

white nights

WHEN IT COMES TO THE PERFECT COCKTAIL,
VODKA'S A CLEAR WINNER BY MARGARET SWAINE

VODKA HAS BEEN AROUND.

It's been up and down and over and out. Lately it's très chic, like a Roberto Cavalli frock. Come to think of it, that fashion icon has come out with a vodka with a signature glass snake gracing its bottle. Vodka's never been more hip, and it comes in as many styles as the latest from the runways of Milan.

A few years ago on a cold, rainy day in late August, I found myself driving a wheat harvester in southern Sweden as part of my research into vodka. Why Sweden? While Russia maintains it's the mother country and Poland's claim as vodka's birthplace is just as compelling, Swedes, too, have a long tradition of vodka drinking. At one point in the 1700s, they had an estimated one still for every 10 inhabitants. The Nordic countries show no sign of losing their love of vodka if a recent trip to Norway is any measure. On the weekends, I discovered the Norwegians let out their inner Viking and partied with a gusto only Scandinavians can fathom.

Vodka's life started rather ignobly in the 12th century as a disinfectant and anaesthetic that tasted dreadful. Herbs, peels, roots and spices were often added to mask the taste. At first, vodka was distilled from rye; later, when the masses consumed it with bread before every evening

GO CANUCK

FOR A CANADIANA SPIN ON THE PERFECT MARTINI, OPT FOR A RENOWNED CANADIAN INGREDIENT: ICEWINE.

Cameron Bogue, the first-ever official mixologist for Smirnoff, offers this recipe called the

Toronto Cocktail:

1 oz vodka, 1 oz icewine and eight Concord grapes.

Muddle five Concord grapes in a mixing glass, fill with ice, add remaining ingredients and shake, double strain and serve up in a martini glass.

Garnish with three Concord grapes floating in the glass or placed on a pick.



meal, the cheaper, more common potato was used. The famed drink of Norway is aquavit (more than 40 versions), a historic tippel made from potato spirits flavoured with caraway, dill and other spices, then aged in wood. It's really just vodka dressed up, and it was all a means to bring cheer into the otherwise dark and dreary winters of countries that embrace the Arctic Circle.

Wheat is the choice grain of most vodka distillers today — hence my visit to Sweden to see winter wheat grown in Skåne. Nearby these grain fields on the Baltic coast is the tiny harbour town of Åhus, the sole home of Absolut, arguably the world's most successful vodka. (Absolut holds the enviable position of being the third-largest international premium spirit in the world. Pernod Ricard of France signed an \$8.9-billion (US) deal earlier this year to purchase the drink-maker. Smirnoff and Bacardi hold the first two posts.)

Absolut tells farmers exactly what to plant and how to farm the crop, assuring absolute consistency. Every worker has exact instructions mapped out in their tractor and that's what I followed as I — with some computer help — drove the machine. One kilo of grain goes into every litre of vodka.

The raw material is just the beginning. Much still happens from there. The makers of premium and deluxe categories of vodka that attract connoisseurs of clear spirits wax lyrical about unique sources of water, special filtration methods, quadruple distillations or more. They are one of the fastest-growing spirit categories today.

Grey Goose claims a superiority of water that picks up hints of minerals as it filters through champagne limestone. Smirnoff Penka has a creaminess attributed to the master distiller's finest cut (the best and cleanest portion of the alcohol gleaned during the distillation process). Chopin boasts about its Stobrawa potatoes distilled four times to give a velvety smoothness. Belvedere's proud ingredient is rye, distilled four times to yield a sweetly gentle, clean citrus effect. Water for Canadian Iceberg vodka is harvested from icebergs off the coast of Newfoundland.

In a pitch to stand out among this elegant

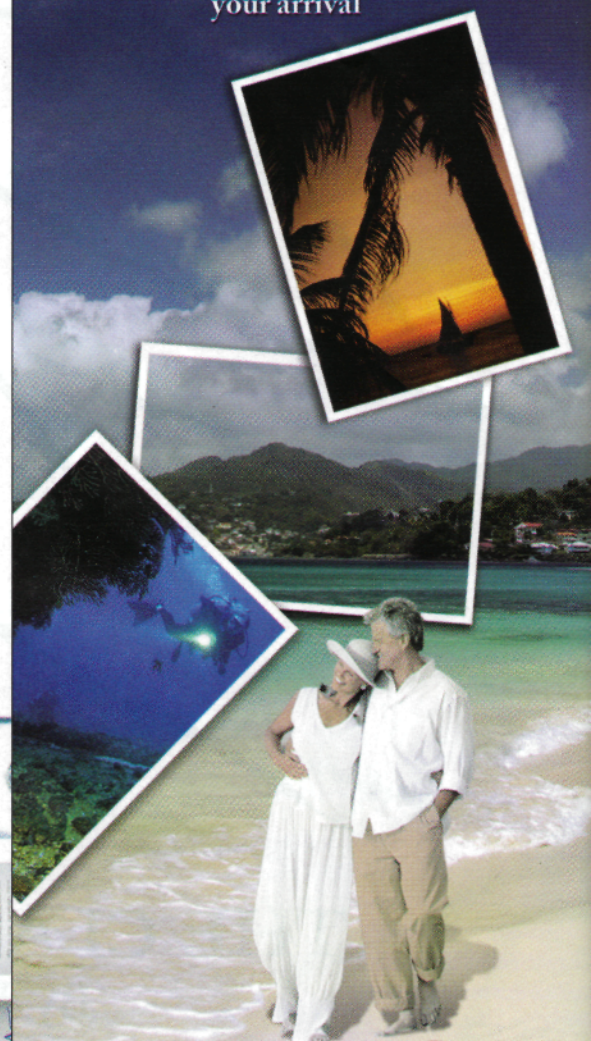
and subtle group, Wyborowa Single Estate went as far as to have legendary architect Frank Gehry design its bottle. Square One organic vodka, made from 100 per cent organic American rye, and 360 Vodka, with its bottle made from 85 per cent recycled glass and a label made from chlorine-free, recycled post-consumer paper, are Earth-friendly types. Effen Vodka from Holland claims to be created by a panel of top bartenders to be perfect for contemporary cocktails.

Then there are the flavoured vodkas. When Absolut Citron launched in North America in 1988, it took off like a rocket and is still our No. 1 flavoured vodka brand. Absolut Citron blazed a trail not only for its other flavours to come — namely Kurant, Mandrin, Vanilia, Raspberri, Apeach, Ruby Red, Pears and Mango — but also for competitors galore. Finlandia and Wyborowa have scored successes with their variants, encouraging even more hopefuls, such as Vod-ca Green Label, a cannabis-infused (albeit THC-free) version. Grapefruit, the latest flavour from Finlandia, is a great success on the palate. Charbay from California uses 100 per cent real fruit for its excellent citrus vodkas, such as blood orange. **Z**



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