



Basic Juice Article
Dear Little Vodka

by: *Beau Jarvis*

U.S. consumers spent \$9.5 billion on vodka in 2003. \$950 million of this was spent on ultra-premium vodka, such as *Grey Goose*, *Ciroc* and *Ketel One*. This begs the question: What's the big friggin deal with vodka?

Vodka originated in either Russia or Poland, depending on whom you ask, a Pole or a Russian. Vodka is the diminutive form of the word voda, which means water. So vodka can be roughly translated as, "dear little water."

Dear little water indeed. Vodka, by definition, is a neutral distilled spirit. It's basically colorless, odorless and tasteless. Of course 'tasteless' doesn't refer to the pickling effect that vodka's 40 or 50 percent alcohol content has on your tongue. Contrary to what many of us have heard, vodka isn't distilled from potatoes. Most vodka is distilled from grain; including wheat, rye, barley and corn. Again a question: How does this relatively humble, yet powerful liquid generate \$9.5 billion in sales? My best guess: Marketing.

The next time you leaf through a magazine notice how many vodka advertisements there are. Most vodka ads convey sophistication, sexiness, and style. Stroll through the liquor store and take a look at the premium vodkas. Some look as though they have been bottled in priceless crystal decanters. Others look as though a Swedish minimalist designed ultra-chic aluminum bottles to hold the stuff. With vodka, it's all about appearance.

To prove (or disprove) my point, I purchased five different brands of vodka; two luxury vodkas, two mid-range vodkas and one bottle of 'rotgut' vodka. My intent was to compare all of them in a blind tasting – a sort of Pepsi Challenge with vodka. The luxury vodka lineup consisted of *Ciroc* and *Absolut*. *Ciroc* is in a beautiful bottle with purple glass at the bottom and a purple bauble embedded near the bottle's neck I know, I know, I'm a sucker for purple. This is French vodka whose claim to fame is that it is made from French Grapes and it is distilled a whopping five times (although how multiple distillations of a neutral liquid do any good is beyond me). *Ciroc* rings in at a cool thirty bucks for a 750ml bottle. *Absolut* is the well-known premium vodka from Sweden. On the bottle's front, elegant text touts its 'superb' origins from the 'rich fields' of southern Sweden. *Absolut* will set you back twenty-one dollars.

The mid-range vodkas were the old standby *Smirnoff* of Russia and Canada's *Polar Ice* (not to be confused with the chewing gum of the same name). *Smirnoff* boasts 50% alcohol, or 100-proof, which makes it the most potent vodka in the lineup. *Smirnoff* is bottled simply with the label "III/X" to draw attention to its triple distillation and ten-time filtration. All this purity for only \$15. *Polar Ice* Vodka pulled out all the marketing stops on its bottle. The label includes the following blurb, "Made of the finest grains; quadruple distilled in a state-of-the-art pressurized extractive distillation process to impart an

exceptionally unique and smooth finish.” Sheesh. Of course this makes it seem like a steal for only sixteen dollars.

Finally, the, ahem, value-priced vodka was *Barton* vodka. “Charcoal filtered 100% neutral spirits distilled from grain.” *Barton* is made right here in the US of A and retails for about \$6. It comes in a humble plastic bottle.

In front of me, I placed five identical glasses, side by side. I then closed my eyes (no peeking, honest) and my lovely assistant poured a shot of each of the vodkas into a glass. Now before someone decides to plan an intervention for me, let me just say that I did not drink all five shots of vodka. I utilized the same method of tasting that I employ for wine:

Appearance: all five vodkas are clear. I suppose I could have skipped this step.

Scent: The vodka vapors literally curled my nose hair as I sniffed each glass. With the exception of two, I couldn’t detect any differences. One glass of vodka didn’t seem quite as pungent as the others (read: My nose hair only received a body wave instead of a permanent). This turned out to be *Absolut*. Another glass had a slightly sweet scent. Interestingly enough, this one turned out to be *Ciroc*; the vodka made from grapes.

Taste: In all honesty I had planned on sipping, swishing, swirling and spitting-out each vodka sample. Easier said than done. The sensation of swishing around vodka inside one’s mouth is not especially pleasant. I resorted to Plan B: I took a tiny sip of each one. Each sample tasted like, well, vodka. Actually, there wasn’t a taste per se; it was more a strong burning feeling in my mouth. I couldn’t detect the stronger vodka (the 100 proof *Smirnoff*). The six-dollar vodka felt just like the thirty-dollar vodka.

I conclude while luxury vodkas look neat in their snazzy bottles, they don’t represent any concrete step-up in texture, flavor or finish. I’m sure there are vodka connoisseurs out there who swear by their favorite brand. To all of them I say this: Line up three or four glasses of different vodkas and see if you can pick out your vodka. As for me, I plan on doing two things. First, I will stick to sipping wine rather than vodka. Second, I’ll keep the nifty bottle of *Ciroc* and when it runs dry, I’ll refill it from my humble plastic bottle of six-dollar vodka. No one will ever know the difference. *Na Zdorovia!*

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