

# Rocking with AMERICA'S FAVORITE SPIRIT

By Robert Plotkin

Vodka sales continue at a record pace, now accounting for 25 percent of all distilled spirits sold in the United States. The vodka category grew 6.8 percent last year alone, and industry prognosticators expect this upward spiral to continue at least through 2007.

Yet few things sell themselves, and vodka is no exception. While it remains America's preferred spirit, little has been done to debunk the widely held misconception that all vodkas are essentially the same. Educating the American palate is difficult to do when vodka is mixed with every combination of juice and mixer behind the bar, thus masking differences in vodka quality and character.

## Adult Education

With the world's finest vodkas perched on the backbar, you need a plan on how to market to spirits-craving guests. The essential first step is educating your staff on a basic theme: great vodkas are not created equal. Impress upon them the subtle yet noticeable differences between the various brands and what makes some of them worth their elevated price tags. Help your staff distinguish between the vodkas that have a discernible taste and those that are neutral. This knowledge will enable the staff to make appropriate recommendations to bar patrons.

Next, conduct a horizontal tasting for your guests. Make a night of it. Start by sampling the neutral vodkas first and work your way to those with intrinsic flavor. Finish the tasting with fruit-infused vodkas, such as Absolut Kurant, Ketel One Citroen, Stolichnaya Ohranj, and Van Gogh Melon, to mention but a few.

Educate your guests on how to identify each spirit's individual qualities: aroma, taste, body, and finish. Most people will likely be amazed that there is such a wide range of characteristics among brands. Serve the vodkas chilled, but take care

not to serve them too cold. Like wine, the colder the vodka, the narrower its taste profile and the less likely your guests will perceive the nuances in styles.

You can also take a less analytical approach. "The best way to get people familiar with the different types of vodkas. . . is to create a compelling beverage program that features various superpremium brands in signature cocktails," contends Kellyann MacLean, brand manager for Stolichnaya. "While aficionados will sample vodkas side by side, most guests like to drink their vodkas mixed. The growing trend of promoting specialty cocktails allows people an excellent opportunity to enjoy different vodkas steeped with a huge array of brilliant flavors."

"We used to serve primarily beer with food in our restaurant," says Sid Rognoni, bar/restaurant manager of Mark & Monica's Sports Grill & Pizza in Granite Bay, California. "Last summer we rolled out a bar menu [and] began holding customer sampling events. Our spirits sales have increased dramatically as a result. The Stoli Around the World is still our most frequently requested drink." The concoction is made with 1/2-ounce portions of each of Stolichnaya's seven flavored vodkas, cranberry and pineapple juice, and lemon-lime soda. The ingredients are shaken over ice and served straight up.

## Martini Madness

With some notable exceptions, master mixologists today seem to prefer formulating cocktails with four (or more) ingredients. The additional splash, dash, or float of a juice or liqueur is often the masterstroke that propels their concoctions into the divine range. And many of these concoctions are served in a martini glass. To illustrate the point, MacLean cites the Kumquatini, one of the signature cock-



Vodka has captured the cocktail culture's collective imagination.



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tails of the City Hall Restaurant in New York City, which features Stoli Ohranj, Stoli Vanil, Cointreau, a splash of orange juice, and a kumquat garnish.

If you're in the market to promote a proven contender, consider the award-winning Pineapple Upside-Down Martini, made with pineapple- and vanilla-infused vodka, grenadine, and pineapple juice. Created by bartenders Hector Ortega and Daniel Faust for the Rickshaw Far East Bistro in Houston, the libation edged out the field at Houston's Best Martini Competition, sponsored by the Texas Restaurant Association.

The introduction of Ketel One Vodka to the United States market involved a strategy that focused on getting bartenders, restaurateurs, and consumers to discover the brand through unique martinis. According to Bill Eldien, president of Nolet Spirits U.S.A., Ketel One's importer, "We began selling our product by promoting the Ultimate Martini, a cocktail that consists of Ketel One Vodka and tomlives. While we believe this is the best way to enjoy the product in its most simple form, we have also started mixing Ketel One Vodka and Ketel One Citroen with a variety of mixers to address the current trends and flavors." Currently in vogue are cocktails made with pomegranate juice.

Ketel One's "Ultimate Collection" contains two recipes showcasing the tangy, flavorful juice. The Ultimate Velvet Martini is made with Ketel One Vodka, Cointreau, sweet and sour, and pomegranate juice, while the Ultimate Pomegranate Martini features Ketel One Citroen, pomegranate juice, and a splash of sweet and sour.

Lola's in West Hollywood, California, is famous in part as the originator of the now universally popular Apple Martini. "The classic cocktail appeals to all types of people," states Beverage Manager Greg Huebner. "We haven't changed the recipe since we debuted the specialty eight years ago. We still make it with Ketel One Vodka, DeKuyper Sour Apple Pucker, and a splash of sweet 'n' sour. The drink has become an institution here."

At Villa Piacere in Woodland Hills, California, the specialty of the house is the Caramel Apple Martini, the lip-smacking combination of Absolut Vodka, sweet and sour, and butterscotch syrup. On the opposite coast at Beacon Restaurant in New York City, Chef/Owner Waldy Malouf has created his own version of the Key Lime Martini, made with Absolut Vanilia, fresh key-lime juice, simple syrup, and pineapple juice.

Wolfgang Puck's latest restaurant venture is Vert, which is located in Hollywood next to the celebrated Kodak Theatre, home of the Oscars. One of the popular signature drinks is the Grapetini, an upscale, summer-oriented cocktail made with Ciroc Snap Frost Vodka (a French superpremium made entirely from grape varieties and distilled five times in traditional copper-pot stills), white grape juice, and a healthy dose of Moët & Chandon Champagne.

Just off L.A.'s Sunset Strip is the hip Falcon Restaurant, where celebrities and average folk rub elbows and live the good life. There the specialty of the house is the Bardot Martini, a sultry number made up of Ciroc, orange juice, a splash of Grand Marnier, and 7-Up with an orange-twist garnish. Falcon Bar Manager Jason Shopay favors the French vodka: "It's become a favorite at our bar, and its unique character is perfectly suited for use in cocktails such as the Bardot Martini."

### Vodka's Versatility

While the martini remains the king of cocktails, there are sufficient heirs to the throne should trends change. One company that actively promotes the versatility of vodka is the Dutch import Van Gogh, whose portfolio of flavored vodkas now numbers nine with the recent release of Van Gogh Melon, Raspberry, and Pineapple.

At Bacchus Nibble in Kildeer, Illinois, Bar Manager Katie Mrvicka has turned heads and slaked the city's thirst with a specialty she dubbed the Summer Citrus Cocktail. It features equal parts of Van Gogh Pineapple, Melon, and Coconut vodkas along with Midori, a splash of grenadine, and pineapple juice.

Jackson's Bistro is a popular watering hole in Tampa. The establishment's signature drinks are huge draws and include the Hawaiian Cosmo, a luscious cocktail made with Van Gogh Pineapple Vodka, Cointreau, cranberry juice, and pineapple juice, and the Metropolitan, which is constructed with Van Gogh Raspberry, Cointreau, and a measure of Chambord. According to resident mixologist Jimmy Z, also high on the hit parade is the Chocolate Lover's Cocktail. Not surprisingly, it's made with Van Gogh Dutch Chocolate and Vanilla vodkas, dark crème de cacao, and a rim of chocolate.

Recently released Skyy Melon Vodka has found its niche in Boston's Mistral Restaurant. While looking to create new and vibrant house-specialty drinks, the bartending staff at Mistral devised two

variations of the famed mojito. The Melon Mango Mojito is made with Skyy Melon Vodka, Melon Frujá Exotic Liqueur, a splash of orange juice, and mint sprigs. The Mistral Melon Mojito features Skyy Melon and ginger ale. "While an outstanding drink, the mojito has become somewhat overpromoted and a bit tired," observes Mistral General Manager Mark D'Alessandro. "We wanted to come up with drinks that are fresh and dynamic, cocktails that exist outside the box. Judging from the rave reviews our new mojitos are receiving, I think our bartenders achieved their goal."

Bacardi recently entered the superpremium category with the release of Türi Vodka from Estonia. To support the introduction, the company enlisted the services of cocktail guru George Delgado, who developed the Kohv Cocktail, an eye-opening offering made with Türi Vodka, black coffee, skim milk, hazelnut syrup, and a garnish of sliced almonds and coffee beans, and the Türi Explorer, an innovative cocktail that combines Türi Vodka, clover honey, and fresh lemon juice.

Inspired yet? Few liquid masterpieces have been devised in a vacuum, so get your staff and clientele involved in the creative process. Once the winning concoctions have been crafted, don't keep their formula a secret. Great drinks are meant to be shared.

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*—kellyann maclean*



### CLEMENTINE CRUSH

*Alex Luca, bartender, Sushi Samba, New York City*

- 6–8 fresh mint leaves
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 ounces Svedka Clementine Vodka
- 1 ounce fresh orange juice
- 1 ounce fresh lime juice
- Mandarin orange or clementine slice garnish

Muddle the mint leaves with the sugar in a mixing glass. Add crushed ice, the vodka, and the juices. Shake for about four seconds and pour the contents into a collins glass. Garnish with a mandarin orange or clementine slice.

# A Vodka VOYAGE

If you're looking for some inspiration to get the old creative juices flowing, try these vodka specialties on for size.

## APPLE MARTINI

*Specialty of Lola's, West Hollywood, California*

- 2 ounces Ketel One Vodka
- 2 ounces Sour Apple Pucker
- Splash sweet and sour
- Granny Smith apple slice
- garnish

Combine the vodka, Sour Apple Pucker, and sweet and sour in an ice-filled shaker. Shake and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with a Granny Smith apple slice.

## SNAPDRAGON

- 2 ounces Shakers Wheat or Rye Vodka
- 4 ounces crème de menthe
- Soda water
- Mint sprig garnish

Fill a highball glass with ice and stir in the vodka and crème de menthe. Top with soda water and garnish with a sprig of mint.

## KEY LIME MARTINI

*Specialty of Beacon Restaurant, New York City*

- 1½ ounces Absolut Vanilia Vodka
- ¾ ounce fresh key lime juice
- 1 ounce pineapple juice
- ½ ounce simple syrup
- Lime wheel garnish

Combine the vodka, juices, and simple syrup in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake contents vigorously and strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a lime wheel.

## BARDOT MARTINI

*Specialty of Falcon Restaurant, Los Angeles*

- 1¾ ounces Ciroc Snap Frost Vodka
- 1 ounce orange juice
- ½ ounce Grand Marnier
- ½ ounce lemon-lime soda
- Orange twist garnish

Combine the vodka, orange juice, Grand Marnier, and lemon-lime soda in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake the contents vigorously and strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with an orange twist.

## SUMMER CITRUS COCKTAIL

*Katie Mrvicka, bar manager, Bacchus Nibbles, Kildeer, Illinois*

- ¾ ounce each Van Gogh Pineapple, Melon, and Coconut Vodkas
- ½ ounce Midori
- ½ ounce grenadine syrup
- 2 ounces pineapple juice
- Pineapple wedge, orange slice, and cherry garnishes

Combine the vodkas, Midori, grenadine syrup, and pineapple juice in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake the contents vigorously and strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge, an orange slice, and a cherry.

## LEMON PIE MARTINI

- 2 ounces Seagram's Extra Smooth Vodka
- 1 ounce lemon liqueur
- Squeeze lemon juice
- Splash milk or half-and-half
- Spiraled lemon twist garnish

Combine the vodka, lemon liqueur, lemon juice, and milk or half-and-half in a shaker filled with ice. Shake and strain into a chilled 5-ounce martini glass. Garnish with a spiraled lemon twist.

## STOLI AROUND THE WORLD

- ½ ounce each Stolichnzya Ohranj, Razberi, Cranberi, Strasberi, Persik, and Citrus Vodkas
- 1 ounce cranberry juice
- 1 ounce pineapple juice
- ½ ounce lemon-lime soda
- Lemon wedge garnish

Combine the vodkas, juices, and soda in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake contents vigorously and strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with lemon wedge.

## MELON MOJITO

*Specialty of Mistral, Boston*

- 6–8 fresh mint leaves
- 2 sugar cubes
- 2½ ounces Skyy Melon Vodka
- Splash ginger ale
- Lime wedge garnish

Muddle the mint and sugar in a mixing glass. Combine the vodka, ginger ale, and ice with the muddled mint. Shake and strain into a collins glass. Garnish with a lime wedge.

## PINEAPPLE UPSIDE-DOWN MARTINI

*Hector Ortega and Daniel Faust, Rickshaw Far East Bistro, Houston*

- 2 ounces pineapple- and vanilla-infused vodka
- ½ ounce grenadine syrup
- 3 ounces pineapple juice
- Pineapple wedge and cherry garnishes

Combine the vodka, grenadine syrup, and pineapple juice in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake the contents vigorously and strain into chilled martini glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge and a cherry.

## KOHV MARTINI COCKTAIL

*George Delgado, Promixology.com*

- 2.2 ounces Türi Vodka
- 1 ounce cold black coffee
- 1 ounce skim milk
- ⅕ ounce hazelnut syrup or liqueur
- 3 coffee beans and several almond slices garnish

Combine the vodka, coffee, skim milk, and hazelnut syrup or liqueur in a mixing glass filled with ice. Shake or stir vigorously for at least 15 seconds to assure a thick froth, and strain into a chilled martini glass. Sprinkle a few almond slices and three coffee beans on top.