

Vodka facts: All you wanted to know and never bothered to ask

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Drink up: Such an incredible variety of vodka brands can be encountered in Kyiv's supermarkets, making the choice of brands tricky.

Vodka ("horilka" in Ukrainian) stands high among the top stereotypes used to describe Ukrainians. What do Ukrainians like above all? Vodka and salo, of course. We have already done an article about the lard. However vodka proved to be a much more extensive topic.

Anyone new in the country can tell that vodka is indeed a highly popular national drink, simply by viewing the vodka section at any supermarket – it runs several meters, showcasing an amazing variety of vodka brands. There are no less than 40 of them produced in Ukraine, while an average supermarket holds as much as 20. Besides, most brands offer a number of different kinds each. Naturally, Ukrainian vodka is one of the common souvenirs any tourist tries to take home. And that's where he faces the difficulty of choice. Unless there is a vodka connoisseur around to give coherent advice, inscriptions like: "honey with pepper," "on milk," "rye" and "on birchtree buds" on the labels can easily confuse not only a foreigner, but even a Ukrainian, who is not an experienced vodka drinker.

A classical definition of vodka is "a drink of water and ethanol, containing a small amount of impurities, sometimes with berry or fruit flavorings as well as spices." The alcohol content may range from 40 to 56 percent. But there is much more to know about the beloved drink of the Slavs.

History

One of the widespread myths is that of vodka as an original Russian/Ukrainian drink. In truth, the first to obtain liquid similar to vodka was Persian Doctor Al-Razi – in the XI century he managed to extract ethanol by distillation. But of course with Persia being a

Muslim country which prohibits alcohol entirely, the new liquid was used only for medical purposes. The first to distill alcohol in Europe was an Italian monk-chemist, Valerius.

Using Arab methods to distill grape must and turn it into ethanol, Italians obtained “aqua vitae,” which later gave birth to all modern spirits – brandy, cognac, whiskey, schnapps and of course, vodka.

The history of vodka in Russia began in 1386 when Genoese merchants first brought “aqua vitae” to Moscow. Instead of grapes, Russians used rye to extract ethanol, thus the Russian called vodka “bread wine” at first.

Back then vodka was frequently flavored with herbs, berries or spices, and in 16th-17th centuries anise vodka was very common. It lost its popularity long since, but anise is still used in many world-famous spirits: Turkish raki, Greek ouzo, Italian sambuca, and French pastis.

Vodka production was one of the first businesses to be controlled by the government in Russia. It started with tsar monopoly on vodka production in 15th century, which allowed only tsar-owned factories to produce it and sell it exclusively in Tsar kabaks (taverns). As a result, vodka lost in quality. And corrupt business of greedy kabak heads led to more crime. Because a lot of vodka was sold on credit, it led to “kabak debts” and consequently to the enslavement of those who couldn’t pay up. In 1765 Catherine the Great granted the privilege of making vodka exclusively to noblemen – the richer they were, the more they were allowed to produce. Because of serfdom, the landlords had plenty of free workforce and concentrated on improving the quality of vodka regardless of the cost and lengthy production time. In 1863, the government monopoly on vodka was abolished, which caused the prices fall dramatically. The drink became much more popular with the population.

In 1894, Tsar Alexander the Third introduced the first vodka quality standard that is used until now. The first patented vodka “Moskovskaya Osobennaya” (“Moscow Special”) contained 40 percent alcohol, which was said to be an ideal alcohol content by the great Russian chemist Dmitriy Mendeleev.

Ever since its first appearance vodka was widely promoted, and it was only in 20th century that its dangerous qualities were recognized and the attempts were made to prohibit drinking. In 1914 Tsar Nikolay the Second announced prohibition for the time of war. The prohibition was “inherited” by the Soviets and abolished only in 1924.

In Soviet Union, attempts to limit vodka consumption were taken several times. The last one was 1985’s prohibition announced by Gorbachev. However, such measures lead to peculiar results. Plenty of individuals used self made devices for making samogon (self-made vodka), a lot of which was sold illegally. Also, at the time of the most serious restrictions when you could only buy a bottle or two a month by producing a special coupon, alcohol addicts would succumb to drinking cologne and other chemical liquids with high concentration of ethanol. Needless to say, this frequently led to fatal consequences.

The world of gorilka

Overall, Ukrainian vodka is considered high quality and many of its brands are exported worldwide. Also, counterfeit is quite rare nowadays, though it's still best to buy alcohol in licensed shops and kiosks.

When it comes to choosing the right Ukrainian vodka, it depends a lot on an individual taste, and it's hard to say which brand is the best. Hortytsya, Nemiroff, Stolichniy Standart, Soyuz-Viktan TM SV, Prime, Tselsiy, Klibniy Dar and Medoff are considered to be among the top brands. Boasting different awards, they are often included in international vodka ratings. It certainly doesn't mean that all other vodka brands aren't worth your attention. However if you're seeking high quality classical vodka (with no flavors), those brands are a sure bet.

In general mid-range vodka costs around Hr 15 per half a liter, while fancier kinds can run up to Hr 20 and more. The price largely depends on the quality of ethanol or "spirt" as it's called here – "spirt extra" is used for cheaper vodka and "lux" is for pricier types. Other important elements include quality of the water and purification methods, as well as exclusive recipes.

One thing important to know when choosing a vodka is what those various signs on vodka labels mean. "Klasychna" (Classical) on a vodka label indicates a common type and "Osoblyva" (Special) may be slightly softened or spiced up but without any special flavor. There is also "Light" vodka with 35 percent alcohol.

While the majority of vodka is distilled from grain, some producers make bread the main ingredient. The main bread vodka brand is "Klibniy Dar," others offer bread vodkas in their lines – "Zlatogor," "Bilenka," "Vdala," Olymp," and "Holodniy Yar" among others. They also indicate the type of grain used: wheat ("Karat," "Bilenka") or winter wheat ("Bayadera Klibniy Dar"), rye (Gorilochka) or barley ("Klibniy Dar").

Some labels also specify that vodka is made of spring water; the other labels say: "Na Moloke" (on milk) – "Mernaya," "Bilenka" – which means that this particular vodka is purified by dry milk – a technology known since 19th century but unused for a long time. "Na Berezovykh Brunkah" (on birch tree buds) is another widespread type of vodka, which means that vodka contains aromatic spirit infused on birch tree buds which softens the taste. There is also vodka with special healthy flavorings such as ginseng extract (Kozatska Rada) and acacia blossoms (Zlatogor). Blagoff's green apple, pear and mandarin vodka – sweet with strong flavor – will be mostly enjoyed by women.

Historically, honey and pepper are the top popular ingredients for Ukrainian gorilka. There are even specific brands specializing in honey-smoothed vodka. "Medoff" offers several kinds, including the one with cayenne pepper and "Medoff Gold," combining aroma of slovenwood and basil. "Medovukha" brand is called after an ancient strong Slavic drink and offers six kinds according to different types of honey used – Carpathian or Poltava blossoms honey, May honey, wild honey and buckwheat honey. A highly popular honey-and-pepper combination "Medova z Pertsem" is offered by [Nemiroff](#).

For special occasions you can choose between luxury brands like Tselsiy for Hr 40 per half a liter, "SV Luxe Premium Vodka," Karat Khlebnaya Sleza (Bread Tear) in handmade bottles (Hr 100 per liter), LEX vodka and Nemiroff Premium, among others. For gifts, you can get vodka in special fancy bottles and sets with shot glasses, as well as custom-made vodka vessels in a shape of a sword, a Cossack, or a girl in a traditional outfit. Chernihiv factory produces vodka in phallic-shape bottles, calling it "Harmata"

(Cannon). However the quality of vodka in original bottles, especially the ones that are made of not transparent materials, may be a miss, so it may be best to keep it as a souvenir, rather than drink it.

Drinking tips

Ukrainians mostly drink vodka cold (but not frozen) at one draught in 0.50 ml shot glasses. Therefore, if you're ordering a vodka at the bar, don't expect it to arrive with lemon on the rocks in big glass – you would have to ask for it specifically. Many pro vodka drinkers consider sipping on vodka quite nonsensical, unless it has any peculiar flavor. Washing vodka down with water or juice is also considered bad taste, though there is an old Moscow tradition of following vodka shots with sweet tea. On the other hand, drinking vodka at one draught has its side affects – that way it's easier to overdose. Quickly consuming a liter of vodka is potentially lethal, so it's good to make pauses between shots, chat and help yourself to appetizers.

In classical fashion vodka is drunk with appetizers and in general it's good to drink with a full-scale dinner, as it washes off the taste of a previous dish and makes your palate senses more acute. In Ukraine vodka is still often drunk at lunch – a shot of this appetitif followed by a spoonful of hot red borscht is quite usual.

Products that best combine with vodka are salo, veal and ham, herring and salmon, pickles, boiled potatoes etc. Red and black caviar are widely known as the deluxe vodka appetizers and they indeed go really well with it. On the other hand, watery products (such as caviar and pickles) dilute ethanol essence, increasing the "high" effect from vodka. Therefore, some like Professor Preobrazhenkiy from Mikhail Bulgakov's famous novel "Dog's Heart," claim that hot appetizers are the best – the make you feel euphoric but don't affect your ability to walk.