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# A WOMAN'S PLACE IS... MAKING VODKA

By Elin McCoy



ALISON EVANOW

One night in August, 2004, Bay Area wine and spirits marketing veteran Alison Evanow woke up at 1:00am with an idea – an organic vodka with the brand-name Square One – and wondered, “Could I make this into a company?”

She’d paid her way through an MBA by bartending and worked at corporate giants PepsiCo, José Cuervo International, and Moët-Hennessy’s Domaine Chandon, where her job had been eliminated just as she found out she was pregnant with twins. “I was thinking about how to have a career I could love without abandoning my kids,” she says.

With financial advice and investment from her East Coast banker sister and help from a green-conscious friend with her own public relations firm, Evanow launched Square One Organic Spirits LLC in April, 2006. It’s one of the few companies in the male-dominated spirits industry owned and managed by women. (Her husband and brother own under 2%.)

Now, at their first anniversary, the vodka is a hit in elegant restaurants, hip bars, and top-shelf retail shops.

But Square One’s success is not just because the earth-friendly vodka tastes great – pure and crisp, rich, soft, and smooth, with faint sweet-spice bite. “Our eco-stance and girl power have helped us,” says Evanow. “When I tell distributors and bartenders (especially women) that we’re female-owned, they love that.”

Square One is just one of the dozens of luxury vodka labels launched in 2006. All are looking for a way to

stand out in the wildly overcrowded, 700+ brand vodka market, which has a whopping 28% share of the multi-billion dollar a year spirits industry. The biggest growth is the super- and ultra-premium \$25-and-up sector that started with now ubiquitous

Absolut and accelerated a decade ago with popular Grey Goose. Only a handful of these are organic, but that seems to be a new mini-trend, with several besides Square One launched last year.

“We’re an eco-vodka, not an ego-vodka,” the 42-year-old Evanow likes to say, referring to the many new vodkas trading on celebrity names, like the recently released Trump and fashion designer Roberto Cavalli’s fancy \$60 eponymous bottling.

The process used to make all vodkas, whether high end, organic, or inexpensive is fairly simple and basically the same: distilling a fermented mash, usually of grain or potatoes, into a neutral white spirit, filtering it to remove impurities and adding water to reduce the level of alcohol.

The overall goal is a clean taste and mild smoothness with no alcoholic bite, the result of multiple distillations and filtrations. The best and more expensive bottlings, such as Square One, Grey Goose, and Stolichnaya Elit have the all-important velvety smooth texture that make them worth the price.

Even though vodka is defined by the US government as a spirit “with no distinctive character or



STACIE PARKER SHONFELD



◀ SQUARE ONE	HERB'S ▶
◀ 267 INFUSIONS	HANGAR ONE ▶



taste”, top brands do have subtle differences and complexities of aroma, texture, flavor, and aftertaste that come from the original element as well as the water, filtration and distillation process.

A few boutique distillers, like California’s Hangar One, use a traditional old-world pot still, which leaves in more flavor, but the majority of companies, like Square One, use a modern continuous still that results in a very clean spirit with just a whisper of its origins. Square One commissioned Idaho’s Distilled Resources to come up with an organic fermentation and distillation process Evanow is convinced helps achieve purity more than extra processing.

Technically vodka can be distilled from just about any substance, including unusual ingredients like apples, maple syrup, even soy. But grain is the favorite. Square One starts with pure certified organic North Dakota rye, which gives complexity and a spicy bite, while the French wheat used for Grey Goose results in lightness, subtlety and elegance. Ciroc, one of the new grape-based vodkas, has an unusual fresh fruitiness that reminds me of, well, grapes. Vodkas made from potatoes, such as Poland’s Chopin, are richer and creamier; those from corn, such as America’s Rain, sweeter.

Water counts, just as it does in single malt whisky. Iceland’s Reyka vodka, for example, sources theirs from a 4,000-year-old lava field, which may be one explanation for its whistle-clean taste.

There are dozens of variations on filtration – through charcoal,

**RAINFOREST GREEN-TEA-NI**

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1 OZ. FRESH LIME JUICE

¾ OZ. ORGANIC AGAVE NECTAR

½ OZ. ORANGE LIQUEUR

PUT ALL INGREDIENTS IN A COCKTAIL SHAKER WITH CRUSHED ICE. SHAKE VIGOROUSLY FOR 15 SECONDS. STRAIN INTO A MARTINI GLASS AND GARNISH WITH A LITTLE ZEST OF LIME.



limestone, quartz, a special patented freeze process, and so on. But once the impurities are out, it’s hard to know how much these add to the taste. Diaka, the world’s most expensive vodka, is filtered through diamonds, but I doubt that contributes to anything but price.

High-end vodkas spin all these differences as well as their names, geographic origin, and elaborate bottle designs to create

buzz and image. Square One aims to give green conscious consumers a chance to put their drinks’ money where their values are. Labels are made from tree-free paper printed with soy-based ink and a percentage of their after-tax profits go to environmental causes. And they pour at events like the San Francisco premiere party for the Oscar-winning documentary on global warming, “An Inconvenient Truth”.

But let’s not leave out the exploding category of flavored vodka, a favorite for today’s creative cocktails. Neutral vodka is an ideal blank canvas for sucking up flavors from lemon (the first to make a splash in the US 20 years ago) to mango to herbs to the latest hot flavors, pear and pomegranate. The best brands macerate real fruit in already-made vodka, then strain it out before a final distillation.

Fifty-three new flavored vodkas hit the shelves in the past two years, including a line from another woman, fashion and food entrepreneur Stacie Parker Shonfeld. She came up with the concept of keeping the real fresh fruit inside the vodka bottle. Her first spirits company and its flagship line 267 Infusions launched last fall. The bottles with colorful sliced oranges and bright red cranberries swishing in the vodka remind me of those big glass jars filled with exotic fruit and vodka gently infusing in trendy bars where the motto is fresh is best.

“We put in the fruit to pop the taste,” Shonfeld says, and it does.

Don’t tell me business women can’t show the right spirit. ■



MCCOY'S TOP VODKAS	FLAVORED
<p><b>SQUARE ONE ORGANIC VODKA</b> (\$35; CALIFORNIA) LIGHT, SOFT, CREAMY, WITH DELICIOUS SPICY BITE.</p> <p><b>REYKA</b> (\$30; ICELAND) CLEAN AND BRACING, PERFECT MIXER.</p> <p><b>WYBOROWA</b> (\$30; POLAND) RYE-BASED AND FULL-BODIED; IN STUNNING FRANK BEHRY-DESIGNED BOTTLE.</p> <p><b>CIROC</b> (\$30; FRANCE) FRESH, GRAPY, COMPLEX, AND UNUSUAL.</p> <p><b>STOLICHNAYA ELIT</b> (\$60; RUSSIA) SMOOTH, SEAMLESS, ELEGANT. WORTH IT.</p> <p><b>JEWEL OF RUSSIA</b> (\$75; RUSSIA) VERY SUBTLE, WITH UNBELIEVABLE SMOOTHNESS AND FINESSE.</p>	<p><b>ABSOLUT CITRON</b> (\$25; SWEDEN) STILL A CLASSIC, CLEAN, LIGHT, WITH A WHISPER OF PINE.</p> <p><b>267 INFUSIONS</b> (\$25; CALIFORNIA) 4 VODKAS; BEST IS THE ORANGE, AND IT LOOKS GREAT ON YOUR BAR, TOO.</p> <p><b>HANGAR ONE</b> (\$36; US) AN ARTISANAL TASTE LEADER WITH 4 FLAVORS; BEST ARE BRIGHT INTENSE BUDDA'S HAND CITRON AND STUNNING FRASER RIVER RASPBERRY.</p> <p><b>DOMAINE CHARBAY</b> (\$32; US) BOUTIQUE PRODUCER; BEST FLAVORS ARE LUXURIOUS GREEN TEA AND BRAND-NEW SPICY-FLORAL RED POMEGRANATE.</p> <p><b>HERB'S AROMATIC VODKA</b> (\$30; US) HERB-INFUSED; FOUR FLAVORS, ALL GREAT MIXERS. I LIKE SPICY CRISP CILANTRO.</p> <p><b>GREY GOOSE LA POIRE</b> (\$35; FRANCE) WONDERFUL ANJOU PEAR SCENT AND TASTE IN THE LATEST FLAVOR FROM MARKET LEADER.</p>