

Good vodka, bad vodka, weird vodka

Filed under Food & Drink

While experts around the country were flying into town for the World Spirits Competition a couple of weeks ago, we were sipping vodka at CHOW HQ with Allison Evanow, founder of Square One Organic Spirits. Yeah, she had something to sell (her vodka is going to go on sale in May), but she knows a lot about the subject and she was happy to have us taste blind.

We waited to tell you what we found until we got the results from the experts (didn't want to upstage them), but you probably know the punchline anyway: much of it tastes pretty much the same, especially at the highest alcohol levels. And if you chill it, you really can't taste much. If you serve it a little warmer, and especially if you add water, it actually brings out the impurities. We did that at the tasting and had some unpleasant surprises.

Here are the big points:

- Ketel One tastes a little like gin (and rumor has it that they add juniper; apparently there's no law against sneaking in this and that into imported vodka)
- Grey Goose has a hint of anise
- Absolut tasted a little like rocket fuel (okay, what we imagine rocket fuel to taste like – kind of gasoliny, with an alcohol punch)
- We couldn't find a bottle of Chopin, but in previous tests, that one has been a favorite.
- Swear to God, blind tasting result, we picked for our overall winner Square One Organic Spirits. Allison didn't even twitch in its direction. It was smooth, had a nice creamy texture and a faint sweetish flavor that made it pleasant to sip.

We were especially excited to try two vodkas from a craft distiller, Vermont Spirits, which distills Vermont Gold from maple syrup and Vermont White from milk sugar. (Turns out you can make vodka from just about anything. In Russia, the classic grain is wheat. In Poland, it's rye. We like the slight sweetness from rye.) Nobody could taste anything resembling dairy in White, but Gold has a slight essence of donut. Not necessarily a bad thing if you're drinking martinis in the morning.

Meanwhile, at the World Spirits Competition, the experts tasted 700 entries from all over the place. Lithuania had a surprisingly strong showing this year, with a mystery spirit called 999 making it into the finals.

We hung out with the judges the first morning to find out what the experts look for in vodka. Turns out, it's all a little haphazard.

In an airless hotel meeting room, the judges (spirits writers, bartenders, and liquor consultants) sat at around a half dozen or so big round tables. Each table was responsible for judging several categories of booze. (Ours tackled plain vodkas, fruit flavored vodkas, white rums, and gins all before lunchtime.) After sipping silently, notes were compared and a consensus arrived at: gold, double gold, silver, bronze, or "no" medal for each product.

Although they agreed on other liquors, when it came to plain vodka, results were all over the map. It wasn't unusual for the same vodka to get "gold" from one judge and "no medal" from another. We joked that it was a little Emperor's-New-Clothesy. Nobody laughed.

We had to wait a whole two weeks to get the official results. The vodka winner was Zyr, from Moscow. It wasn't in our tasting; unfortunately, Zyr is only available in New York for now. We'll get back to you on that.

– Lessley Anderson

