The Choice Is Clear

Can maple sap or apples make good vodka? New England craft distillers think so.

by Wayne Curtis
photography Annie Card

What makes a superb vodka? That's a matter of spirited debate. The most cynical sippers insist that since vodka is made from almost pure alcohol and water, little discernible difference exists among the brands. They attribute the recent vodka boom chiefly to slick advertising and curious consumers.

A DOZEN YEARS AGO, NOBODY MADE VODKA IN New England. Today, there are six "craft distillers" producing small-batch premium vodkas. It's all part of a national trend that's been working its way through the food chain. "First it was wine, then bread, then beer, then olive oil, then balsamic vinegar, then cheeses," says Bill Owens, head of the California-based American Distilling Institute, which advises craft distillers on how to get that first bottle bottled and then run operations profitably. "Everything seems to be going through a renaissance of rediscovering its roots."

And, just so you don't make a common novice's mistake, vodka's roots don't necessarily involve potatoes. "Potatoes are just what the Russians had a surplus of," says Rich Pelletier, who makes Nashoba Valley Vodka in Massachusetts. In fact, vodka can be (and is) distilled from any fermentable plant product—wheat, apple cider, corn, molasses, sugar beets, or even maple sap.

What makes vodka vodka—and not, say, bourbon or rum—is the process of distillation. Vodka is defined by the federal government as a "neutral spirit," which means it must emerge from a still as at least 95 percent pure alcohol. That means most of the natural flavors of the original fermentation are left behind. (In contrast, many other liquors, including bourbon and rye, are by law distilled at a maximum of 80 percent pure alcohol, ensuring that more of the essential flavor of the base spirit survives the distillation.)

What makes a superb vodka? That's a matter of spirited debate. Some producers claim that the base product still yields enough trace elements to influence how it ultimately tastes, even at a high-proof distillation. New Hampshire's Frank Reinhold Jr., who makes General John Stark Vodka out of apples, says of his vodka that "there's a softness, and, to a certain extent, there's a perception of sweetness that's uniquely different." Much the same claim is made by those who make vodka from maple sap and potatoes.

Others claim that vodka's clean taste is more influenced by how it's filtered (if at all) or by the water that makes up most of the end product (after the alcohol is produced, the distillate is blended with water to lower the alcohol content to 40 percent). The most cynical sippers insist that since vodka is made from almost pure alcohol and water, little discernible difference exists among the brands (in fact, federal trade laws define vodka as being "without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color"). They attribute the recent vodka boom chiefly to slick advertising and curious consumers.

Craft distillers don't have budgets for splashy ads. The combined output of all New England vodka producers is less than 2 percent of Grey Goose, the leading premium vodka, but this new breed of distillers believes they can find a market at the local and regional level, producing something that's every bit as smooth and clean on the palate as more prominent brands.

Vodka is not a traditional New England product. (It was virtually unknown in the United States until after World War II.) But vodka has a distinct advantage: It can produce immediate returns for start-up distillers. Unlike whiskey or brandy, vodka can go from still to bottle without pausing to age in barrels. And, nationally, drinkers love vodka, which accounts for about one out of every four bottles of spirits sold.

"Outside of a nuclear reactor, there's nothing more difficult to get into than distilling, because it's layered with a bureaucracy that goes back to Prohibition and beyond," says Bill Owens. "If you're opening up a small business, you need to think about making some money to pay for the capitalization."

Indeed, paying for it all remains an unsettled issue. Many of today's craft vodkas sell for around $30 a bottle—almost triple the cost of a mass-market vodka. "After the initial push and everyone thinks it's cute," says Frank Reinhold Jr., "can we produce a quality product at a price the public will pay?"

Here's a look at six who are betting they will.

VERMONT SPIRITS

When Duncan Holaday bought a hilly, 200-acre property in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom in the late 1980s, he figured there must be some way to make it pay. Making maple syrup wouldn't do it—the industry was too competitive at a small scale. So Duncan experimented with distilling maple sap, and a creditable vodka was the result. Pleased, he set about launching Vermont Spirits, constructing the distillery just a few dozen yards from his house.

Today, the distillery—his second, after the first burned down—is a back-to-the-land operation that operates wholly off the grid. A steam generator burns firewood to heat the four stills. Duncan can produce

Vodka can be distilled from any fermentable plant product—wheat, apple cider, corn, molasses, sugar beets, or even maple sap.

what they sipped in the dining room. Rich is making overtures to other Massachusetts restaurants to carry his products, but anyone hoping to take home a bottle will still need to plan a trip to Bolton.

General John Stark Vodka

Flag Hill's hallmark product is named after the New Hampshire hero who uttered the words "Live free or die" (the state's motto). Frank Reinhold Jr., the owner of this farm-based winery and distillery could recast that slogan as "Diversify or die."

The 110-acre farm outside Durham, New Hampshire, has been in Frank's family for more than 50 years. Facing the dim economic prospects of family farms everywhere, Frank decided to plant 20 of those acres with wine grapes. Then he learned the process of distilling, making fortified wines such as port and gearing up for vodka production after convincing the state legislature to allow him to sell it at the farm's store.

Frank sold a conservation easement on the farm in 2004, which partially paid for his distillation equipment. He begins his process with apple cider, which is

Hometown Spirit

Distilled waters run deep in New England. With crisp, clean artisanal vodkas already in the bottle, many of the region's boutique distillers are experimenting with whiskeys, rums, and brandies.

With a head start in the business, Triple Eight Distillery on Nantucket concocts everything from Gale Force Gin and Hurricane Rum to Riptide Tequila and Nor'easter Bourbon. The company's latest distillation is Notch. The scotch-style whiskey, aged six years in bourbon casks, will be released later this year.

Green Mountain Distillers in Stowe, Vermont, is also dabbling in whiskey. Partners Tim Danahy and Harold Faircloth are currently aging a limited-batch single malt, which they believe will be the first American organic whiskey. Next up: maple rum, aged in bourbon barrels coated with Vermont maple syrup.

Nashoba Valley Spirits in Bolton, Massachusetts, produces gin, several types of eau-de-vie (clear fruit brandy), wine, beer, and brandy. A single-malt whiskey is in the works.

At Flag Hill Winery & Distillery in Lee, New Hampshire, the newest additions are liqueurs made from two of New England's favorite flavors. A sugar maple liqueur is "good enough to eat on pancakes," owner Frank Reinhold Jr. jokes, while the cranberry liqueur has plenty of "pucker power."

Westford Hill Distillers in Ashford, Connecticut, producer of Pear William, Framboise, Fraise, and Kirsch eaux-de-vie, is currently barrel-aging its first apple brandies, which should be ready for release in the fall. *– Jessica Merrill*

fermented for 10 days and then triple-distilled in a copper still. He has 18 full- and part-time employees, many of whom cater weddings and other events held outdoors or in the property's 1796 dairy barn.

General John Stark Vodka is available at the farm's store and at New Hampshire state liquor stores, and will soon be offered in other markets.

Sip your next martini in style with Simon Pearce hand-blown martini glasses (from left: Hartland, Ascutney, and Stratton). simonpearce.com

How Do the Vodkas Taste?

A recent blind tasting of eight vodkas by eight vodka aficionados (admittedly not experts) produced one unexpected result: The two top vodkas were distilled from apples. Nashoba Valley and General John Stark scored highest and were hailed by most of the tasters for their subtle sweetness and softness. Taking third place was Cold River, which several tasters thought was made from maple sap because of its sweet aroma. (It's made from potatoes. Vermont Spirits Gold is made from maple sap, and it placed fourth.)

The New England distillers' insistence that local craft vodkas can hold their own against national brands from the big producers seems to have promise: All the local vodkas but one—Sunshine—were preferred to the two control vodkas—Smirnoff (made in the United States from corn) and Chopin (made in Poland from potatoes).

The test also produced one other definitive result, at least for the tasters: It amply proved that all vodkas are not the same.