

# MARKET WATCH

## BOURBON SERVES UP NEW VARIETY

DISTILLERS HONOR THE CLASSIC STYLES  
WHILE ALSO FINDING THEIR CREATIVE STREAK



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# Vodka Stands Strong

*Vodka-based cocktails remain an essential part of any successful bar program*

BY SALLY KRAL

Even though vodka remains the top-selling spirit in the U.S. and has been for decades, it's no secret that craft cocktail bartenders haven't always been the spirit's biggest fans. "Vodka is full of subtle character, infamously neutral, and is also the former nemesis of the craft cocktail," says Ryan Mish, head mixologist at The Graceful Ordinary in St. Charles, Illinois. Mish adds that because of its neutral nature, vodka has often been overlooked in favor of other spirits that are deemed more complex. "In recent years it seems like vodka has been outstripped by gin, Tequila, rum, or mezcal—but I do believe bartenders are finding new innovative ways to utilize vodka in cocktails," he says.

Adam Montgomerie, bar manager at Hawksmoor steakhouse and cocktail bar in New York City, notes that vodka has come full circle and the days of cocktail bars no longer carrying it are behind us. "It's back to taking center stage on many cocktail menus," he says. "It's good to see that a lot of the snobbery we used to see around vodka isn't there anymore."

Indeed, more and more bartenders are recognizing that vodka's neutrality is not its weakness, but its strength. "This shift started around the mid-2010s and has only grown as people are increasingly gravitating toward lighter cocktails," says Maria Agostinelli, general manager and beverage director of Birch & Rye in San Francisco. "Vodka stands strong because it's so versatile."



*Bartenders are leaning on vodka as the on-premise sees a resurgence for the Martini. At Catch One in Los Angeles, the Smoking Bison Martini (pictured) is a riff on a Smoky Martini, which substitutes Scotch for vermouth.*

## Consistent Contender

Martinis—particularly vodka-based ones—are having a major moment right now, which Claire Mallett, bartender at Catch One in Los Angeles, attributes to nostalgia. "What's old is new again, and not only traditional Martinis but cocktails like the Espresso Martini, the Cosmopolitan, and the Dirty Martini are thriving in today's market," she says. "As we all return to some form of normalcy after two years of uncertainty, looking to the past offers a blessing of comfort and familiarity. Also, I've noticed that as the next generation becomes of drinking age, they're ravenous for trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that includes enjoying vodka drinks of the 1990s and early 2000s for the first time." Her Smoking Bison Martini (\$18) aims to capitalize on the current Martini craze, blending Zubrowka Bison Grass vodka, Dirty Sue premium olive juice, and Laphroaig 10-year-old Scotch. The drink is based on the Smoky Martini that was popular in the UK in 1940s, where vermouth is replaced

with a splash of Scotch. "It was traditionally made with gin, but I use Zubrowka because I've always been a fan of Polish vodka, and this bison grass-infused variation is particularly delightful, lending vegetal grassy notes that work well with the saltiness of the olive juice," Mallett adds.

At The Graceful Ordinary, the Cosmopolitan-inspired Contessa (\$18) by bar manager Max Bach is one of the venue's bestsellers from its "Premium Classic" cocktail list. It comprises

*Vodka allows other flavors and ingredients to shine in a cocktail while still providing body, which is part of the reason it's still going strong behind the bar. At Hearth & Hill in Park City, Utah, the Guava Sour (pictured) has a vodka base that allows flavors of guava, lemon, and maple to shine through.*





Hanson of Sonoma Organic vodka, Cointreau orange liqueur, lime juice, and a splash of cranberry juice. “Made in California with Napa Valley wine grapes, Hanson of Sonoma is rapidly gaining popularity with guests—it’s incredibly smooth, with a slight grape flavor that works well paired with tonic or soda, in Martinis, or in cocktails like Gimlets and Cosmopolitans,” Mish says. “Vodka-based cocktails have historically been relatively simple and these cocktails have remained popular for a reason. If it’s not broken, why fix it?” His take on the Espresso Martini, the Graceful Espression (\$13), features Breckenridge vodka, espresso, Demerara simple syrup, and an Amarula cream liqueur foam. At Esters Wine Shop & Bar in Santa Monica, California, bar manager Jonah Atkins’ Luxxe Martini (\$16) is also an Espresso Martini riff, mixing Crop Organic vodka, St. George coffee liqueur, Amaro dell’Etna, cold brew concentrate, Demerara simple syrup, and Scrappy’s chocolate bitters.

“For our guests, it’s all about the trends and aligning ourselves with the current times, while still paying homage to



Vodka’s neutral flavor lends itself to flavorful infusions. Birch & Rye in San Francisco infuses vodka with linden flower in the Olena’s Flowers (above), and with carrot and cinnamon in the New Fashioned (top).

the classics,” says Robert Taylor, lead mixologist at Santé in The Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City in Arlington, Virginia. “Our vodka-based bubbly drink, the South of France Sparkler, does very well for us—it’s refreshing for guests no matter the time of day and it’s easy to drink while still being refined and elegant.” The cocktail, which Taylor created, is reminiscent of the classic French 75 and comprises Ciroc vodka, Cointreau, fresh lemon juice, and Lamberti Prosecco, topped with lavender and mint sprigs. “Our Mule-style cocktails also do very well for our guests,” Taylor adds, pointing to his Mediterranean Mule (\$20), which mixes Ketel One vodka, Bombay Dry gin, Caravella Limoncello, fresh lime juice, and Q ginger beer, topped with rosemary sprigs. At Hawksmoor, Montgomerie’s Midnight Marauder (\$19) is also a Mule, featuring Hepple Douglas Fir vodka, John D. Taylor’s velvet falernum liqueur, lime juice, Giffard orgeat syrup, Fever-Tree ginger beer, and Scrappy’s Cardamom bitters. “Vodka works so well in lots of drinks due to its neutral nature—there isn’t a lot of flavor to it, but that gives you a good opportunity to add other layers of flavor,” Montgomerie says. “No other spirit can work with pretty much any ingredient quite like vodka can.”

### Cocktail Chameleon

The cocktail options with vodka are indeed limitless. “It truly adapts to whatever you are mixing with it: If you like citrus flavors, you might add mango or pineapple; if you want something more savory, you might add freshly made Bloody Mary mix with hints of spice; if someone doesn’t like sweet or strong drinks and desires something a bit lighter, you can use a bittering agent or something fresh like cucumber,” Taylor says. “The world is your oyster with vodka.”

Montgomerie appreciates that vodka allows other ingredients in a cocktail to shine while still adding body and proof to the drink. His Count Collins (\$19) blends Grey Goose vodka, Campari aperitif, Martini Rosso vermouth, lemon juice, simple syrup, Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters, and club soda, while his Grey Area (\$18) mixes Grey Goose, grapefruit peel-infused Dolin Blanc vermouth, Combier Pamplemousse Rose pink grapefruit liqueur, Fever-Tree club soda, and a dash of Macchu pisco. “This cocktail is all about grapefruit, and vodka gives the base to then build other flavors in,” Montgomerie says. “The idea was to make something light and refreshing that still has a real depth of flavor. Grapefruit works really nicely with Dolin Blanc and pisco adds a further pop of brightness.”

At Hearth & Hill in Park City, Utah, former bar manager Daisy Clark’s Guava Sour (\$14) features Persistent vodka,



Classic cocktails are getting a makeover as bartenders experiment with vodka more often. The Luxxe Martini (left) at Esters Wine Shop & Bar in Santa Monica, California; the Grey Area (center) from Hawksmoor in New York City; and the Saint 75 (right) at The Graceful Ordinary in St. Charles, Illinois are intriguing takes on the Espresso Martini, Greyhound, and French 75, respectively.

Alpine Preserve liqueur, guava purée, lemon juice, maple syrup, and egg white. “Vodka is so versatile—if you’re looking for a spirit that packs a punch but has minimal flavor, vodka is your guy,” Clark says. “Traditional drinks like Cosmos, Bloody Marys, Screwdrivers, and White Russians are all made with vodka, yet they are distinctly different drinks—it really shows how vodka provides an endless number of different ways to make a drink.”

At Esters, Atkins’ vodka cocktails showcase the spirit’s innate versatility: His Mallow Spritz (\$16) comprises Crop

Organic vodka, Lo-Fi amaro, house-made hibiscus syrup, lemon juice, club soda, and an Orsa Cabernet Sauvignon float, while his Out & About (\$18) blends vanilla-infused Supergay vodka, pineapple and lemon juices, house-made jalapeño syrup, and Scrappy’s Firewater tincture. “I like how easy it is to infuse vodka and create different flavors, and vodka also mixes well with other spirits,” Atkins says. “Recently I’ve been experimenting with adding more spice and herbaceous flavors to vodka, like in My Out & About cocktail, where the flavors

### Vodka-based Cocktail Recipes

#### LUXXE MARTINI By Jonah Atkins

##### Ingredients:

1½ ounces Crop Organic vodka;  
½ ounce St. George coffee liqueur;  
½ ounce Amaro dell’Etna;  
1 ounce cold brew coffee concentrate;  
¼ ounce Demerara simple syrup;  
2 dashes Scrappy’s chocolate bitters;  
3 espresso beans.

##### Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine vodka, liqueur, amaro, cold brew, syrup, and bitters. Shake vigorously double strain into a chilled coupe glass. Garnish with espresso beans.

#### GREY AREA By Adam Montgomerie

##### Ingredients:

1 ounce Grey Goose vodka;  
1½ ounces grapefruit peel-infused Dolin Blanc vermouth<sup>1</sup>;  
¼ ounce Combier Pamplemousse Rose pink grapefruit liqueur;  
1 teaspoon Macchu pisco;  
3 ounces Fever-Tree club soda;  
Grapefruit slice.

##### Recipe:

In an ice-filled Highball glass, combine vodka, vermouth, liqueur, pisco, and soda. Give it a quick stir and garnish with a grapefruit slice.

#### SAINT 75 By Ryan Mish

##### Ingredients:

2 ounces Irie Cup Blue Mountain Berry tea-infused Breckenridge vodka<sup>2</sup>;  
1 ounce Combier Fleur de Sureau elderflower liqueur;  
1 ounce simple syrup;  
1 ounce lemon juice;  
Ultraviolet sparkling rosé;  
Lemon swath.

##### Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine vodka, liqueur, syrup, and juice. Shake and double strain into a coupe glass. Top with sparkling rosé and express a lemon swath over the drink, then discard.

<sup>1</sup>Add the peel of one large grapefruit to a non-reactive container and add one bottle of Dolin Blanc. Cover and let infuse at room temperature for 6 hours. Strain back into the bottle through a fine sieve and keep in the fridge for up to one month.

<sup>2</sup>Combine 2 tablespoons loose leaf tea and 1 750-ml. bottle of vodka. Stir and allow to sit for a few days, then double strain.

PHOTOS BY MARK RWIELSKI

PHOTOS BY LEFT: JONAH ATKINS; CENTER: FRANCESCO SAPIENZA

blend together to create a creamy, yet spicy cocktail. I think bartenders are seeing such a want for new and exciting cocktails from their guests that they're getting more creative with ways to enhance vodka and to showcase it differently than other spirits."

## Flavor Fusion

The Graceful Ordinary's Mish also notes that bartenders are getting increasingly creative with their vodka cocktails. "While vodka has always played its role well in Highballs and Martinis, many of us in the industry have lent its versatility to any and every flavor we choose, to complement a drink that complements our concept, such as what we do at our bar with vodka infusions," he says. "Since vodka is such a basic and neutral tasting spirit, it's a perfect candidate for infusions. By steeping tea, flowers, herbs, or fruit in vodka over a certain period of time, it allows the spirit to take on more flavor of its infusion than other spirits like gin or Bourbon that carry their own distinct flavor profiles." Mish's Saint 75 (\$13) mixes The Irie Cup Blue Mountain Berry tea-infused Breckenridge vodka, Combiar Fleur de Sureau elderflower liqueur, simple syrup, and lemon juice, topped with Ultraviolet sparkling rosé, while his Monarch (\$13) features butterfly pea shoot-infused Zubrowka vodka, simple syrup, and lime juice, topped with equal parts ginger ale and club soda.

"With the Saint 75, I chose a tea with dried currant, blueberries, and elderflower that naturally complements the other flavors in the cocktail, and then with the Monarch we use butterfly pea shoot flowers, which impart a light botanical flavor as well as a spectacular blue hue that when combined with lime juice and simple syrup results in an eye-catching and picture-worthy pale lavender color," Mish says. "Just 20 minutes of infusing with occasional stirring can turn your favorite vodka into something your friends and family will rave about."

Since Birch & Rye is a Russian restaurant, vodka and vodka infusions are featured prominently on the beverage menu. "We make our vodka infusions in house and they are wildly popular as standalone drinks. They serve as the bases of all of our house cocktails, so we have an opportunity to be quite creative," Agostinelli says. "With its subtle nuances, vodka can be infused and mixed with almost anything." She notes that her Black Currant Martini (\$16), featuring black currant-infused Smirnoff 100 Proof vodka and Dolin Blanc vermouth, is a bestseller. Other favorites include her Olena's Flowers (\$16), which mixes linden flower-infused Smirnoff 100 Proof vodka, linden flower-infused honey syrup, and Dakishvili Sparkling Saperavi Rosé, and the Carrot-Cinnamon "New" Fashioned (\$16), which she created with service manager Diana Kowalsky, comprising carrot- and cinnamon-infused Smirnoff 100 Proof, Demerara simple syrup, and Bitter Queens Marie Laveau Tobacco bitters. "Vodka gives me the creative



*Vodka has long been the spirit of choice in refreshing cocktails. At Santé in The Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City in Arlington, Virginia, the South of France Sparkler (top) and Mediterranean Mule (above) are popular among bar guests who want a lighter-style drink.*

license to experiment with new infusions like pickled beets or even luxury items like caviar," Angostinelli adds. "Soon we'll be adding a horseradish Martini to the menu made with horseradish-infused vodka and lacto-fermented dill pickle brine and garnished with dill oil."

With the current Martini craze showing no signs of slowing and more inventive and modern vodka-based cocktails growing as well, it's clear that the spirit will always have a place on bar menus. "I think we're going to see people infusing or mixing vodka with flavors that we would have never thought would pair well," notes Atkins of Esters. "There's still so much more to explore and uncover with vodka-based cocktails." 