

On-Premise Report: Distilling the Grape

A look into the world of grape-based vodkas, who's making them and how they're being marketed in on- and off-premise arenas.

Liza B. Zimmerman

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THE VODKA CATEGORY has been exploding on the United States market for some time now. It has been the number one spirits category for years and shows few signs of slowing down. Consumers can't seem to get enough new flavors and multiple distillations. Until a few years ago, most of the action in the category was a race to see who could come up with the next greatest flavor, tallest most elegant bottle or source it from the least-expected country (who would have imagined a vodka from France before **Sidney Frank** created the unstoppable marketing machine that is Grey Goose?).

In this heavily competitive market, every new vodka brand has been on the hunt for a new angle to spin their product on. While vodka has historically been made from potatoes or grain, there was no reason it couldn't be distilled from grapes (like Brandy, Cognac and Pisco). It would also seem to be a natural segue for the wine drinker to move into drinking a grape-based vodka. While the marketing platform was there, the important question is "is the flavor in the bottle unique enough to support the dollars spent and justify all the commotion?"

A FRENCH VISION

The first major grape-based vodka brand to hit the market was Ciroc in 2003. It is produced from French grapes, a natural choice to focus on the spirit's noble and lengthy wine country connection. It was also a natural continuation of the Grey Goose-spawned idea that ultra-premium vodka could come from France. As more new introductions hit the market, it was only logical than more Frenchmen, with wine

backgrounds to boot, would throw their hats in the ring. Two of the more recent entries into the category, Idol and Swan's Neck, have French creators who are well equipped to forge the link between grapes and why they wanted to produce vodka from them.

“The idea was to create an alcohol that didn't have any alcohol smell to it and that doesn't burn your mouth and nostrils.”

Jean-Charles Boisset, president, Boisset America

Jean-Charles Boisset, president of **Boisset America**, an importer and producer of both wines and spirits, launched his grape-based vodka Idol two years ago. As he poured me a taste of the brand in a wine glass in his Sausalito (California) office, he excit-



Jean-Charles Boisset

edly explained that the goal with Idol was to produce a balanced vodka, which should ideally be sampled in a wine glass to properly savor its bouquet. "The idea," he said, "was to create an alcohol that didn't have any alcohol

smell to it and that doesn't burn your mouth and nostrils."

He has succeeded. It was so balanced I thought it even might have been lower proof than the standard vodka (40 percent alcohol), but it's not. Nor are almost any of the grape-based brands on the market. I have never been much of a vodka drinker in great part because of the burn and lack of flavor, but I found Idol balanced with hints of citric grape flavors. Boisset, being from Burgundy, finally settled on using Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes from his home region to produce the vodka as any terroir-focused wine producer might do. There are no flavors in the line yet, but the company has plans to launch them in the next year. The vodkas retail for \$30 for a 750-ml. bottle.

Another Frenchman, **Bernard Portet**, the founder of the Napa-based Swan's Neck vodka and the former winemaker at Napa's **Clos Du Val**, reit-

erated some of the same ideas about what's unique about grape-based vodka. "I wanted to approach [vodka production] with a winemaker's approach and introduce a sense of finesse and elegance." The product is named after the swan's neck-shape of pipe of the Alembic still in which it is distilled.

"We have eliminated much of the burning sensation, and you can see traces of wine behind it," added Portet. "I wanted something that could be enjoyed as an aperitif or on the rocks," he said, expressing a highly wine-influenced approach to vodka production. The line has a ginger and a lemon flavor, and the company is discussing adding a few more to the line-up. The vodkas are priced at \$45 for a 750-ml. bottle, making them the most expensive grape-based brand on the market to my knowledge.

Despite what could be perceived as greater delicacy, some mixologists doubt that grape-based vodkas really



Bernard Portet

have any flavor tie to the fruit from which they are distilled. Any relation to the grape flavor may have “more to do with the distilling process than the grape growers, the distillers themselves or the terroir,” said **Peter Vestinos**, head mixologist at **Sepia**, a seasonal American restaurant located in a 1890 print shop in Chicago.

brand group at **Diageo North America** in New York, which markets category-innovator **Ciroc**. “There’s a high correlation between the wine drinker and the ultra-premium vodka drinker,” he added.

“Ciroc has a refined, citrus-like nose and is great to drink on its own,” Parrott continued, supporting both



Kim Haasarud

behind it. The grapes are from the Cognac area of France, a sommelier can work with that,” said **Kim Haasarud**, a Los Angeles-based drinks consultant who heads up **Liquid Architecture**. She works with restaurants, hotels and brands, such as **Omni Hotels**, **Four Seasons** and **T.G.I. Friday’s**.

The grape-based provenance has also helped uniquely position these vodkas in the off-premise arena. Diageo’s sales staff will cleverly try to get **Ciroc** positioned in the wine section when selling to liquor and grocery stores, according to Parrott.

REGIONALLY FOCUSED AND FRUIT-DRIVEN VODKA

The French aren’t alone in focusing on the regional provenance of these vodkas. **Chris Williams**, owner of the **Wattle Creek Winery** in the Alexander Valley, launched **Boomerang** vodka two years ago to capitalize on a grape glut in his native Australia. He also shares the Frenchmen’s goal of producing a more balanced vodka from grapes that won’t burn the esophagus. The brand is being marketed and distributed through Napa-based **Foster’s Wine Estates** in a joint venture with Williams.

Boomerang retails for \$20 a bottle, making it by the far the most competitively priced in the group. It is made from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc grapes from the Barossa Valley. Williams said he is also debating producing a flavored vodka that would be based on an indigenous Australian fruit and may also introduce a reserve line as well. The vodka is marketed by Foster’s Wine Estates Americas in the United States and also comes in liter and 1.75-liter bottle sizes in addition to the standard 750s.

Back in California, **Beam Wine Estates**, based in Healdsburg, is promoting the lore of California wine country with its Roth vodka. It is the only vodka distilled from solely California grapes on the market to my knowledge. Roth marketing director **Tracey Woodward** shared her belief that grape-based vodkas also have the added benefit of blending better with fruit-based mixers. Roth retails for \$30 for a 750-ml. bottle.

This mixability in and of itself is another strong sales asset. These vodkas are softer and more delicate, according to **Junior Merino**, owner of New York-based **The Liquid Chef Inc.** consulting

“There’s a great marketing angle behind it. The grapes are from the Cognac area of France, a sommelier can work with that.”

Kim Haasarud, Liquid Architecture

THE GRAPE CONNECTION

Not only do grape-based vodkas potentially present a more balanced vodka taste profile, they also would seem to be a natural way for wine drinkers to segue into vodka consumption. “Consumers have a big affinity to anything having to do with grapes,” noted **Jeff Parrott**, director of the reserve

Boisset and Portet’s premise of grape-based vodkas being more balanced and approachable than their grain- or potato-based counterparts. **Ciroc** is produced from grapes in France’s Cognac region. It retails for \$30 to \$33 a bottle, and there are currently no flavors in the line.

Savvy marketers have tried to play up

the grape base of this set of vodkas in myriad ways to better position them in both the on- and off-premise arenas. Their regional and varietal origins can make sommeliers more comfortable with selling them and give them a terroir-focused opportunity to do so. “There’s a great marketing angle

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firm. "I would mix them with more delicate ingredients and maybe some Champagne too," he noted of their ideal cocktail combination. He works with restaurants such as **Café Frida** and **Rayuela** in New York.

Beyond Cognac, Armagnac and Brandy, which haven't frequently been used as cocktail components, the other notable grape distillate is grappa and its South American cousin Pisco. Made in the Veneto and Friuli regions of north-eastern Italy, grappa producers have long focused on the grape varieties behind the spirit, and producers like Jacopo Poli and Nonino have a distinguished history of marketing elegantly packaged single-varietal grappas. Some mixologists believe that the taste profile of grape-based vodkas may have a lot more in common with grappa than their grain- and potato-based brethren. Haasarud noted that many grape-based vodkas "are kind of viney and stemmy" because of their relation to grappa. "People used to drinking regular vodkas may be thrown for a loop because they are very distinctive," said Haasarud.

THE MARKETING SPIN

The positioning of any new sub-category of vodkas may be even more crucial to the product's success than it is with many wines. With an over-flooded market and a premium by-the-bottle price, it's crucial for producers to focus on the unique aspects of their product. "A great deal of effort has to be made to get people to call for one over the other because, when you get down to it, there is really no difference between them," said Sepia's Vestinos. "Vodka drinkers, for the most part, are looking for the effect rather than the flavor. So it's all in the marketing, getting into people's heads that they are better if they drink one over the other."

Having a distinct product in a category that has traditionally been promoted as odorless, flavorless and colorless can also be both a contradiction and a challenge. Several of the country's top bartenders declined to be interviewed for this story as they had "nothing to say about vodka."

"The role of vodka in a cocktail is to be a well-prepared blank canvas on



H. Joseph Ehrmann

which you can create a whole new flavor," noted H. Joseph Ehrmann, proprietor of the **Elixir** saloon in San Francisco. And a tabula rasa can't be too strongly linked to its province that it can't be a genuine blank slate. While **Idol** has been marketed as a distillate of Burgundy grapes and Roth plays the

California wine country spin, "most of the time they don't [even] reveal where the grapes are from," Ehrmann added. And this may not have a negative effect on the category as it may continue to allow grape-based vodkas to compete in the odorless and flavorless category without being pigeonholed by their vinous roots.

Ehrmann continued to surmise that grape-based vodkas can remain strong on the market if they continue to focus on their brand strategies. Vodka consumers, he noted, "like to keep it simple by latching onto one brand. Collect those drinkers and you've got a winner."

Strong brand loyalty has always set the spirits category apart from wine on the United States market. Wine, unlike any other category (think bleach to cars), has been fueled by those who like to explore new and uncharted territory. So much of the success of grape-based vodkas may depend on how they choose to market themselves with consumers and if those methods are successful in engendering brand loyalty. **wbm**

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