

A TOAST TO THE RICH MYSTERY OF THOSE TRANSLUCENT POTIONS KNOWN AS VODKA, GIN AND DRY VERMOUTH

ALL CLEAR

BY RICHARD CARLETON HACKER

There's something comforting about a drink you can see through. For one thing, you know what's in it, or at least what's not in it. If it's served chilled and straight up, chances are it's vodka or gin. Both are the perfect pour for summer's clear sunny days and warm starry nights. Though you may know what's in your see-throughs, the origins of gin and vodka and the things that make every brand unique are not so clear. Herewith, a few facts to consider while you sip.

The word *vodka* comes from the Slavic word *voda* (*woda* in Polish), meaning *water*. Most experts believe it was first distilled in Russia by Viatka monks in the 12th century. It's been a lightning rod ever since. In the 1600s Orthodox priests claimed it was the drink of the devil, and some mornings we have to agree. A century later the illustrious Catherine the Great decreed that only noblemen could distill vodka. During the Russian Revolution, Lenin's henchmen took possession of the country's most famed vodka distillery—Smirnoff—and turned it into a garage. If there was one silver lining to the debacle known as the Bolshevik uprising, it was this: Vodka distillers fled Russia and introduced the spirit to America. Today, in an irony as strange as the Cold War itself, vodka is the most popular spirit in the USA.

So what is it exactly? Vodka is plain diluted alcohol that can be distilled from almost any crop, though traditionally wheat, corn, rye or potatoes are used. Although the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms

and Explosives officially defines it as a colorless, odorless distillate without taste, anyone who has sipped two different vodka martinis side by side knows that the boys at the BATFE haven't been going to the right bars. Anything can affect the flavor of a vodka—the water used, the choice of crop, the method of distillation, whether or not there's a beautiful woman sitting next to you at the bar. It can be made cheaply (since it doesn't need aging) or with great craftsmanship, and with infinite taste characteristics: That's why there are so many choices on the shelf at your local liquor store.

Heartier yet is gin, which is nothing but vodka infused with juniper and other botanicals. Gin was invented by Franciscus de le Boe Sylvius, a Dutch doctor, in the 1600s. The good doc used ingredients sailors were bringing back from ports all over the world—juniper berries, coriander, licorice, lemon—to flavor a liquor distilled from primarily malted barley. De le Boe called his concoction *genever* (Dutch for juniper). When the British parliament brought William and Mary over from Holland to assume the throne, gin followed. The Brits distilled their spirit from corn to make what became known as London dry gin, a smoother, dryer version of Dutch *genever*. Each of the early distillers—Beefeater, Tanqueray, Gordon's—had its own recipe, thus the differing flavor profiles of those brands.

In America Prohibition gave gin its boost. Since it doesn't need aging, gin can easily be made behind closed doors in large containers such as bathtubs (thus "bathtub gin"). Appropriately President Roosevelt toasted the end of Prohibition in 1933 with a gin

martini—the king of cocktails. Which brings us to the great romance between gin and vermouth. The martini was first described in *The Modern Bartender's Guide* in 1884. Hemingway is said to have reported on World War II carrying two canteens—one of gin, one of vermouth. We suggest a more refined approach. (See the wetware below.)

If you can't decide between vodka and gin, follow the lead of James Bond (always good advice), who called for three ounces of gin and one ounce of vodka in his martinis (along with half an ounce of Kina Lillet vermouth and a thin lemon peel). No wonder he was licensed to kill.



From left: ● **Campari Shaker by Matteo Thun for Alessi** Eleven inches high, crafted from glass and stainless steel, this beauty combines unique form and straight-up function (\$125, unicahome.com). ● **Reyka Vodka** A full-flavored Icelandic love juice that's double-distilled from wheat and demineralized glacier water, then filtered through lava rock (\$23). ● **Jean-Marc XO Vodka** Made the old-fashioned way in small batches in copper-pot stills, this fantastic French vodka features hints of herb and almond (\$50). ● **Baccarat Brummel Highball Glass** Simple and elegant, shown here with equal parts vodka and Pama pomegranate liqueur over ice (\$95, baccarat.com). ● **SKYY90 Vodka** One of the purest vodkas available, SKYY90 is made of amber winter wheat and mountain water from the Sierras (\$30). ● **Plymouth Gin** Traditionalists swear by this oily, full-flavored classic. Plymouth fans, and they are legion, will notice the new packaging (\$23). ● **Tanqueray No. Ten Gin** Easy to find and as good as it gets, this juniper-heavy gin is named for the Tanqueray distillery's smallest pot still, known as Tiny Ten (\$30). ● **Baccarat Harmonie Tumbler** Swirl a top-shelf liquor in a heavy crystal rocks glass like this one, and the great existential dilemmas that haunt our universe will dissolve with your ice (\$95, baccarat.com). ● **No. 209 Gin** This smooth and floral mouthful, from a distillery on San Francisco's Pier 50, took us completely by surprise. It was first made in a Napa Valley barn, in a defunct still that was registered as number 209 in 1882 (\$35). ● **Spiegelau All Round Martini Glass** For the connoisseur the martini glass is nearly as important an ingredient as the gin or vodka. This one from Spiegelau is top-shelf (\$10, spiegelau.com). ● **Hendrick's Gin** A little cucumber essence gives this Scottish gin a unique flair. If Plymouth is for traditionalists, this gin's for the adventuresome. We recommend it chilled and straight with no vermouth (\$33).

