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Vodka Tasting

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The Chris Gillespie Trio, (www.ChrisGillespie.com), filled the night with jazz. Metrazur provided the most wonderful hors d'oeuvres, like cornbread with crème fraiche and caviar, salmon mousse in a delicate pastry, chicken crostini, potato cakes, and even a wild mushroom risotto.

Everyone these days is making vodka in the most unlikely places, from Ireland to Nantucket. Vodka originally made from potatoes, is being made from organic grains, wheat, and yes, some are still making vodka the traditional way, using potatoes.

Flavored vodkas are starting to crowd out the vodka shelves of the liquor stores, some are good, some not so good, and some are really noteworthy. The Jewel of Russia, made in Russia, (www.jewelofrussia.com), which has been making vodka for over 300 years, demonstrates that experience really does matter. I sampled 4 of their vodkas, the Ultra, Limited Edition, slow-flow filtered for extra purity, 80 proof, (\$59.99 for 1 liter), the Classic, (\$25.99), high-absorption filtration for extra purity, 80 proof, the Berry Infusion, made with cranberries, 40 proof, (\$23.99), and the Wild Bilberry Infusion, 44 proof (\$23.99). Although their products fall at the high-end of the market, they really are worth it. The Ultra, not only is very smooth, it is a clean tasting vodka, which comes in a traditional 300 year old bottle design, with old-fashioned label, silk cord, red wax, seal and a hand-painted wooden top, perfect for gift giving. The Classic is smooth, and well done. Their flavored vodkas, their Berry Infusion, and their Wild Bilberry Infusion, are expertly finished, fruity and sweet, but well balanced, and taste like a perfect Cosmopolitan ‐ just pour over ice, shake and strain into a martini glass.

Another favorite of my mine at the tasting was Iceberg, from Canada, 80 proof, (www.icebergvodka.com). Their vodka is actually made from you guessed it, icebergs, along with distilled grain! It is one of the most costly vodkas to make, since they actually use fishing boats to gather the icebergs, yet the consumer price is right at just \$17.99. Using icebergs as their water supply is definitely unique, and their product really has a very refreshing, clean taste, without the aftertaste that some vodkas have.

Two other American vodkas, which I found noteworthy are Shakers Original American Vodka, (www.shakersvodka.com), made from 100% American Wheat from Northern Minnesota and distilled six times, 80 proof, (\$32.99) and Hamptons Banana Vodka, (www.hamptonsvodka.com). Shakers Original American Vodka, was just introduced in March 2003 on a limited basis, has a pleasing taste, and is presented in a frosted bottle, which resembles a shaker glass: great product, great presentation. Hamptons Vodka, in addition to making vodka, has taken a real twist on flavored vodka, and has made banana vodka, Hamptons Banana Vodka, 80 proof (\$27.00). The vodka has a strong banana bouquet, and strong, but true banana taste.

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