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ISSUE 24 MARCH/APRIL 2010  
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VODKA GROWS UP

DESTINATION ASHEVILLE, N.C.

10 MICROROASTERS COAST TO COAST

# Bottled Brawn

The potent allure of Fernet Branca

**MOST LIQUEURS ARE GENTLE, SWEET AND EAGER TO PLEASE**, like helpful Boy Scouts in a bottle. Fernet Branca is no Boy Scout. A bombastically bitter Italian liqueur, Fernet Branca is an alpha-dog amaro so powerfully laced with pungent botanicals that grimacing attempts at describing its flavor have dotted everything from Bill Cosby's standup routine to the YouTube commentary of disbelieving wine tasters. While such a caustic reputation might seem like a marketing kiss of death, Fernet Branca has been successfully shocking a steadily expanding core of drinkers for more than 150 years.

First produced in Milan in 1845, Fernet Branca is a member of the broad class of Italian amari, or bitter liqueurs, that also includes Campari, Averna and Aperol. Designed to be consumed as a post-prandial *digestivo* and renowned for its alleged powers at countering the effects of overindulging at the dinner table, Fernet Branca is flavored with around 40 roots, herbs, spices and other ingredients, including gentian, myrrh, chamomile and saffron. Redolent with the herbaceous aroma of menthol and eucalyptus, Fernet Branca has a bitter complexity that is jarring on first experience, and bracingly alluring with each subsequent encounter.

While many drinkers may first taste Fernet Branca as a late-night dare in a crowded bar, the liqueur has many dedicated fans who adore its firm slap to the palate. Fernet Branca has long been wildly

popular in Argentina, where it is often mixed with Coke, and domestically the liqueur has countless fans in the bar and restaurant industry, particularly in San Francisco. Bartenders in that city sometimes refer to a shot of Fernet Branca (often served with a chaser of ginger ale or ginger beer) as a "bartender's handshake," and such is the liqueur's resonance with the local food industry that recently Andrew Mitchell, a bartender at Rickhouse, designed a cocktail made with Fernet Branca and ginger, which he dubbed the Restaurateur.

Tricky to mix with because of its potent character, Fernet Branca contributes an intricate vibrance to classic cocktails, such as the whiskey-based Toronto and the vermouth-laden Appetizer à l'Italienne, as well as to contemporary drinks, such as the earthy Villa de Verano, created by Boston bartender Misty Kalkofen, and the classically styled Fernet Alexander, served at Anvil in Houston. The liqueur works best with other complex-flavored ingredients, such as vermouth or gin, though the crisp flavor of rye whiskey and tequila also prove good matches. While the flavor of Fernet Branca can take some getting used to, when mixed in a cocktail, the liqueur performs an essential task. "It's like cooking with a really powerful ingredient like garlic," says Rickhouse bar manager Erick Castro of the Restaurateur. "Without Fernet Branca, the drink is nowhere near as dynamic."

—Paul Clarke

## Restaurateur (Left)

*This bracing mixture—which combines Fernet Branca and ginger, the components of the "bartender's handshake"—has earned special attention among San Francisco drink slingers.*

3 slices fresh ginger  
1 oz. London dry gin  
½ oz. yellow Chartreuse  
½ oz. Fernet Branca  
¾ oz. fresh lime juice  
½ oz. simple syrup  
Ginger beer  
Ice cubes

Tools: shaker, muddler, Hawthorne strainer, fine-mesh strainer

Glass: Collins

Garnish: lime wheel

Place ginger in a shaker and muddle until well-crushed. Add everything except ginger beer, fill with ice and shake well for 10 seconds. Double-strain through a fine-mesh strainer into an ice-filled glass. Top with ginger beer and garnish.

Andrew Mitchell, Rickhouse, San Francisco

## Appetizer à l'Italienne (Center)

*This vermouth-based cocktail from The Flowing Bowl, an 1892 bar guide by a New York bartender known as "The Only William" Schmidt, displays the baroque, vivid flavors that were favored at that time. Best made with a full-flavored vermouth, such as Carpano Antica Formula or Vya, this drink is surprisingly delicate.*

2 oz. sweet vermouth  
1 oz. Fernet Branca  
1 dash absinthe  
2 dashes simple syrup  
Cracked ice

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: coupe or cocktail

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled glass.

William Schmidt, The Flowing Bowl, 1892

## Toronto (Right)

*Originally formulated around the mild flavor of Canadian whisky—hence the name—the Toronto has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years when made with the more robust character of American straight rye whiskey.*

2 oz. rye whiskey or Canadian whisky  
¼ oz. Fernet Branca  
¼ oz. simple syrup  
Cracked ice

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: coupe or cocktail

Garnish: strip of orange peel

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled glass. Twist orange peel over the drink and use as garnish.

Adapted from David Embury, The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks, 1948

Find more tasty Fernet cocktail recipes online.  
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# CLEARING THE WAY

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Vodka Gains New Momentum Behind the Bar

Story by PAUL CLARKE  
Photos by STUART MULLENBERG

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It came without warning during the hottest years of the Cold War, a surprise incursion from the Soviet bloc.

But rather than ICBMs dropping from the skies over Washington or Red Army tanks flooding into Western Europe, this engagement came in the form of booze—specifically, vodka, the colorless spirit as synonymous with Russia as balalaikas and borscht that, in the 1950s and '60s, was suddenly everywhere.

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The invasion was swift and stunning: in 1950, only 40,000 cases of vodka were sold in the United States; by 1955, that number was up to 4 million. As William Grimes noted in *Straight Up or On the Rocks*, a history of drinks in America, sales of vodka exceeded those of the once-mighty gin in 1967, and in 1976, vodka surpassed whiskey to become the country's biggest-selling spirit. Today, while sales of super-premium brands have been sluggish by the economic downturn, vodka still reigns supreme, and according to the Distilled Spirits Council, it regularly accounts for around a quarter of all spirits sales in the United States.

For the last half-century, vodka has been an unstoppable force behind the bar, but in some corners of the drinks world, resentment has been building in recent years. Many mixology blogs and online forums dismiss vodka as flavorless; some sneeringly disdain the crystal-clear spirit, placing its epicurean value on par with that of a Hostess cupcake and its cultural contribution on the same level as a Jonas Brothers CD. Last April, these grumblings came to a head when the *Wall Street Journal* proclaimed in its spirits column, "Vodka is passé."

Wait ... really? As eager as some might be to see the spirit fall from prominence, vodka's obituary, as the saying goes, was premature. Today some craft bartenders are taking a calm, measured look at vodka and determining how it can fit into the world of creative cocktails. "For me it started as devil's advocacy," says Jeremy J F Thompson, former head bartender at The Raines Law Room in New York who now works as a brand ambassador for Russian Standard Vodka. "I used to be of the school of thought that vodka was only good for cleaning your apron or disinfecting a wound," he says. "But my wife and in-laws are Russian, and I've spent a good deal of time drinking vodka in Russia and the Ukraine. That experience opened up vodka in a cultural way for me."



## Eldersour

*Vodka magnifies the floral character of rosehips and the elderflower-flavored St. Germain in this sour-style cocktail. Ehrmann suggests using organic produce if possible.*

1 ½ oz. rosehip-infused vodka (see below)  
1 oz. St. Germain  
1 tsp. powdered sugar  
½ oz. fresh lime juice  
½ oz. fresh lemon juice  
1 fresh egg white  
Ice cubes  
Tools: shaker, strainer  
Glass: cocktail  
Garnish: several drops of Peychaud's bitters

Add all ingredients to a shaker and shake well, without ice, for at least 5 seconds to emulsify the egg white. Add ice and shake again for 19 seconds, until well chilled. Strain into a chilled glass. Garnish.

### ROSEHIP-INFUSED VODKA

Using a 750-milliliter bottle of vodka (Ehrmann uses Square One Organic), pour off 2 ounces for another use, to make room for the rosehips. Add 20 dried rosehips, seal the bottle and let sit for a minimum of 5 days, agitating the mixture daily. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer and return vodka to the bottle. Rosehips may be found at Eastern European, Nordic and other specialty grocers, as well as herb shops.

*H. Joseph Ehrmann, Elixir, San Francisco*

## Gypsy

*Dating to the mid-1930s, the Gypsy demonstrates vodka's utility in drinks with strongly flavored liqueurs; here, the spirit's neutrality gives the potent flavor of the herbal liqueur Bénédictine room to expand while also tempering the liqueur's sweetness.*

2 oz. vodka

1 oz. Bénédictine

1 dash Angostura bitters

Ice cubes

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: cocktail

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and add ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled glass.

*Adapted from Esquire Drink Book, 1956*



 For more vodka cocktails, browse our website.  
[IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM/RECIPES](http://IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM/RECIPES)

## A Muddled Reputation

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A simple combination of ethyl alcohol and water, vodka is largely defined by what it doesn't have—color and, technically, aroma and flavor. But just as nature abhors a vacuum, vodka resists total anonymity, and minute differences in texture, viscosity and flavor among brands make the spirit more diverse than it might appear at first glance.

Consumed for at least 600 years in Eastern and Northern Europe, vodka can be made from anything that can be fermented and distilled. Classically made from rye, wheat or potatoes, vodka is flexible, and today it is made from ingredients ranging from grapes and oranges to milk and honey. Distilled to a very high proof, which eliminates virtually all of the properties that contribute flavor to other styles of spirit, vodka is then filtered, diluted with water to a drinkable strength and bottled.

A relative novelty in the U.S. until the 1950s, vodka quickly became popular when served in drinks such as the Moscow Mule, a mixture of vodka and ginger beer served in special copper mugs, as well as the Bloody Mary and the Kangaroo—a drink now more commonly known as the vodka martini. Embraced by the Hollywood set and memorably imbibed by James Bond, vodka was initially seen as exotic, suave and stylish. But if timing is everything, vodka's ascendance in some ways couldn't have happened at a worse time. Rising to prominence during an era that marked a culinary low point in America, vodka had the misfortune of taking command of the spirits world during the decades that were also culturally defined by roller disco, Def Leppard and unironic mullets.

Easily masked by other ingredients, vodka became the virtually flavorless fuel in massively popular drinks such as the White Russian, the Kamikaze and, more recently, the Sour Apple Martini—drinks that became especially popular among younger, inexperienced drinkers, who could consume feloniously large quantities of Mind Erasers without tasting anything more than sweet liqueurs or juice.

Not surprisingly, these party-hearty drinks receive a chilly reception among many contemporary craft bartenders, and Thompson says they're the biggest reason many hold a grudge against vodka. In his opinion, the anti-vodka bias has little to do with the spirit itself, arguing that while vodka has taken some wrong turns, it's still possible to appreciate the spirit and to use it creatively. "We don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater," he says. "These drinks are the bathwater—the baby is the spirit, and that is what we should hold onto."

## Gateway to Craft Cocktails

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As a quick glance at any liquor store's lineup will prove, vodka is not only the biggest selling spirit in the country, but is also represented by dozens of brands, with many of the more expensive vodkas packaged in elaborate designer-crafted bottles. Unfortunately, a vodka's package may have little relation to the product inside, and in the rush to promote new vodkas, some marketers make misleading or nonsensical claims about brands, boasting about the number of times they've been distilled—a figure of questionable relevance that's open to creative interpretation—or the imaginative ways in which the vodka has been filtered.

Perhaps more than any other spirit, vodka's identity has been shaped by marketing, and while that's led to some spectacular success stories in the spirits industry, it's also contributed to the sense of ill-will among many craft bartenders. At Employees Only, a New York bar that's popular among the city's bar and restaurant workers, bar manager Robert Krueger says that vodka may not be the most exciting spirit to work with for some bartenders, but he describes the backlash against vodka as an overreaction and says the spirit can play an integral role in

creative bars—for example, it can help first-time customers become more comfortable with the whole craft-cocktail experience. “You can open up the world of cocktails to a customer who’s prepared to drink only vodka.”

In Austin, Texas, bartender and “Topsy Texan” blogger David Alan agrees. “Taking an antagonistic attitude to something people drink a lot of is not a good way to further the movement,” says Alan, noting that at Annie’s, the craft-cocktail bar he recently managed, most customers were vodka drinkers and would have felt out of place in a bar that didn’t stock the spirit. “Having a good vodka cocktail [on the menu] is kind of a gateway to get people to trust you, and then you can introduce them to other things.”

Vodka’s cocktail history—or, more appropriately, its relative lack of one—has also worked against it among bartenders who prize drinks that have a heritage stretching back a century or more. While Thompson has found a handful of vodka cocktail recipes from the early 20th century—the earliest known reference to a vodka cocktail is from a 1905 newspaper article about the visit of a Russian diplomatic delegation (unfortunately the drink’s name and recipe are lost to time)—vodka didn’t really hit its stride as a cocktail ingredient until the last half of the 20th century.

Some of the earliest—and, to some bartenders, most appealing—vodka cocktails use the spirit’s neutrality as a stage for strong-flavored ingredients, such as bitter Italian amari or French herbal liqueurs. “Vodka is spreading out the flavors and adding neutrality in a very functional way, giving the rest of the flavors a broader surface to play on,” Thompson says. “The neutrality opens it up, like putting a tincture into water.” Examples include the Gypsy, a drink dating to the 1930s in which vodka helps soften the full flavor of Bénédictine; the Drink Without a Name, a Cointreau- and Chartreuse-laden contemporary classic sometimes also called the Harrington; the Carnaval Room, a 1940s drink of vodka accented with dry vermouth and tangerine liqueur; and the Staraya Modnaya, a drink created by Thompson that features the savory flavors of fresh dill and Bénédictine or kummel, a caraway liqueur that’s popular in Russia. Krueger says the Vesper—the James Bond martini variation introduced by Ian Fleming in *Casino Royale*—works in the same way, with the vodka giving the flavors of gin and Lillet room to breathe.

Another type of drink that puts vodka to good use is that in which vodka is used to magnify flavors, especially those of delicate herbal or floral ingredients that might be obscured by fuller-flavored spirits. “Alcohol and sugar are both flavor amplifiers,” says H. Joseph Ehrmann, owner of Elixir in San Francisco and ambassador for Square One Vodka. Ehrmann points out that much of the contemporary cocktail culture, especially in California, uses fresh fruit and other produce, and that vodka is a natural fit for these types of drinks. “Say you’re combining three fruits, an herb and a syrup,” he says. “If you’ve diversified your ingredients and play them off each other, then throw a well-made vodka on top of that, the flavor just explodes.”

These bartenders also challenge the notion that vodka loses all of its character the moment it encounters another cocktail ingredient. “When you’re serving something like a vodka martini and you throw some Lillet or French vermouth and a dash of orange bitters in there, the quality of that vodka is important,” Thompson says. “Three things are relevant: the mouthfeel, the burn (this can be a positive thing, such as with a rye vodka) and the aftertaste—that’s really where a vodka comes out, in the finish.”

Ultimately vodka’s future in craft cocktails depends not only on what distillers can do in terms of creating interesting, well-made spirits, but on what bartenders do in terms of setting aside their preconceived notions and approaching vodka for what it has to offer. “We know vodka is there,” says Thompson. “But at the end of the day there has to be a more constructive and creative approach than just ignoring it.” ■



## Staraya Modnaya

*In this cocktail inspired by the Old Fashioned, Jeremy Thompson uses vodka's neutrality as a stage for the savory flavors of fresh dill and the rich, herbal character of Bénédictine.*

1 sugar cube  
1 small sprig fresh dill  
2 dashes orange bitters  
1 dash seltzer  
2 ½ oz. vodka (Thompson uses Russian Standard)  
1 tsp. Bénédictine  
Ice cubes for stirring; large cube(s) for serving  
Tools: mixing glass, muddler, bar spoon, strainer  
Glass: Old Fashioned  
Garnish: lemon twist, small sprig of fresh dill

Place dill and sugar cube in mixing glass and add bitters and seltzer; muddle into a paste. Add vodka and ice and stir well until chilled, around 20 seconds. Pour Bénédictine into a chilled glass and rotate to coat the sides of the glass with the liqueur; discard excess liqueur and add large cube or several small cubes of ice. Strain drink into glass and garnish.

*Jeremy J F Thompson, New York*

# 12 to Try

All too often, a vodka's reputation is built on style rather than substance. To avoid a pretty bottle or clever marketing campaign from influencing the search for nuance and character, all vodkas listed here were sampled in a blind tasting. —P.C.

## 42 Below

A well-balanced New Zealand export with a light aroma of slate, a medium body, a mineral dryness and a delicate herbal sweetness on the finish. \$24, [drinkupny.com](#)

## Absolut

One of the bestselling vodkas proves its reputation isn't only built on its iconic bottle. With a light fragrance of lemon peel and a full, round mouthfeel, Absolut has a gentle bite and a light vegetal sweetness. \$21, [shoppersvineyard.com](#)

## Charbay Clear

The initial aroma is subdued, but has a pleasant, medium-bodied viscosity and a slow, rich heat tinged with traces of lemon peel and almond milk. \$37, [internetwines.com](#)

## Hangar One

This blend of vodkas made from viognier wine and wheat has an aroma touched with fresh apples, a medium body and a pleasant fruity sweetness. \$35, [infinespirits.com](#)

## Karlsson's Gold

Made in Sweden from a base of potatoes, Karlsson's Gold has a rich, fruity aroma and a full, creamy body, with bright nuances of apples and plums. It's surprisingly rich, with enough personality to be enjoyed on its own. \$24, [beltramos.com](#)

## Medoyeff

This Oregon-distilled vodka has a lean, brisk character. A light aroma of grain leads to a medium-bodied spirit with a snap of heat and a touch of yeasty sugar on the finish. \$26, [beltramos.com](#)

## Russian Standard

This vodka has a medium body, a mellow burn and a dry, grainy flavor followed by a lightly honeyed finish. For less than \$10 more, the Platinum is similarly lean and dry, but has a spicier snap balanced with a doughy richness. \$20, [drinkupny.com](#)

## SKYY

Another longtime industry leader, for a reason. With a light, grassy aroma and a rich body touched with notes of butter and almonds, SKYY has a modest, nicely balanced character well-suited for cocktails. \$17, [bevmo.com](#)

## Square One Organic Rye Vodka

Made in Idaho from organic rye, this vodka is crisp and balanced, with a medium body, a slight spicy snap and a finish that is full and mildly sweet. \$33, [klwines.com](#)

## Tito's Handmade Vodka

One of the leaders in a growing craft-vodka boom, Tito's is made from corn. It has a medium body and an earthy, mineral flavor that's dry and balanced, with a lightly sweet finish. \$16, [crownwineandspirits.com](#)

## Vermont Spirits White Vodka

Vodka can be distilled from pretty much anything, as Vermont Spirits artfully demonstrates with its vodka made from milk sugar. It has a rich, honeyed aroma and a round, full-bodied character. At \$10 more, the Gold Vodka is made from maple sap and has a gentle sweetness of almond milk, a medium body and a mellow heat. \$30, [drinkupny.com](#)

## Vodka 360

The aroma of 360 has an implied sweetness of corn and spun sugar, but on the palate this medium-bodied vodka is moderately dry, with hints of anise and a slight nutty richness. \$30, [wallywine.com](#)



Check out tasting notes for additional vodka brands: [IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM/MA10](#)

