

Cheers

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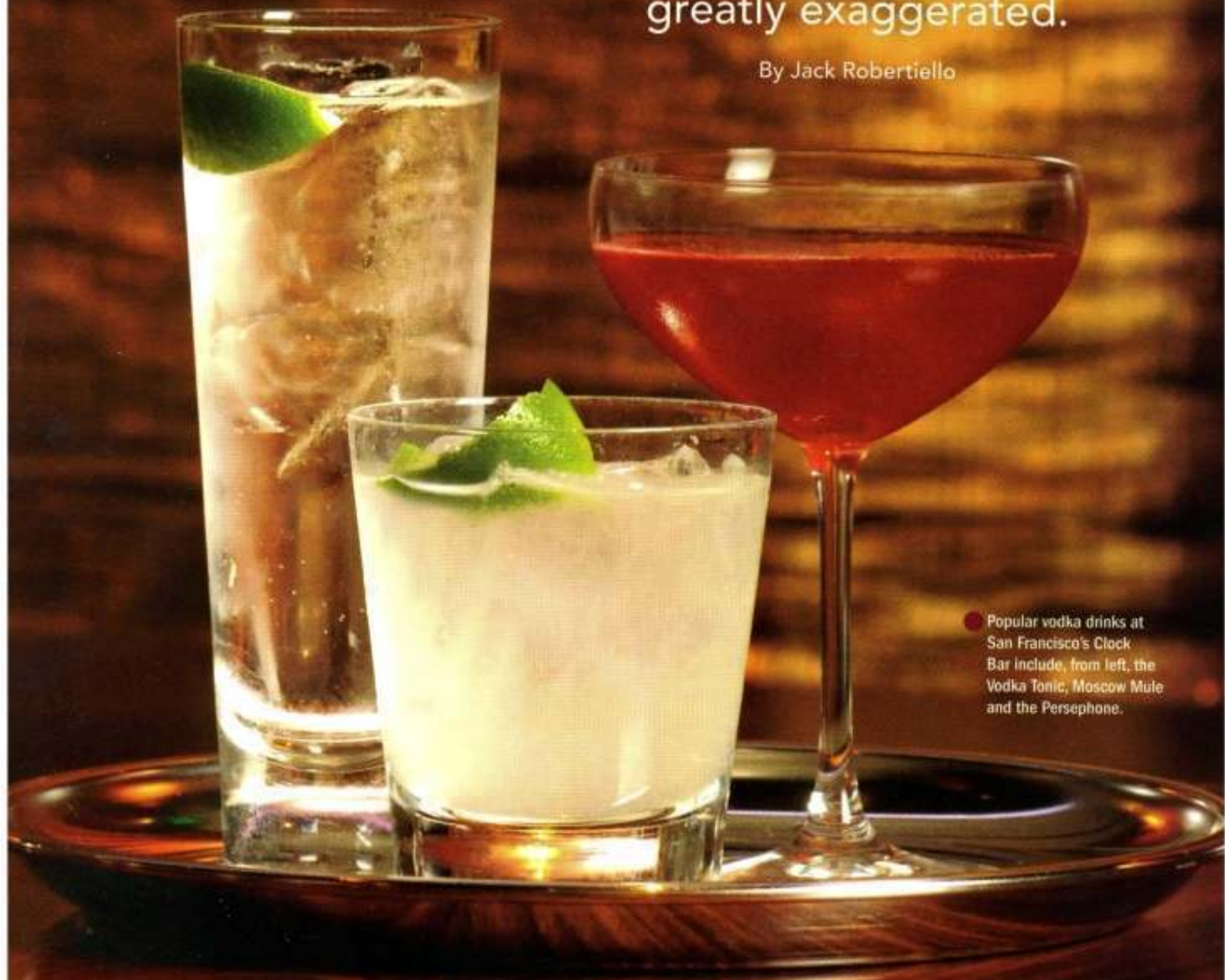


VODKA
Still King Behind the Bar

Czar of the Spirits World

Vodka's decline as the spirit of choice has been greatly exaggerated.

By Jack Robertiello



● Popular vodka drinks at San Francisco's Clock Bar include, from left, the Vodka Tonic, Moscow Mule and the Persephone.

VODKA.

Vodka, vodka, vodka.

VODKA, VODKA, VODKA, VODKA, VODKA.

Sure, it sometimes can be monotonous.

But vodka also sells. It's the on-premise cash-cow, the spirit that pays the rent. And despite the current economic tide, the category is growing with every new flavor, line extension and brand introduced. Let there be no confusion: Vodka is firmly established as the most reliably profitable commodity in the on-premise business.

Vodka continued its dominance in 2008, gaining market share in the U.S. with sales that now surpass 55.1 million 9-liter cases, according to *Cheers* parent The Beverage Information Group, a 4.9 percent gain over 2007. It accounts for nearly 30 percent of total U.S. spirits sales at this point, and dominates most top brand lists; vodka accounted for 23 of the 53 *Cheers* Growth Brands winners this year (see cheersonline.com for the wine and spirits Growth Brands coverage in our March issue).

Top brands come from all price points and places on the map: Smirnoff and UV from the U.S., Svedka from Sweden, Three Olives from England, Ciroc from France, not to mention the powerhouses that lead the category—Absolut, Grey Goose, Skyy, Stolichnaya and Ketel One, among others.

New vodkas arrive all the time; the latest include Belvedere IX Vodka—pronounced One-X—which has ginseng, guarana, açai, ginger, sweet almond, jasmine, eucalyptus, cinnamon and

black cherry, as well as Absolut Mango, the latest extension from the second best selling vodka brand, Absolut.

Recently the cocktail boom, arguably started in the late 1990s by the vodka-liqueur-fruit juice triumvirate known generically as "Martinis," has shifted attention to other spirits. Many so-called Martini bars, including landmark Tini Bigs in Seattle, have cut back on their extensive vodka-based menus. Chains especially have been forced to reduce spirits inventory, and they are looking to winnow the vodkas on their shelves, making it tougher for new ones to get introduced.

Boston-based Uno Chicago Grill now limits each of its more than 200 restaurants to no more than 15 vodka SKUs. Chicago-based Morton's the Steakhouse once stocked 35 at each of its 76 U.S. restaurants, but now the number is closer to 25.

QUICK AND SAFE

It may be harder for new brands, but that doesn't mean vodka has dropped in guest popularity; Vodka Tonics, Vodka Rocks and Vodka Martinis still are extremely popular orders, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, when the category can account for as much as 50 percent of a bar's beverage alcohol receipts.

The ease and speed with which vodka drinkers choose their favorites—with a splash of cranberry, soda or tonic, usually—is



Leading Vodka Brands

(Thousands of 9-liter cases)

Brand	Supplier	2008p
Smirnoff	Diageo	9,375
Absolut	Pernod Ricard USA	4,746
Grey Goose	Bacardi USA	3,459
Skyy	Skyy Spirits USA	2,485
Svedka	Constellation Spirits (Spirits Marque One)	2,200
Stolichnaya	William Grant & Sons	2,000
Ketel One	Diageo/Nolet Spirits	1,969
McCormick Vodka	McCormick Distilling	1,930
Popov Vodka	Diageo	1,815
Barton Vodka	Constellation Spirits/Barton	1,699
Skol Vodka	Constellation Spirits/Barton	1,592

(p) Preliminary

a boon to busy bartenders, says Jackson Cannon, bar manager at Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks, a Boston-based lounge that serves American cuisine. "When I'm slammed, I'm happy to have many Highball orders to survive the night, as opposed to high-construction cocktails. The person who's ordering that Highball tends to get his drink faster."

Part of vodka's appeal lies in its reliability. "If you're walking into random bars asking for Sazeracs, you're going to get more bad ones than good ones. But it's hard to mess up a Vodka and Tonic," says Marco Dionysos, head bartender at Clock Bar in San Francisco's Westin St. Francis, part of the San Francisco-based Mina Restaurant Group. He speculates that the majority of any restaurant's customers go out only on weekends and don't change their drink orders much.

Even at bars that have stellar cocktail reputations, such as Clock Bar, vodka still leads sales. "Our top-selling drink since opening has been a Ketel One Martini despite two pages of featured and classic cocktails displayed prominently in our menu," notes Dionysos. The hot drink recently has been Persephone, \$14, a cocktail Dionysos added after lots of customers requested pomegranate Martinis. The drink is made with Charbay Pomegranate Vodka, pomegranate juice and prosecco.

Clock Bar opened with only one vodka drink, the Moscow Mule, \$12. With a small back bar, the Clock keeps inventory tight, focusing on local favorites Charbay and Hangar One, as well as limited national brands. "People are generally happy drinking any of the leading brands if they are after a vodka cocktail," he says.

THE SPIRIT OF CHOICE

Meanwhile, some standout vodka-focused operations continue to do quite well. Take Red Square, celebrating its 10th year in the Mandalay Bay Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. The

● At the Eastern Standard in Boston, the Salsify Gimlet is made with a mix of Hammer + Sickle Vodka, salsify purée, Seville orange cordial and Angostura Bitters.



● Last winter, the Eastern Standard featured drinks such as the Russian Tea Room (left), made with roasted beet-infused Christiania Vodka, orange juice, tarragon and Greek yogurt; and the Earth & Brine (above), which has Reyka Vodka, celery-infused vermouth, olive brine, Regan's Orange Bitters and a black olive garnish.

Ketel One are the other leaders, and Van Gogh Pineapple has become the most popular flavored vodka due to the concept's Pineapple Lemon Drop cocktail.

PAIRING PLEASURE

Even though there's been a vodka backlash among many mixologists as they turn to classic cocktails, some cutting-edge bartenders still feature it. Four out of five of the cocktails on Eastern Standard's "Cocktail Culinaire" menu last winter were vodka-based.

"We've all done our part to revive the classics and create new things, and now at the end of the day we should be secure enough to make drinks with vodka," says Cannon, referring to the backlash. "Vodka's neutrality and its subtle variations from brand to brand allow you to do anything you want." Cannon tried using gin in some of the winter drinks, but found that "the flintiness in Russian vodka worked better and let other flavors speak for themselves."

Still, as befits a culinary cocktail approach, he makes between two and five flavored vodkas in-house, depending on the season, and carries only two commercially made flavors.

Last winter's culinary cocktails, priced at \$10 a drink, included the Russian Tea Room, made with roasted beet-infused Christiania Vodka, orange juice, tarragon and Greek yogurt; Mot Chaud, composed of vegetable-infused vodka, fresh lime juice, Luxardo Maraschino, cayenne simple syrup, muddled cucumbers, celery bitters and salt; Earth & Brine, which has Reyka Vodka, celery-infused vermouth, olive brine, Regan's Orange Bitters and a black olive garnish; and the Salsify Gimlet, a mix of Hammer + Sickle Vodka, salsify purée, a house-made Seville orange cordial and Angostura Bitters.

Cannon does see an evolution in bar ordering, even on weekends; the number one call at Eastern Standard still is Grey Goose, but not so long ago all three top calls were vodka; now the other two come from his cocktail list, the Whiskey Smash and Old Cuban, both made without vodka.

But vodka makers still are searching for points of differentiation to drum up sales, and they are fully aware of consumer and restaurant trends like those at Eastern Standard. Fiumara, Christenson and other operators say they are seeing more interest from customers in organic vodkas such as Rain and Square One, as well as for savory flavors such as cucumber and tomato.

For operations with more modest beverage programs, such as Bollywood Bistro in Pleasantville, N.Y., the continued expansion of flavored vodka offerings is a definite asset; the bistro uses Herb's Aromatic Fennel Vodka with pineapple juice for a simple signature drink, Little Yellow Drink, \$8.50, that pairs well with its contemporary Indian cuisine.

Vodka still is going strong, with new opportunities and expressions for bar programs at every stage of sophistication. ●

Jack Robertello has worked with or written about wine and spirits most of his adult life, and is a judge at such events as the San Francisco International Spirits Competition. More of his writing can be found at his blog, Drinks Ink (<http://drinksink.blogspot.com>).