

HANNA
LEE

POLSKA VODKA!

VODKA ON THE ROCKS ANYONE?

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I consider myself a wine gal, but like many a hardworking businessperson, I've also been known to enjoy vodka, especially in a dirty Martini or an extra spicy Bloody Mary. That all changed recently when I made a pilgrimage to Poland, the country that many consider to be the birthplace of vodka. The flight was only seven hours, but I was transported to an ancient distillery that dates back to 1726. I was greeted with a shot of vodka. I mean – a lot of vodka. And throughout my stay, the shots of vodka continued...and their shot glasses are pretty large!

The Poles take pride in their vodka culture. They are purists and prefer their vodka chilled and straight. Naturally, I didn't dare mention my dirty Martini reputation! After this intensive indoctrination, I now enjoy my vodka on the rocks, where I can savor its pure grain flavor and its smooth texture.

Americans are not strangers to vodka. As a matter of fact, the U.S. is the largest vodka market in the world and there's more vodka consumed here than all others spirits combined. Certainly, businesswomen and men like ourselves often choose vodka drinks when entertaining clients, which is certainly contributing to these robust consumption numbers.

Every year, the U.S. vodka market continues to grow. Believe it or not, 60 vodka brands were introduced last year alone and more are on the way. I thought it would be appropriate to set the record straight with a miniature Vodka 101. Vodka is a neutral spirit, having no color and a very subtle taste. It is traditionally distilled from grains like wheat, rye or corn, as well as potatoes. Among these, many connoisseurs consider rye to be the best grain for vodka, as it imparts a pleasing peppery note.

Traditionally, vodka has been produced in Poland, Russia and various countries in Scandinavia. Today, the market is being flooded with vodkas made from untraditional ingredients, like grapes, and made in untraditional places such as France, Ireland and even Texas. Moreover, the proliferation of flavored vodkas, for example, herbs, grapefruit, mango, green tea, etc., has made liquor stores seem more like Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlors. Lastly, the price of vodka is skyrocketing, with consumers routinely spending \$30, \$40, even \$60 a bottle, but many wonder if these prices are really justifiable.

I recently interviewed a leading vodka expert, Chester Brandes, who is a 33-year veteran of the spirits industry. He is the president and CEO of Imperial Brands, Inc., a subsidiary of Belvédère S.A. that is now staging the U.S. launch of Sobieski Vodka, Poland's #1 premium vodka and the world's #7 bestseller. Mr. Brandes is also promoting a "Truth in Vodka" campaign to return vodka back to its roots.

"It's time vodka drinkers knew the truth about vodka," said Brandes. "Consumers are spending between \$30 to \$60 a bottle for so-called super premium vodkas. In essence, they are paying for fancy packaging and bloated marketing costs. It's time to get back to basics with an honest, premium vodka at a price that won't make consumers' heads swim. Sobieski Vodka delivers unparalleled quality at an affordable price."

Indeed, Sobieski Vodka retails for \$10.99 for a 750 ml bottle and \$14.99 for a liter bottle, an unabashed bargain. Beyond price, however, Sobieski Vodka can compete on taste against vodkas at double or triple its price. It was recently crowned #1 at a blind tasting of 25 vodkas conducted by La Revue du Vin De France, France's leading wine and spirits journal, beating Grey Goose, Absolut, Stolichnaya, Svedka, Ciroc and others. It also won a gold medal from the Beverage Testing Institute (BTI) in the U.S., where it was ranked the number one premium vodka from among 108 entries in a blind tasting. These professional tastings prove Sobieski Vodka's premise, namely that the proof is in the bottle, not in the price or the packaging.

For more information about Sobieski Vodka, please visit vodkasobieski.com or www.tastings.com. In the meantime, say "Cheers" in Polish, or "Na Zdrowie."