



AT THE BAR

By Robert Plotkin

The 12 Most Fascinating American Vodkas

Recently while touring a state-of-the-art distillery in St. Petersburg the master distiller approached me and asked in a heavy accent, “So do you know this fellow Tito?”

I knew the name immediately. “Da tovarich, his vodka is becoming quite popular in the States.” He winced as if stung. Walking away he grumbled, “Your Tito, his vodka drinks too easy.”

Tito Beveridge considers that high praise. In 1997, the former geophysicist opened a small distillery outside of Austin, Texas and began producing Tito’s Handmade Vodka in a pot still of his own design. Soon its satiny body and elegant, slightly sweet finish were wowing aficionados and spirit critics alike, hurtling the brand up the charts with a bullet.

“The Russians I’ve met like feisty, muscular vodkas that scald the larynx going down,” says Beveridge. “The folks I know prefer something a whole lot smoother. So do I. After the B.A.T.F. analyzed our vodka they reported that it was the cleanest, purest spirit they’d ever tested. I’d say that largely answers why Tito’s is so smooth, or ‘drinks too easy’ as our comrade put it.”

Beveridge is one of a growing cadre of American distillers handcrafting world-class vodkas using artisan techniques and micro-distilling technology. Their zeal and passion seem linked to the allure of creating spirits that flirt perilously close to perfection. The concept alone is fascinating.

Founder of Bendistillery in Bend, Oregon, Jim Bendis is a pioneer of micro-distilling and creator of Crater Lake Vodka, a small batch gem alembic distilled using local grain and spring water from the Cascades, and then aged in oak barrels. The slow, laborious process yields a vodka of substance, an exquisite spirit with a wafting fresh fruit bouquet, and a long, luxurious finish. The brand is highly sought after for use in cocktails because of its laudable neutrality and voluptuous body.

Down the road in Rigby, Idaho is Silver Creek Distillery, the facility from which several of these fascinating vodkas hail. The first is Square One Organic Vodka, a featherweight spirit distilled entirely from organic rye and artesian spring water. It’s an invigorating spirit featuring a spicy herbal bouquet, layers of dry, slightly tart flavors that persist throughout the finish. SQ1 may well be too good to share with friends.

Sky Infusions Citrus Vodka is another unpretentious treat for the senses. This sumptuous spirit is made by steeping premium

Sky Vodka with a mélange of freshly pressed citrus before being filtered and bottled at 70-proof. The infusion is generously aromatic and endowed with a tangy, zesty, true-to-fruit palate. There’s no biting edge, alcohol burn or unwanted sweetness. A guaranteed crowd pleaser from start to graceful finish.

The most celebrated of the distillery’s threesome is Blue Ice Vodka, a sensational spirit quadruple-distilled entirely from Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes. A treat from start to finish, the lightweight vodka has an enticing herbal and citrus bouquet, and an expansive, subtly sweet set of flavors that persist on the palate an impressively long time.

“In a world fond of its vodka, the chant “USA! USA!” can once again be heard reverberating in bars and restaurants around the globe. Salud!”

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BOUTIQUE BRANDS FLOURISH

Iconic Shakers Vodka from Minnesota was the first American brand to flourish in the rarified ultra-premium category. The luxury brand is continuous distilled from local wheat and spring water, and then rigorously filtered for purity. While a poster child for neutrality, the vodka does make its presence known with a measured dose of warmth. The prestigious line also includes Shakers Rye Vodka, which is made from 100% Minnesota-grown rye.

Socially conscious enthusiasts will appreciate 360 Vodka for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it’s exceptionally light, silky smooth, and ideally suited for any vodka-based assignment. Crafted in Weston, Missouri, 360 is four times distilled, five times filtered, and produced using an advanced, environmentally friendly process. Great vodka, great karma.

Another boutique brand earning deserved recognition is handcrafted Cold River

Vodka from Freeport, Maine. First bottled in November 2005, the pot-distilled spirit is made from locally grown potatoes and underground spring water. Cold River is a flavor-imbued vodka with a second helping of sweetness on the finish. It’s a superb choice for use in tart and tangy cocktails.

Hands down the hippest of the fascinating few is ultra-suave p.i.n.k. Vodka. The super-premium import from Schiedam is alembic distilled from wheat, purified water and an all-natural infusion of guarana and caffeine. It’s a 21st century spirit with lightly spiced aromas, dry currant-like flavors, and a payload of kinetic energy equivalent to a cup of Joe. Charisma and moxie are highly marketable traits.

The final three vodkas qualify as fascinating by sheer virtue of their extraordinarily luscious, sun-drenched flavors. Ultra-delicious Domaine Charbay Ruby Red Grapefruit Vodka is made in Napa Valley by master distiller Miles Karakasevic and his family. The spirit is made micro-distilled from American Midwest grain, spring water, and macerated fresh fruit, a meticulous process taking up to six months. The result is invariably worth the wait. Among the popular franchise of flavors are Blood Orange, Meyer Lemon, Pomegranate and Green Tea.

Flavor worshippers will want to get their hands on any of the sumptuous vodkas made by Modern Spirits of Monrovia, California. Created to complement a wide range of cuisine, the brand’s repertoire of infused vodkas includes Celery Peppercorn, Candied Ginger, Black Truffle and Pear Lavender. Their flawless construction and brilliant, almost incandescent flavors make Modern Spirits a favorite with mixologists.

Rounding out the roster of American greats are the vivacious flavored vodkas of Hangar One. The handiwork of St. George Spirits in Alameda, California, Hangar One Vodkas are distilled in small batches from American wheat, and then infused with real fruit, usually rare, exotic species not from around these parts. Among the Hangar One Vodkas are Buddha’s Hand, which is infused with citron, a fragrant citrus fruit grown in Asia, Mandarin Blossom and Kaffir Lime.

In a world fond of its vodka, the chant “USA! USA!” can once again be heard reverberating in bars and restaurants around the globe. Salud!

Robert Plotkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and has recently authored his 16th book, *Secrets Revealed of America’s Greatest Cocktails*. He can be reached at www.BarMedia.com or by e-mail at robert@barmedia.com.

SIDE BAR:

JUNIPER BREEZE

*Specialty of Julie Reiner
Flatiron Lounge, New York, NY*

- 2 ounces Domaine Charbay
Ruby Red Grapefruit Vodka
- 1/2 ounce St-Germain Liqueur
- 1/2 ounce fresh lime juice
- 1 ounce fresh grapefruit juice
- 1 ounce cranberry juice

Pour ingredients into an iced mixing glass. Shake vigorously for a minimum of ten seconds and strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with a slice of star fruit.

PERSIAN INFLUENCE

*Specialty of Joshua Durr
Molecular Bartending, Louisville, KY*

- 1 1/2 ounces Hangar One
Buddha's Hand Vodka
- 1/2 ounce Carvella Limoncello
- 6 organic watercress leaves
- 1/2 ounce Sumac-infused,
white wine reduction
- 1/2 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 1 1/2 ounces Santa Cruz Lemon
-Ginger Echinacea
Splash club soda

Lightly muddle 3 watercress leaves in an empty mixing glass, after which add ice and pour ingredients into the glass. Shake vigorously and strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass. Add a splash of club soda and garnish with watercress leaves and a lemon twist spiral.

To make the sumac-infused, white wine reduction, add 1/2 teaspoon of sumac to 8-10 ounces of white wine and reduce on low heat for five minutes.

BLACKBERRY AND BASIL COCKTAIL

*Specialty of Duggan McDonnell
Cantina, San Francisco, CA*

- 2 ounces Square One Organic Vodka
- 2 dashes Fees Orange Bitters
- 3 blackberries
- 3 basil leaves
- 1/2 ounce agave nectar
- 3/4 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 1 ounce ginger beer

Place blackberries, orange bitters, agave nectar, lemon juice and basil leaves in an empty mixing glass. Muddle contents and add ice. Pour in the Square One Vodka, shake vigorously, and strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass. Finish with a splash of ginger ale (about an ounce) and garnish with a blackberry and basil sprig.

TITO'S TEXAS TEA

*Specialty of Tito Beveridge, Fifth Generation
Distillery, Austin, TX*

- 2 ounces Tito's Handmade Vodka
- 1 ounce simple syrup
- 3/4 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 3 slices English cucumber, peeled
- 1-2 dashes Green Tabasco Sauce
- 3-4 cilantro sprigs

Place cilantro, cucumber, syrup, Tabasco Sauce and lemon juice in an empty mixing glass. Muddle contents and add ice. Pour in the Tito's Handmade Vodka, shake vigorously, and double strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass.

VOLCANO HOT

*Specialty of Eric Tecosky
Jones Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA*

- 1 1/2 ounces Crater Lake Vodka
- 1/2 ounce Dirty Sue premium olive juice
- 1-2 dashes Tabasco sauce
- 3 jalapeño-stuffed green olives

Pour ingredients into an iced mixing glass. Shake vigorously, strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass, and garnish with jalapeño-stuffed green olives.

GINGER SOUR

*Specialty of Michael Shelter
Rosemary's Restaurant, Las Vegas, NV*

- 1 1/2 ounces Modern Spirits Candied
Ginger Vodka
- 1/4 ounce Cointreau
- 1-2 dashes Fees Orange Bitters
- 1 egg white (Pasteurized)
- 1/2 ounce simple syrup
- 1/2 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 3/4 ounce yuzu juice

1 ounce Dr. Brown's Extra Dry Ginger Ale
Pour vodka, Cointreau, orange bitters, egg white, simple syrup, lemon and yuzu juice into an iced mixing glass. Shake vigorously and strain contents into a chilled cocktail glass. Finish with a splash of ginger ale and garnish with a lime wedge.

CHOCOLATE ORANGE DROP

*Specialty of Michael Shelter
Rosemary's Restaurant, Las Vegas, NV*

- 1 1/2 ounces Modern Spirits
Chocolate Orange Vodka
- 3/4 ounce Starbucks Coffee Liqueur
- 1/2 ounce Grand Marnier
- 1 ounce heavy cream

Pour ingredients into an iced mixing glass and shake mixture vigorously. Strain the contents into a chilled cocktail glass rimmed with ground espresso bean/cocoa powder. Garnish with shaved chocolate.