

VODKA

Vodka is a distilled beverage. It is a clear liquid which consists of mostly water and ethanol purified by distillation — often multiple distillation — from a fermented substance, such as grain (usually rye or wheat), potatoes or sugar beet molasses, and an insignificant amount of other substances such as flavorings or unintended impurities.

Vodka usually has an alcohol content of 35% to 50% by volume. The classic Russian, Lithuanian and Polish vodka is 40% (80 proof). This can be attributed to the Russian standards for vodka production introduced in 1894 by Alexander III. According to the Vodka Museum in Moscow, Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev (more famous for his work in developing the periodic table) found the perfect percentage to be 38. However, since spirits in his time were taxed on their strength, the percentage was rounded up to 40 to simplify the tax computation. At strengths less than this, vodka drunk neat (without ice and not mixed with other liquids) can taste "watery", while strengths above 40% may give the taste of vodka more "burn". Some governments set a minimum alcohol content for a spirit to be called "vodka". For example, the European Union sets a minimum of 37.5% alcohol by volume.

Although vodka is traditionally drunk neat in the Eastern European and Nordic countries of the "Vodka Belt", its popularity elsewhere owes much to its usefulness in cocktails and other mixed drinks, such as the bloody mary, the screwdriver, the white russian, the vodka tonic, and vodka martini.

History. The origins of vodka cannot be traced definitively, but it is believed to have originated in the grain-growing region that now embraces western Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland. It also has a long tradition in Scandinavia. For many centuries beverages contained little alcohol. It is estimated that the maximum amount was about 14% as only this amount is reachable by means of natural fermentation. The still allowing for distillation – the "burning of wine" – was invented in the 8th century.

The "vodka belt" countries of central and Eastern Europe and Nordic countries are the historic home of vodka, and also have the highest vodka consumption in the world.

It was not originally called *vodka* — instead, the term *bread wine* was used. Until mid-18th century, it remained relatively low on alcohol content, not exceeding 40% by volume. It was mostly sold in taverns and was quite expensive. At the same time, the word *vodka* was already in use, but it described herbal tinctures (similar to absinthe), containing up to 75% by volume alcohol, and made for medicinal purposes.

The first written usage of the word *vodka* in an official Russian document in its modern meaning is dated by the decree of Empress Elizabeth of June 8, 1751, which regulated the ownership of vodka distilleries. The taxes on vodka became a key element of government finances in Tsarist Russia, providing at times up to 40% of state revenue. By the 1860s, due to the government policy of promoting consumption of state-manufactured vodka, it became the drink of choice for many Russians. In 1863, the government monopoly on vodka production was repealed, causing prices to plummet and making vodka available even to low-income citizens. By 1911, vodka comprised 89% of all alcohol consumed in Russia. This level has fluctuated somewhat during the 20th century, but remained quite high at all times. The most recent estimates put it at 70% (2001). Today, some popular Russian vodka producers or brands are (amongst others) Stolichnaya and Russian Standard.

Today. Vodka is now one of the world's most popular spirits. It was rarely consumed outside Europe before the 1950s. By 1975, vodka sales in the United States overtook those of bourbon, previously the most popular hard liquor and the native spirit of that country. In the second half of the 20th century, vodka owed its popularity in part to its reputation as an alcoholic beverage that "leaves you breathless", as one ad put it — no smell of liquor remains detectable on the breath, and its neutral flavor allows it to be mixed into a wide variety of drinks, often replacing other liquors (particularly Gin) in traditional drinks, such as the Martini.

(Continued on Next Page)

VODKA, continued

According to *The Penguin Book of Spirits and Liqueurs*, "Its low level of fusel oils and congenics — impurities that flavour spirits but that can contribute to the after-effects of heavy consumption — led to its being considered among the 'safer' spirits, though not in terms of its powers of intoxication, which, depending on strength, may be considerable."

Russian culinary author William Pokhlebkin compiled a history of the production of vodka in Russia during the late 1970s as part of the Soviet case in a trade dispute; this was later published as *A History of Vodka*. Pokhlebkin claimed that while there was a wealth of publications about the history of consumption and distribution of vodka, virtually nothing had been written about vodka production. Among his assertions were that the word "vodka" was used in popular speech in Russia considerably earlier than the middle of the 18th century, but the word did not appear in print until the 1860s.

Production. Vodka may be distilled from any starch/sugar-rich plant matter; most vodka today is produced from grains such as sorghum, corn, rye or wheat. Among grain vodkas, rye and wheat vodkas are generally considered superior. Some vodka is made from potatoes, molasses, soybeans, grapes, sugar beets and sometimes even byproducts of oil refining or wood pulp processing. In some Central European countries like Poland some vodka is produced by just fermenting a solution of crystal sugar and yeast. In the European Union there are talks about the standardization of vodka, and the Vodka Belt countries insist that only spirits produced from grains, potato and sugar beet molasses be allowed to be branded as "vodka", following the traditional methods of production.

Distilling and filtering. A common property of vodkas produced in the United States and Europe is the extensive use of filtration prior to any additional processing, such as the addition of flavourants. Filtering is sometimes done in the still during distillation, as well as afterwards, where the distilled vodka is filtered through charcoal and other media. This is because under U.S. and European law vodka must not have any distinctive aroma, character, colour or flavour. However, this is not the case in the traditional vodka producing nations, so many distillers from these countries prefer to use very accurate distillation but minimal filtering, thus preserving the unique flavours and characteristics of their products.

The "stillmaster" is the person in charge of distilling the vodka and directing its filtration. When done correctly, much of the "fore-shots" and "heads" and the "tails" separated in distillation process are discarded. These portions of the distillate contain flavour compounds such as ethyl acetate and ethyl lactate (heads) as well as the fusel oils (tails) that alter the clean taste of vodka. Through numerous rounds of distillation, or the use of a fractioning still, the taste of the vodka is improved and its clarity is enhanced. In some distilled liquors such as rum and baijiu, some of the heads and tails are not removed in order to give the liquor its unique flavour and mouth-feel.

Repeated distillation of vodka will make its ethanol level much higher than legally allowed. Depending on the distillation method and the technique of the stillmaster, the final filtered and distilled vodka may have as much as 95-96% ethanol. As such, most vodka is diluted with water prior to bottling. This level of distillation is what truly separates a rye-based vodka (for example) from a rye whisky; while the whisky is generally only distilled down to its final alcohol content, vodka is distilled until it is almost totally pure alcohol and then cut with water to give it its final alcohol content and unique flavour, depending on the source of the water.

Flavoring. Apart from the alcoholic content, vodkas may be classified into two main groups: *clear vodkas* and *flavored vodkas*. From the latter ones, one can separate *bitter tinctures*, such as Russian *Yubileynaya* (anniversary vodka) and *Pertsovka* (pepper vodka).

While most vodkas are unflavored, many flavored vodkas have been produced in traditional vodka-drinking areas, often as home-made recipes to improve vodka's taste or for medicinal purposes. Flavorings include red pepper, ginger, fruit flavours, vanilla, chocolate (without sweetener), and cinnamon. In Russia and Ukraine, vodka flavoured with honey and pepper (*Pertsovka*, in Russian, *Zpertsem*, in Ukrainian) is also very popular. In Poland, a famous vodka containing honey is called Krupnik.

This tradition of flavoring is also prevalent in the Nordic countries, where vodka seasoned with herbs, fruits and spices is the appropriate strong drink for midsummer seasonal festivities. The Finnish vodka "Finlandia" was the first vodka company to mass produce flavored Vodka.

Source: Wikipedia