

FOOD & WINE[®]

THE RESTAURANT ISSUE

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AND VALERIE
CHANG'S SQUID
WITH BLACK MINT
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BOTTLE SERVICE

COCKTAIL HOUR

The Spirit of the Moment ... Is Vodka?
Once the bane of bartenders, ambitious craft versions have changed this go-to spirit's reputation.

By Betsy Andrews

Think vodka boring? Try a Retropolisian (recipe p. 77) or a Rocky Mountain Wizard (p. 78).

AT THE BETTY SUPPER CLUB IN ATLANTA, beverage director Darius Naderi infuses Aperol with seasonal strawberries, then swaps it for the cranberry juice in a crafty comeback of the Cosmopolitan. The result is the Retropolitan, an adult-style Kool-Aid: dangerously gulpable, yet sophisticated enough for thoughtful sipping. What adds the layers of salty earth and vanilla beneath the bitters and berries? The answer, believe it or not, is the vodka.

Naderi uses Pennsylvania-based Boyd & Blair vodka, made with local potatoes fermented with Champagne yeast to draw out their rich, silky sweetness. It's one in a rising wave of vodkas upending the spirit's wallflower image. "In the 1980s and '90s, I thought of vodka as the tofu of spirits," says Naderi. "But newer vodkas come with nuance and depth." (To be fair, tofu does, too.)

Once defined by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau as "without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color," vodka has so diversified that, in 2020, the TTB scrubbed that phrasing. "It's no longer just Popov and Smirnoff," says Tony Abou-Ganim, author of *Vodka Distilled: The Modern Mixologist on Vodka and Vodka Cocktails*.

Nowadays, vodkas come from all over the world and are distilled from novel ingredients: Japan's clean, rice-based Haku; South Africa's approachable Vusa, distilled from sugarcane; fruity St. George, made with California pears; Kástra Elión, a Greek vodka derived from olives that's a knockout in a briny martini. Low-ABV vodkas like the smooth, 55-proof Sommarøy temper intoxication. Organic vodkas, such as Purity, use earth-friendly grains. There are even vodkas with a mission, fighting climate change and boosting social causes.

Established producers have diversified, too. To its popular potato-based flagship, Chopin has added a wheat vodka and

a rye vodka, the latter now a standard on the martini carts that so many upscale restaurants have been rolling out. Says Aviram Turgeman, beverage director at Manhattan's Monterey, "I love playing with its spiciness." He adds a dash of orange bitters and an orange twist for "citric lift." The brand has even rolled out a higher-proof version of the rye vodka, called Bartender's Choice. More potent by half at 60% alcohol, it's made for blending into multi-ingredient mixed drinks.

With the revival of the vodka martini, "people are celebrating local distilleries making great spirits," says Abou-Ganim. At Oregon's "farm-to-flask" Thinking Tree Spirits, the Main Stage vodka is made from Cascades water and non-GMO white wheat sourced from neighboring growers. It's distilled 21 times, but that doesn't mean it's bland. "It's so smooth and creamy, you don't need to hide it," says the distillery's tasting room manager David Heter, who uses its lemon-blossom tones to brighten a spicy, picky martini called The Lovesick Crocodile (recipe p. 78). Locavorism is elevating flavored vodkas, too. Thinking Tree's standout for a spritz is infused with organic lavender and given its purple hue with butterfly pea flower.

"After decades of intentionally flavorless plain vodka or overly artificially flavored vodka, people now want vodka that offers notes that nod to the origin of the spirit and that can be complemented with cocktail ingredients rather than overpowered by them," says Thinking Tree's Darcey Howard.

We are also finally catching up with the vodka styles that are appreciated in the spirit's countries of origin. "In the West, we've looked for a neutral product," says Abou-Ganim. "But when you talk about Poland and Russia, it's a big, robust style." Distilled only once from estate-grown potatoes, Colorado's Woody Creek Distillers offers what he calls an alluring "funk" in their vodka—a "musty, vegetal, mushroomy, potato-skin" flavor that makes it "the main player" in his Rocky Mountain Wizard (recipe p. 78).

With white vermouth and yellow Chartreuse "complementing and celebrating the vodka," it's a martini with an herbaceous, earthy punch. But Abou-Ganim's favorite way to enjoy this rootsy vodka is even more Old World: poured from the bottle, "right out of the freezer, alongside a dollop of osetra caviar."

VODKAS WITH PANACHE, PLUS A PURPOSE

ISCO OSTREIDA (\$40)

Infused with local oysters, this vodka has a briny aroma and finish with a meaty, almost animal mid-palate. Dirty up your martini with it, and enjoy both the cocktail and the fact that you're supporting regenerative ocean farming.

KOSKENKORVA CLIMATE ACTION (\$20)

Made with barley that's farmed regeneratively to sequester carbon dioxide in the ground, this Finnish vodka blooms when poured over ice with a little Meyer lemon zest. Try it in a Lemon Drop cocktail.

SUPERGAY (\$31)

This queer-owned New York distillery's vodka is pot-distilled only three times to retain the character of its organic corn base. With its grapefruit-pith finish, it's fabulous in a Salty Dog. And when you drink it, you're helping out LGBTQ+ organizations.

THE COMMUNITY SPIRIT (\$32)

Made from corn distilled in a copper pot, this spiky, mouth-watering vodka asserts itself against the gin in a Vesper, and its B Corp–certified makers donate up to 24% of their revenue to BIPOC-run arts and community groups.





The Retropolitan

TOTAL 15 MIN, PLUS 24 HR
CHILLING; SERVES 1

This riff on a Cosmopolitan cocktail calls for strawberry-infused Aperol instead of the usual cranberry juice. The infused Aperol provides a sweet, tangy, fruity kick to this punchlike drink. It's also delicious in a spritz, and the leftover liqueur-soaked strawberries are perfect for spooning over sorbet or ice cream.

STRAWBERRY-INFUSED APEROL

- 1 cup (8 oz.) Aperol
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup ripe strawberries, stemmed and quartered

RETROPOLITAN

- 3 Tbsp. (1½ oz.) vodka (such as Boyd & Blair)
- 2 Tbsp. (1 oz.) strawberry-infused Aperol
- 1 Tbsp. (½ oz.) orange liqueur (such as Cointreau)
- 1 Tbsp. fresh lime juice
- 1 tsp. simple syrup
- Mint sprig and fresh strawberries, for garnish

1. Make the strawberry-infused Aperol: Combine Aperol and strawberries in an airtight container, and refrigerate 24 hours. Strain Aperol, and set aside. Reserve liqueur-soaked strawberries for another use, if desired.

2. Make the Retropolitan: Combine vodka, strawberry-infused Aperol, orange liqueur, lime juice, and simple syrup in a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Place lid on shaker; shake until mixture is cold, about 15 seconds. Strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a mint sprig and fresh strawberries. —THE BETTY AT THE KIMPTON SYLVAN HOTEL, ATLANTA

NOTE Store leftover infused Aperol in an airtight container in refrigerator up to 2 weeks.

The Lovesick Crocodile

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

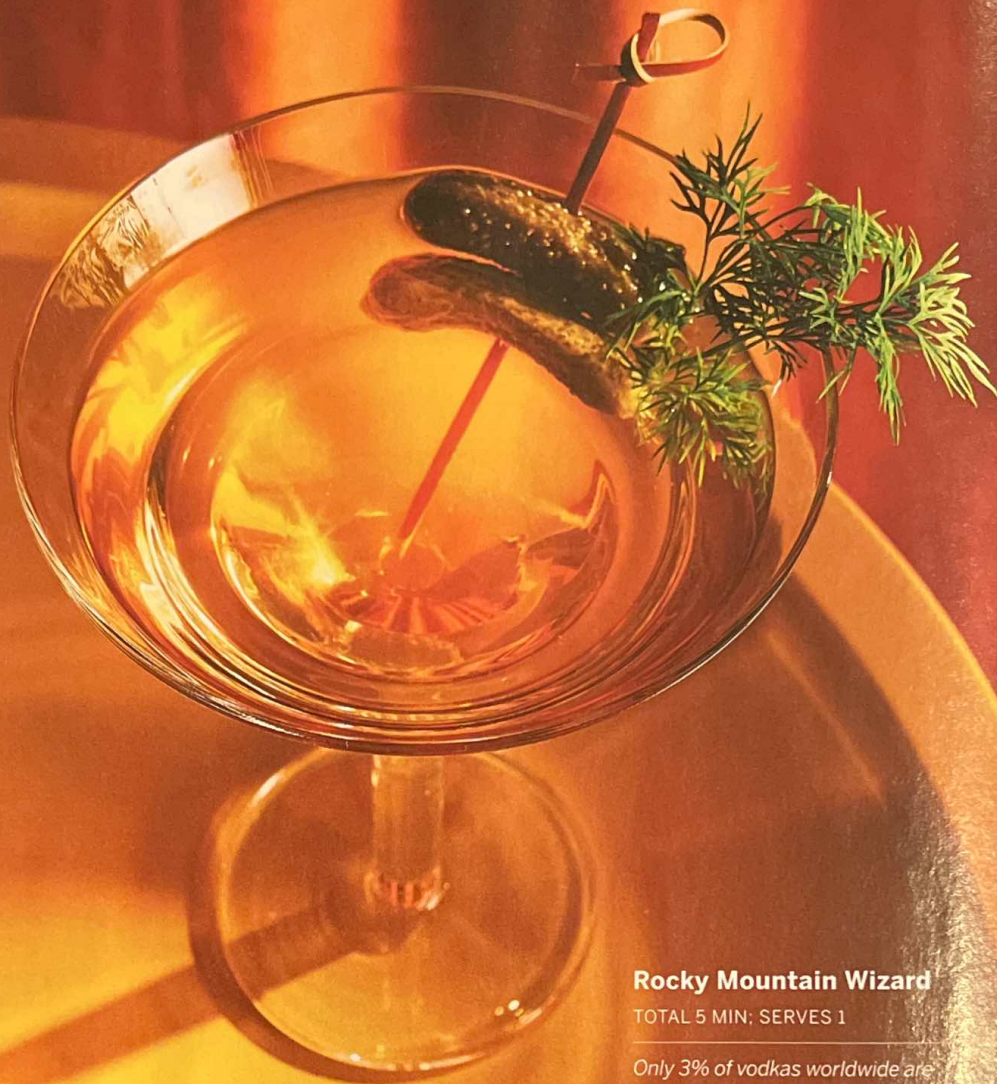
This surprisingly invigorating, bracing libation relies on Ancho Reyes, a Mexican chile liqueur made from smoky, sun-dried ancho chiles. The readily available liqueur imparts earthy and sweet aromas of dark chocolate and coffee and an assertive heat to the cocktail. The pickle juice acts just like a touch of salt, seasoning the drink and elevating and enhancing its robust flavors.

¼ cup (2 oz.) vodka (such as Thinking Tree Main Stage Vodka)

1½ Tbsp. (¾ oz.) Ancho Reyes Original Ancho Chile Liqueur

1½ Tbsp. dill pickle juice
Dill sprig and cornichons, for garnish

Combine vodka, Ancho Reyes liqueur, and dill pickle juice in a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Place lid on shaker; shake until mixture is cold, about 10 seconds. Strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a dill sprig and cornichons. —DAVID HETER, THINKING TREE SPIRITS, EUGENE, OREGON

**Rocky Mountain Wizard**

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

Only 3% of vodkas worldwide are made from potatoes, due to their finicky fermentation process. Las Vegas mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim uses the more earthy, nutty notes in Woody Creek's vodka to pair with the mellow, honeylike sweetness of yellow Chartreuse. While potato vodkas are not as common as rye vodkas, they can easily be found at most liquor stores.

- ¼ cup (2 oz.) potato vodka (such as Woody Creek)**
- 2 Tbsp. (1 oz.) Italian white vermouth (such as Cinzano Bianco)**
- 1 Tbsp. (½ oz.) yellow Chartreuse**
- 2 dashes orange bitters**
Orange peel strip, for garnish

Combine vodka, vermouth, yellow Chartreuse, and bitters in a mixing glass. Add ice, and stir until well combined, about 10 seconds. Strain into a chilled Nick and Nora glass, and garnish with an orange peel strip. —TONY ABOUGANIM, THE MODERN MIXOLOGIST

