

Whiskey is the latest spirit to get in on the flavoring action; here, Phillips Union's vanilla and cherry essences update an Old Fashioned.



# Elevated SPIRITS

Distillers worldwide are enhancing classic quaffs and resurrecting others to create a deeper well of flavor possibilities

BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

The cocktail revolution still sweeping through American restaurants and bars has spurred an entire generation of bartenders to fascinating drink-making endeavors. Much attention has been paid to the methods and ingredients, both classic and innovative, that are used to craft these cocktails. But homage must also be paid to global spirit companies and distillers who have responded to the expanding American palate with unprecedented exploration of new flavor opportunities.

Take vodka. In its basic form, the liquor is flavorless and colorless, scorned by many drink enthusiasts as vapid and uninteresting.

"It's the tofu of spirits," David Wondrich, author of the James Beard-award-winning book "Imbibe!," once told me. He's right in one way: Vodka, no matter how well crafted, adds little more than alcohol to a cocktail.

## VODKA VARIATIONS

There are some basic flavor differences among plain vodkas, depending primarily on the original material used in distillation. Wheat vodkas tend to be clean and fairly neutral; potato vodkas, creamy and slightly earthy; rye vodkas, lean and spicy. Yet the real growth in the category is in flavored vodkas, accounting for more than 28 percent of the spirits sold in the United States, reports alcohol

researcher Beverage Information Group.

At the beginning of this year, 357 flavored-vodka brands were on the U.S. market, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, and that number has undoubtedly grown since.

There is virtually no flavor that has not made it into a vodka. Once Merlot-, Chardonnay- and rosé-flavored varieties made it to the market, I stopped keeping track.

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ Complex gins, flavored rums, cachaça, rye and other spirits on the rise
- ▶ How spirit-makers layer infusions and create high-end versions of spirits to meet demand for multi-dimensional drink flavors
- ▶ Tips on introducing new spirits to the back bar and building on successful bar programs

PLYMOUTH GIN

# Making the INTRODUCTION

**Adding new spirits is a matter of building on what already works at the bar**

These days, with back bars more crowded with new products than at any time in recent memory, operators hesitate to take on new spirits without knowing how they can sell them. Suppliers often provide new drink recipes, but more is needed to successfully launch an addition to a bar program and take into account the specifics of a restaurant's requirements. When thinking about how any new spirit might fit your needs, here are some things to consider.

- ▶ **FIND SMART PAIRINGS:** Any flavor — sweet, savory or complex — has partners that make sense. Inspired chefs have long used herbs to enhance fruit, so think about mixing savory vodkas or gins with fresh and seasonal fruit or herbs. Try peach rum with fresh basil or tarragon vodka with fresh melon, or balance two flavors and create a third.
- ▶ **EXPAND THE BASICS:** Got a popular mojito program? Add berries or cherries to the recipe and try using gin instead of white rum to create a different flavor profile. Sell a lot of Bloody Marys? Savory vodkas and gins are a natural tweak.
- ▶ **THINK TIKI:** Fruit juices and rum make a classic pairing, and while Tiki drinks have developed a sickly sweet reputation, they are actually complicated concoctions. Experiment using two or three different types of rums — dark, light and aged — until you find a signature mix.
- ▶ **DIAL DOWN THE SWEET:** Many of today's flavored spirits are exceptionally sweet, too much so for customers with sophisticated palates. Cut back on the sweetness by using some bitters, citrus or moderately sweetened fresh fruits or purees in cocktails.

It now seems all flavor options have been explored. Recent additions include passion-fruit vodka from Skyy, root beer vodka from Three Olives and blackberry vodka from Stolichnaya. Such flavors might fuel drink creativity, but restaurant and bar owners are up to their necks in vodkas already, and it's increasingly tough to get them to carry new flavors, especially ones they can recreate by adding purees or fresh juices to a plain vodka. That's the main reason most of these new flavored vodkas are destined to be primarily retail products.

However, some small distillers have taken the flavor explosion to a refined niche market. Hangar One in California, best known for its intensely flavored Kaffir Lime and Buddha's Hand vodkas, made a big hit with mixologists in the early part of the decade. Another California distiller, Charbay, produces vodkas in flavors like Meyer lemon and ruby red grapefruit, with more assertive pith and skin aromas and flavors.

Hangar One and Charbay have been followed into the high-end niche market by companies like Modern Spirits, which has set the bar high with artisan flavors like black truffle, celery-peppercorn and pear-lavender. They've even launched a bespoke line that will allow vodka fanatics to have their very own combinations.

## MULTI-LAYERED FLAVORS

Some restaurants still make their own infusions and have pioneered the combining of multiple flavors. Gilt Club in Portland, Ore., crafts cocktails using vodka infused with serrano pepper and tangerine, or pumpkin, cinnamon and spice. New York's Aquavit has expanded its eponymous Swedish spirit tradition to 14 flavor combinations, including fig and cardamom.

Larger companies have taken note of this inventive pairing. Last year, vodka goliath Absolut issued the first of its limited-production, city-named vodkas with Absolut New Orleans, flavored with mango and black pepper. In July, the company launched Absolut Los Angeles, an acai, acerola, pomegranate and blueberry concoction. The following month, Rain organic vodka released four flavored iterations: grape-hibiscus, lavender-lemonade, cucumber-lime, and honey-mango-melon.

Perhaps the effectiveness of such combinations has inspired vodka makers to turn to savory tastes to help them stand out in a crowded marketplace. Vodkas infused with tomato (Crop and Three Olives), cucumber (Crop and Square One Organic), rosemary (Herb's), tarragon and saffron (Sub Rosa) and other ingredients have started appearing. So far, there are only a handful, and they're being used primarily to tweak Bloody Mary recipes, but they offer great possibilities for savory cocktails.

## GIN IS IN

The vodka surge has engendered a backlash among some operators. Recently, as I sat at the newly opened Clover Club in Brooklyn, N.Y., two women looked perplexed after flipping through the drink menu and finding not a single vodka cocktail among the two-dozen or so listed.

Cutting-edge bars like Clover Club are increasingly turning from vodka to gin, helping it evolve from a lingering association with tonic and lime, sultry weather and perspiring glasses into the original flavored spirit.

Gin drinkers don't appreciate hearing that their favorite drink could be considered the first flavored vodka, but it's the best way to remind people of gin's easy mixability, and the liquor may need a boost in the modern mixology context. Today, as most gin drinkers totter off to the over-age demographic, gin makers are working at making the juniper-spiked spirit relevant.

Venerable gin brands like Plymouth, bolstered by big spending and an association with classic cocktails, have surged, and new gins, like the rose-and-cucumber-enhanced Hendrick's, have also found favor among contemporary mixologists, who have picked up on how well the savory and tangy qualities of gin balance with fruits or fruit juices.

"Gin, especially Hendrick's, already has a tremendous amount of flavor layering in there," says Adrian Stratton, general manager and beverage director at the upscale Back Bay Grill in Portland, Maine.

"There are juniper, coriander, almond, licorice and mild floral notes that work well with citrus and herbal flavors. Hendrick's has such a distinct aroma, almost like fresh cucumbers. I love gin with a muddle of cucumber, mint and lime. It's a hit on our spring and summer menus."

For a more visual impact, Stratton reaches for Magellan, a blue gin colored and mildly flavored with iris roots.

"It's great straight, but it's also been popular in our Maytag Blue Martini. I stuff olives with Maytag blue cheese, skewer four of these and carefully place the skewer so that only the edges of the olives float in the gin, without any cheese getting in the drink."



ABSOLUT VODKA

New American-made craft gins like Aviation, made in Oregon with juniper, cardamom, coriander, lavender, anise seed, sarsaparilla and dried orange peel, have tinkered with the botanical mix to create a gin with more modern flavor profiles. Gin giant Tanqueray last year added Tanqueray Rangpur, flavored with lime and ginger as well as juniper and other botanicals.

Older gin brands typically incorporated few of the botanicals that now generally balance gin's junipery bite and tang. But recipes eventually became more exotic. Modern gins like Bombay Sapphire use a dozen or more botanicals, such as cassia, cubeb berries, nutmeg, bitter almond and grains of paradise, along with the signature juniper, to imbue flavor.

## BEYOND THE PALE

The flavor explosion isn't limited to white spirits; rum makers have found favor matching their spirit with citrus and tropical fruits and spices. Infusing rum with tropical flavors makes culinary sense, as the essential sweetness of rum, derived from molasses or sugar cane juice, pairs naturally with them.

**Absolut led the way with creatively flavored vodkas; its latest multi-flavored line includes the mango-peppercorn blend, a salute to New Orleans.**

Some of the leading rum brands, like Captain Morgan (essentially a spiced rum) and Malibu (with coconut and other flavors), are sold only in flavored versions, but historically, these two have been anomalies in a mostly pure spirit category. More recently, flavored rum, including the recently released guava rum from Cruzan, has taken off in popularity.

As with vodka, operators are reluctant to risk overload by adding too many flavored rums to the back bar. However, the rum category, like most others, has benefited from the long-term consumer trend of spending more for high-quality products. For years, this pattern was referred to as “drinking less but better,” as consumers voted with their dollars in restaurants for top-shelf products. Some of the high-end rums that entered the U.S. market recently are aged varieties from Venezuela (Diplomatico, Santa Teresa, Pampero), Guatemala (Zacapa, Zaya) and other Central and South American countries.

These newcomers are winning favor with aficionados because they are complex, rich and intense. Oddly, their sophisticated flavor profiles are championed by fans of Tiki cocktails, those multi-rum creations pioneered by 1940s restaurateurs Trader Vic Bergeron and Donn “The Beachcomber” Beach. Fans of classic cocktails find that these complex rums have many of the flavor and aromatic characteristics of rums gone by.

### RUM AND THEN SOME

Two small but growing areas for the rum business are rum agricoles from the French Caribbean, primarily Martinique, and cachaça, a sugar-cane-spirit that dominates Brazilian drinking. Brands of rum agricole, both aged and unaged, like Clement, J.M. and Neisson, add robust sugary and grassy aromas and flavors to drinks. They have started to win favor with bartenders looking for more flavor than many innocuous, popular rums provide.

Cachaça also can offer a lushness of fragrance and flavor, whether a natural result of production or due to added sugars. A few years ago, only a handful of brands made it to the United States. Today, almost two-dozen

can be found. While rum can be made with molasses or freshly pressed sugar cane, cachaça is made from pure sugar cane syrup and is the main ingredient in Brazil’s national cocktail, the caipirinha, made from crushed lime, sugar and cachaça and now popular in parts of the United States.

### WHISKEY ENTERS THE RACE

Whiskey makers are also getting into the flavor game. Enhancing whiskeys with flavors from other sources is nothing new; bourbon depends on the rich vanilla sweetness that comes from the toasted new oak it ages in, and Scotch whisky gains flavor from oak barrels once used to age bourbon, sherry and port, among other things.

Whiskey makers have focused on offering stronger, longer-aged and uniquely flavorful selections. American distillers have responded to the demand from consumers, bartenders and writers for the return of spicy and aggressive rye whiskey, which has become a brisk seller in the serious-minded, artisanal bars of major cities.

But some whiskey distillers have headed down the flavored-vodka road. Offerings from Phillips Union of Princeton, Minn., include vanilla- and cherry-flavored whiskeys, flavored with artisanal products like Royal Ann cherries and Madagascar vanilla made from hand-pollinated orchids. Lately, even corn whiskey has yielded to the trend. Heaven Hill Distilleries just added Georgia Moon Peach and Georgia Moon Lemonade flavored corn whiskeys, sold in old-fashioned Mason jars.

Back Bay Grill’s Stratton sees great flavoring potential with the warm, smoky notes in whiskey.

“I’m experimenting with playing off the smoky, buttery notes in whiskey and would like to do something with brown butter for Christmas.”

There’s an idea that could take the chill off the colder months ahead. ☺

JACK ROBERTIELLO *writes about spirits, cocktails, wine, beer and food from Brooklyn, N.Y.; he can be e-mailed at [applejak@earthlink.net](mailto:applejak@earthlink.net).*



PLYMOUTH GIN

Gin, the original flavored vodka, has tremendous built-in herbal notes that pair well with savory elements like cucumber and olives.

### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **MAKE IT A DOUBLE:** Double-flavored spirit infusions, like honey-mango, add complexity to cocktails
- ▶ **PULL A PUNCH:** Classic rum-based, punch-bowl drinks are the latest mixers making news