the minimum 80-proof (40 percent alcohol) standard legally mandated for regular vodka. Flavors can dip as low as 60 proof (30 percent), so adjust your recipes accordingly.

One strategy is to stick with the longstanding cocktail flavors, such as fruits as lemon, lime, orange and cherry, that have historically found their way into drinks. The reasoning is, you'll probably put some citrus into your vodka tonic anyway, so you're not devoting shelf space to an oddball flavor. But to me this is strictly lazy. After all, I have fresh fruit lying around that I could just squeeze into a drink. On the other hand, if you're making trays full of drinks while entertaining, wouldn't it be better to cut to the chase by having a bottle of Smirnoff Citrus or Ketel One Oranje at the ready?

Flavored vodkas do boost a Bloody Mary, a drink you should really start to prepare days in advance so that the flavors marry in the mix. With pepper vodkas (Absolut Peppar, Hangar One Chipotle), cucumber and tomato versions (Crop) or a combination (Belvedere Bloody Mary) you get a head start.

The flavors I tend to keep around are harder to duplicate from the refrigerator or pantry. I love pears, but that's a fruit that doesn't surrender its juice very easily. So rather than create an infusion, I let Grey Goose do it. Mango vodka is tantalizing, but I can't wait until the really good ones are in season. Absolut figures that out for me. The same goes for pomegranate, and for that I turn to Stolichnaya's Pomegranik. I don't even know what dragon fruit is. But Skyy does, and has put it in a bottle for me.

But somewhere deep inside I have a hankering to try my own infusion. (The website for Tito's vodka, which doesn't bottle flavors, has video instruction). The possibilities are endless. I've always liked rib-eye steaks. Maybe I'll try that.

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