

VODKA

In keeping with the nature of the spirit, our test of vodka drew a mixed response

A FEW SHOTS

It's typically assumed that the only 'authentic' way to drink vodka is chilled, but there are no rules. Chilling reduces aromas and flavours, and causes the subtler nuances to be lost.

Traditionally, British (and Western) vodkas are 'neutral', with no discernible taste. East European and Scandinavian distillers promote the character of the ingredients (rye or potatoes in Poland; wheat or rye in Russia; wheat in Sweden; barley in Finland) that give their vodka a distinctive taste.

Vodka has a low level of congeners, the elements that cause a hangover. Overindulge, though, and you will still suffer.

Enjoy vodka as they do in Poland and Russia, served with rye bread and hors d'oeuvres. If you can't afford caviar, try blinis, dill cucumbers, pickled mushrooms, herring fillets or charcuterie.

Vodka is supremely mixable. It's inspired more cocktails than any other spirit – and because cocktails are cool, and vodka cocktails lead, its status as the most fashionable spirit is guaranteed. Sales of vodka have gone up 40 per cent over the last five years and vodka now accounts for around 57 per cent of all white spirits drunk in the UK. According to Melissa Draycott, spirits buyer for Sainsbury's, this growth in sales shows no signs of letting up. But, she adds, 'competition is fierce, with countless new additions at all different price points'. Apart from standard brands, costing up to £10 or so, there are premium vodkas (around £14) and super-premiums (around £20 and upwards). It's the premium and super-premium end of the market that's boosted sales, so we put 13 of these vodkas to the test to see what they had to offer.

A VERY BLITHE SPIRIT

Our tasting produced a mixed response. For a couple of our judges, it 'proved beyond doubt that all vodkas do not taste the same', although another noted that only a few had distinctive flavours. Some were considered ideal for the unadventurous to add their kick to a mixer; others were 'as distinctive and complex as more traditional spirits, and very able to be savoured on their own'. Our Best Buys will go down well neat or mixed.

BEST BUYS

Scoring 17 out of 20, our top vodka was the New Zealand **42 Below**, £18.95. Tasters found it complex and smooth, and appreciated its initial flavours of butterscotch and

aniseed and its spicy aftertaste.

Our other Best Buys all scored 16. The Polish **Smirnoff Penka**, £31.95, was liked for its soft, creamy texture and good combination of sweet

Other vodkas on test

15 Kauffman, Russia (£52.61)	France (£25.79)
15 Wyborowa, Poland (£13.49)	14 Finlandia, Finland (£16.49)
15 Stolichnaya, Russia (£13.95)	14 Ketel One, Holland (£18.49)
15 Stolichnaya Elit, Russia (£43.29)	14 Skyy, California (£20.95)
15 Grey Goose,	11 Absolut Blue, Sweden (£15.95)

KEY FACTS

We served our vodkas at room temperature to six professional spirits tasters, who tasted them 'blind' (with the labels and bottles covered) and awarded each a mark out of 20. The score shown is an average, rounded to the nearest whole figure.

All our vodkas are 40% abv, apart from 42 Below, which is 42%. We give the price we paid for a 70cl bottle. We bought all of our vodkas online from www.thedrinkshop.com, but you may find them in specialist drinks shops or selected supermarkets.

flavours balanced by peppery spice.

Tasters praised the Russian **Ivan the Terrible**, £25.99, for its good complexity, its mix of grain and fruit flavour and its sweet, velvety finish.

Finally, and good value at £15.89, is another Polish brand, **Luksusowa**. Our panel approved of its fresh citrus fruit and buttery flavour, and one taster commended it for its lack of alcoholic kick.