



ALBERTA LIQUOR STORE ASSOCIATION VODKA HANDOUT

This handout goes with the corresponding video. Please photocopy this and put it in a binder.

Objective: To learn about how vodka is made and the different types we see in our market.

Word Origin

Vodka is a spirit coming from Eastern Europe. In Poland it is Wódka and in Russia it is Vodka.

History

Alcohol is a product of nature. Yeast is windborne, lands on grapes, or wet grain, and fermentation takes place. Humans took notice and started to experiment. This led to making beer and wine as early as 6000 BC. Taking the next step to turn this fermented liquor into spirits does require more thought, but not a lot more.

Distillation was being practiced by the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese and Arab countries. There was a fascination of distilled spirits among physicians, alchemists and monks. The word, 'spirit', comes from the idea the spirit rises from the body, just as alcoholic vapors rise from the liquid being distilled.

Europeans became obsessed with alcohol. It was considered a medicine. There were no headache pills to take back then! Consider also, the damp, cold, countries with poor heating conditions and how a shot of distilled spirit would have warmed a person.

The method of making vodka has not changed much since the 8th century. Modern facilities are cleaner and better equipment is in place. Better yeast strains make better vodka as well. Vodka is the number one spirit from Eastern Europe. Now vodka is made all over the world.

How Vodka Is Made

Distillation

A producer can start out with corn, potatoes, wheat, beets or rye as a few examples. As long as there are sugars, or starches that can be converted to sugars, a distilled spirit can be made. In Russia they use wheat and in Poland they use rye most often. The Canadian Vodka, 'Iceberg' uses peaches and cream corn.

Making the Mash

Mash is the mixture made from these food products mixed with water. The mixture is cooked into an oatmeal like consistency. Quite often you will notice the spirit is made out of a product abundant in the area. For example: If potatoes are abundant in the region then vodka will be made out of these. After cooking, the water is then drawn off and sent to the next step.



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The Fermentation Process

This drawn off water has sugars in it. The yeast is added and the fermentation begins. The yeast will eat the sugars and create alcohol as a by-product. This will take around fifty hours to complete. The result is an alcoholic beverage of approximately 5% abv.

The Distillation Process

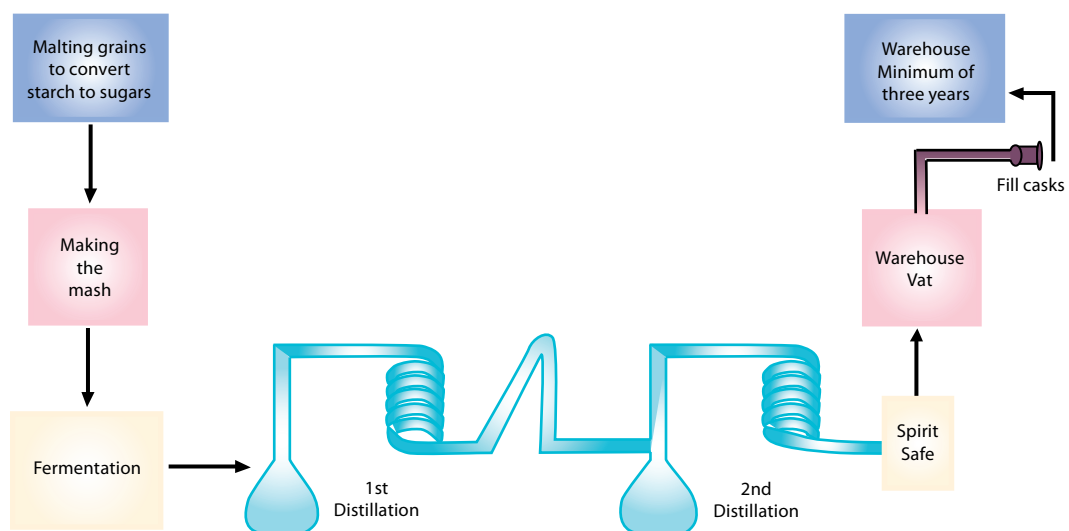
A large copper pot, [copper works the best] with a long neck, will be used to collect the vapors. The pot still is heated up from underneath. Water boils at 100° C, but Ethanol - the name of the alcohol we drink, boils at 78° C. The vapor collected will contain the alcohol and some aromatics that create flavor. The shape of the still is important. The vapors rise and contact with the copper, allowing a flavor to develop. The vapors can rise up and fall back down again, depending on the still shape. By the time the vapor goes over the top and down the neck, a particular finished product is created.

There are two types of stills used to make distilled spirits. The Pot Still makes one batch at a time and the Continuous Still takes the mixture and separates it in an ongoing process. For Albertans, we may look no further than our oil and gas plants for a continuous process example. These are continuously running and producing distilled products. When you see a refinery, those towers are distillation columns.

Vodka is better distilled in Continuous Stills because the end product will have less aromatics. The effect created is a colorless, neutral, almost tasteless alcohol. Congeners are flavor elements removed in the distillation. Vodka can be distilled over and over to remove the congeners.

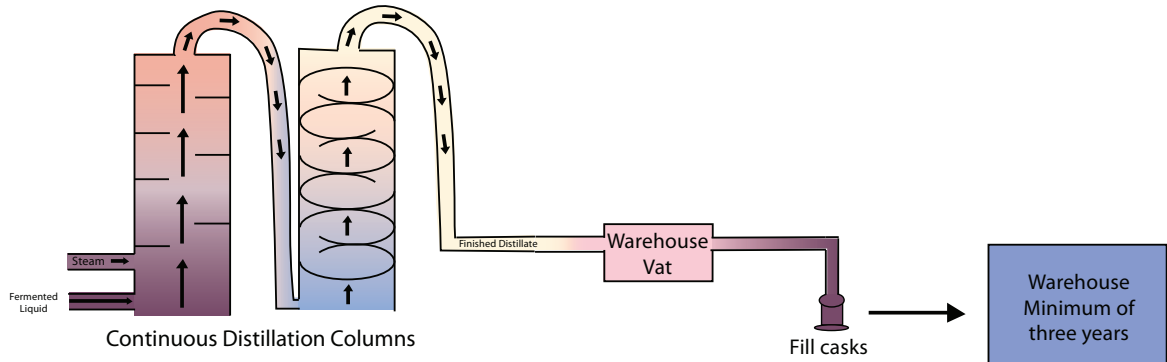
The Distillation Process

POT STILLS





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Filtering

This is an important step in removing congeners. The vodka is run through charcoal filters to create the final, nondescript spirit.

Aging

There is none! Vodka is not put in oak casks. It can be bottled and sent to market right away.

The Finished Product

The product we purchase will be different only by its smoothness, the flavor, price tag and the packaging. Less expensive vodka will have some flavor and may be a bit harsh. Expensive vodka will be smooth and have little taste. What the bottle looks like and the marketing behind it will have a lot to do with how popular it is. Perception versus reality is the way vodka is sold to consumers.

Vodka Examples

We have good standard vodkas that work well with mixed drinks. They are widely produced and fairly inexpensive. They are a staple in every liquor store. Vodka is very popular and people seem to have their favorite brand. Vodka goes with any type of mix since it has no overriding taste.

Premium Vodka has had more distillation and/or filtering. There may be some taste, but the harsh alcohol will not be present. These will be silky and subtle. The popular serving suggestion is a neat pour in a shot glass, immersed in ice. Think; the colder the better when sipping vodka! Vodka can be kept in the freezer and poured in a nice glass. Martini's can be made with vodka. An easy recipe is 3 oz. in a Martini glass with three olives!

Flavored Vodkas

These styles have exploded onto our market in the last few years. Europe has had flavored vodkas almost since they have been making it. We may not find pepper or bison grass flavored vodka on our shelves though!



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Flavored spirit also comes from France. They make fruit flavored spirits called Eau de Vie. This is a neutral spirit, with an infusion of fruit. The popular ones are cherry, raspberry, pear and plum. North Americans have taken this idea and made it understandable to the consumer by calling it 'flavored vodka'. Truly, any distilled spirit can be infused, but it has to be attractive to the consumer. Vodka was a perfect match for consumer recognition and ease of flavoring by the producer.

Flavoring can be done in two ways. The least expensive way is to add artificial flavoring. The most expensive way is to add the fruit into the distillation process. This can be difficult because the natural flavors have to be the correct strength and consistent from batch to batch. The result is a true sense of having fresh fruit in your vodka.

Two Examples of Flavored Vodka

Hangar One is made by infusing real fruit into the finest wheat vodka, then redistilling the fruit infusion on our tiny copper Holstein pot-stills. Because fruits can differ so much from season to season, and distillation can be affected by temperature and humidity the master distillers keep a close watch on the process. To see a video on how a small batch distillation in Pot Stills is done, go to www.youtube.com and search for '*This is Hangar One Vodka*'.

Absolut Vodka is made using the Continuous Still process. The method is less expensive and the fruit infusion is done during this process. There are many flavored vodkas produced by Absolut.

Since Vodka is a colorless, tasteless spirit it can be flavoured with just about anything. You will see coffee, vanilla, lemon and orange as examples. The consumer has caught on to this style of vodka and it is very popular.



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Review Sheet

Where is Vodka originally from?

What can Vodka be made out of?

Is Vodka aged in oak casks?

What is the flavor of Vodka?

What is a congener?

What does filtering do to the spirit?

How does the consumer choose a Vodka?

What are two ways to flavor a Vodka?

A customer comes in the store and they want Vodka. How can you help them decide which is a good choice for them?

Write down a standard Vodka name and price. Read the label. Now do this with a premium Vodka.
