

What's this? Vodka with flavour?!

Now, let's get one thing straight right off: I don't drink vodka. Which is to say, of course I drink vodka, but rarely is it a "go to" spirit for me, and even less often is it something I want to write about.

The reason for this sentiment is quite simple, as simple as the definition of vodka, in fact. It is, or is supposed to be, a flavourless spirit devoid of colour or aroma, which is hardly a description that sets my mouth a-watering. So properly, I reckon, a comparison of vodkas should at least approximate the following:

"Uh, this one tastes like nothing, just alcohol."

"But this one tastes even more like nothing, and it's got a cool bottle."

In my humble abode, then, I generally have on hand a bottle of Reyka Vodka, which appeals to me because of its minerality, and a refrigerated bottle of the Polish bison grass vodka Zubrówka—more about that later. But then I happened upon not one, but three new vodkas, and get this—attention locavores—they're all from Ontario! What's more, each one actually tastes of something, and something good.

First off the mark is Kittling Ridge's Eight Below, a "luxury vodka" sweetened ever so slightly with a few drops of icewine. The bottle is kind of fancy, which immediately sets me on my guard, and I'm none too sure about this whole "luxury" thing, but in the glass this is a most pleasing spirit, surprisingly perfumey on the nose and a trifle fruity and none too harsh on the palate. At \$44.95, it's the most expensive of the trio, but to my mind, more worth the cash than most of the other "luxury" vodkas I've tried.

The brand-new Still Waters Distillery in Concord delivers the next new vodka, and if, like a friend of mine, your mind drifts to whisky when you sample it, there is ample reason for that. Distilled from 100% malted barley, Still Waters Single Malt Vodka is essentially an unaged, Scottish-style whisky, and as appealing as its pedigree suggests. The nose is sweet and fruity, a mix of tropical fruits and green grapes, while the body is soft and creamy-sweet, with what seems like vanilla notes and a soft, fruity roundness. At \$36.95, this is an immensely sippable bargain, even at room temperature.

Our third Ontario vodka is Tag No. 5, which again sets off alarms by arriving in a fancy, embossed bottle with sharp graphics and a "filter polished five times" catch phrase. "Filter polished"? What that is supposed to mean is quite beyond me, but I have to admit that this is a fine corn-based spirit, smelling vaguely of minty alcohol and tasting like a subtly sweet, herbaceous vodka with admittedly the sharpest finish of the three. But wait, it's also the cheapest of this trio, at a decidedly unpretentious \$24.95 per bottle. So if you're searching for a flash looking, good tasting and modestly priced mixing vodka, I think this Oakville distillate may fit your bill nicely.

Finally, about that Zubrówka (\$24.95) I mentioned earlier, if you have Polish friends, as I do, you may have already been introduced to this yellowish spirit flavoured with the grass upon which wild bison are said to feed. What you may not have noticed, however, is that the vodka has not only received a bottle makeover of late, but also experienced a reformulation. Gone is the rather garish yellow hue, replaced by more subtle tones, and while the sweetness is still there—sugar is identified as an ingredient on the label—it's definitely more reserved, less in need of refrigeration to be held in check, and more balanced by appealing herbal qualities.

While I haven't polled my eastern European mates as to their feelings yet, I certainly think the change has been for the better, and I look forward to being able to keep my Zubrówka in the liquor cabinet, rather than the fridge from now on. **CB**



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