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Vodka Distillers Give Tours, Tastings, Honey Vanilla and Stone Fruit Flavors

Sip vodka at room temperature to taste naturally occurring notes such as orange, pepper, berry and caramel

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By ALINA DIZIK

Updated April 8, 2014 8:11 p.m. ET

Industry City Distillery in Brooklyn is among a new crop of small U.S. distillers producing craft vodkas. The company's do-it-yourself ethos is reflected in its equipment and techniques.

When friends come over, Ken and Maria Peterson will often pour vodka shots and encourage guests to appreciate it the way they would a fine wine—at room temperature.

The Petersons buy vodka at CH Distillery, a six-month-old distiller in Chicago (the city's first since Prohibition) that triple-distills vodka and other spirits using Illinois-grown wheat and rye, and serves cocktails and small plates on the premises.

When a friend tries to drink the vodka in one shot, "we say, 'No, this is the good stuff,'" says Mr. Peterson, an accountant who entertains several times a month. "Then we'll sit around the table just sipping."

The most popular liquor with U.S. consumers is vodka, accounting for roughly a quarter of all new spirits launched in 2012, according to Chicago research firm Technomic Inc.

In the years since states started easing laws limiting spirits distilling, hundreds of micro-distillers have popped up to produce craft vodkas they hope can hold their own next to the big brands dominating the \$5.5 billion U.S. market.

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Many small makers have introduced vodka tastings modeled on vintners' and brewers' popular wine and [craft beer](#) tastings. Craft distillers suggest sipping vodka at room temperature to experience the full range of naturally occurring notes in unflavored distilled vodka.

These notes—including orange, pepper, vanilla, berry and even caramel—can be hard to detect and somewhat ambiguous, and they shouldn't be confused with the superpotent flavorings branded vodkas add to extend sales and obscure the alcoholic sting.

Vodka from the Heartland



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A look inside Middle West Spirits, a micro-distillery in Columbus, Ohio, that makes craft vodka in flavors like honey-vanilla and stone fruit, which are being met with growing demand. *Ian C. Bates for The Wall Street Journal*

"The differences in vodka are very subtle, so you need to do everything you can to really experience it," says Tony Abou-Ganim, author of "Vodka Distilled," a guide to consuming vodka, who also conducts tastings and workshops around the country and aboard cruise ships.

Vodka is made when a grain, fruit or vegetable containing natural sugar or starch is fermented and then distilled, or heated, to reach a higher alcohol content.

Most producers distill vodka multiple times to reach 190-proof alcohol concentration and then dilute with water to achieve about 80 proof, or 40% alcohol. Many refine their vodka further by carbon filtration, typically done using charcoal.

U.S. distillers now number more than 620, compared with 83 a decade ago, according to the American Distilling Institute, a national trade group.

More distillers are welcoming visitors. In the past year, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Mississippi and Texas passed legislation allowing distillers to conduct on-premise tastings, says Frank Coleman, vice president at the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S., a Washington, D.C., trade group. Distiller tastings remain unlawful in 18 states including Arizona, Florida and Illinois, he says.

In Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, pumpernickel bread, pickled vegetables and marinated fish are the traditional, somewhat salty complements to vodka, Mr. Abou-Ganim says. Bread, fish and vegetables are common at U.S. tastings too, as are charcuterie and cheese.



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Middle West, a Columbus, Ohio, distiller founded in 2009, sells its OYO brand vodka at the distillery and in more than 1,000 locations across 15 states, says co-founder Brady Konya.

The company ferments Ohio's soft red winter wheat for a "starchy" taste and distills the vodka 34 times while leaving it unfiltered for smoothness. OYO (pronounced "o-EE-o") is a reference to the Iroquois name for the Ohio River.

Most vodkas are distilled about five times before being filtered for sediment, Mr. Konya says. "We're working with the vodka, more like we'd be working with a gin," says Mr. Konya who this year added honey-vanilla and stone fruit flavors.

Middle West offers \$15 tours where visitors can select up to four spirits to taste from among the four vodkas and two whiskeys they produce.

The vodka has a "fruity nose," a "full vanilla caramel body" and a "whiskey-like" finish, Mr. Konya said, adding, "A third of our core vodka customers [are] whiskey drinkers who hate vodka." Middle West is launching Bourbon Barrel Aged Honey Vanilla Bean Vodka this week.

Mr. Abou-Ganim says it is possible to detect notes such as white pepper and vanilla in vodkas made from wheat, and citrus notes in vodkas distilled from grapes.

To distinguish between brands, Mr. Abou-Ganim recommends sampling several vodkas at one sitting. He prefers sipping from a sherry glass to enhance one's "nosing" ability, or aroma detection.

Unlike at wine tastings, where participants may take several sips of each wine they sample, Mr. Abou-Ganim advises participants at vodka tastings to swallow only a few ounces over the course of the entire event. "The idea is to do a lot of spitting," he says.

Bartenders looking for alternatives to the vodka-cranberry cocktail are coming around to craft offerings. Warehouse, a Charleston, S.C., cocktail bar that opened eight months ago, has added six more small-batch vodkas to the menu, making vodka more popular than gin at the bar, says owner James Groetzinger.

The most popular cocktail at Warehouse is Where the Crosswalks End. It is made with honeysuckle vodka from a Jackson, Miss., distiller called Cathead, plus ginger ale, citrus, ginger and lemon grass syrup, he says.

One of vodka's big advantages is its versatility. Vodka is defined by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives as being "without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color," and it goes well in both light, citrusy [summer cocktails](#) and creamy winter drinks.

About 60% of vodka distillers work with neutral pure alcohol purchased from a third party rather than fermenting their own grain or fruit, according to Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute, based in Hayward, Calif.

Going from fermented mash to distilled spirit in less than a day, vodka is quicker to produce than brown spirits. Justin Stiefel, owner of Heritage Distilling, a Gig Harbor, Wash., producer of vodka, whiskey and gin, says his whiskeys require six to 18 months of aging.

When Mr. Stiefel and his wife, Jennifer, got started two years ago, they purchased a 5-ton, 2,000-liter copper-pot still from Italy for about \$300,000. They had the equipment shipped by cargo boat and took nine days to assemble it.

Heritage bottles vodkas, which it distills from wheat and grapes, in Bordeaux-type wine

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bottles that fit behind a bar and are easier to handle than many square-shaped vodka bottles. "We know it can fit in someone's hand," Mr. Stiefel says.

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John Gould

I think I would rather drink a Scotch or bourbon which has a distinctive taste profile then sit around trying to see if the libation I am sipping has any discernible flavor! At the price many boutique vodkas sell for these days one could pick up a reasonably good barrel aged spirit for the same price-- or less.

Apr 9, 2014



Charles Frederick

The only way to really enjoy vodka is to make it yourself as I do with my own unlicensed distillation column using either distressed wine or cooking wine (available in bulk quantities if you know where to look and perfectly legal to buy without a license).. The distilled raw alcohol is then diluted with distilled or deionized water and then run through a column of activated carbon which removes all off-flavors.

If you consume large quantities of vodka making it yourself is not only fun but you also avoid paying significant federal and state taxes and the odds of getting caught are practically zero.

Apr 8, 2014



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