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Flavored Vodka Gets Back to Nature

IN WHAT TO DRINK | by Ilan Baril | February 1, 2012



Photo by Laura Dart

Forget the bubblegum and chocolate. Craft distillers are turning to unique, natural ingredients to give their vodkas authentic and delicious flavor.

You've probably seen ads for all kinds of flavored vodkas, from basics like lemon to more flamboyant flavors like cake and espresso. But what do you have to add to vodka to make it taste like cake?

As we watch liquor store shelves swell with candy- and dessert-flavored vodkas, a number of craft distillers are taking another approach by using all-natural, seasonal ingredients to flavor their vodkas. They are seeking out unusual fruits, herbs and other botanicals to create unique spirits that taste more like real food.

Two of my favorite distillers are Hangar One and Charbay, both California distillers that draw upon generations of family experience. Their vodkas may be relatively new on the world stage, but they are winning awards and collecting fans for their fresh tastes and natural ingredients.

Flavored vodka is a great way to add more flavor to a drink without adding extra ingredients. You can make simple vodka cocktails more interesting, or even sip a nice flavored vodka on the rocks with a little club soda. I'll take Hangar One Mandarin Blossom or Charbay Ruby Grapefruit anytime.

Jorg Rupf, founder and Master Distiller of Hangar One, has been producing spirits in California since 1982. He began making unflavored vodka, Hangar One Straight, in 2001, and this vodka is the basis for Hangar One's flavored varieties, says Kensey Davis, Hangar One's brand manager. "[Jörg] included viognier grapes with the wheat," she says of Hangar One Straight, "to give it a depth of flavor reminiscent of the eau de vies his family has been making for generations."

To make the flavored vodkas, Hangar One crushes and ferments their fruit whole — rind, stems, seeds and all — to bring out the oils in the fruit and to add depth to the finished product. The result is an interesting line-up of natural flavors, including [Buddha's Hand Citron](#), [Chipotle](#), [Kaffir Lime](#) and [Mandarin Blossom](#).

Charbay is another California distillery creating great flavored vodkas from natural ingredients. Master Distiller Marko Karakasevich is the 13th generation of distillers in his family and the son of the distillery's founder, Miles, whom Marko calls "an artist of flavor." Miles started Charbay in 1983, making wine and brandy. Since then, this family-owned distillery has broadened their scope to nearly 30 wines and spirits.

Seven of these are vodkas, one clear and six flavored — [Blood Orange](#), [Meyer Lemon](#),

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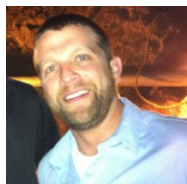
Greenhook Ginsmith's presents a sloe gin featuring local, seasonal beach plums.

Ruby Grapefruit, Green Tea, Red Raspberry and Pomegranate. Vodka entered into the family business only in 1998 because, as Marko says, Miles had a policy of “no vodka,” and Marko had to prove to him that it would sell. Marko started with Meyer Lemon vodka, still a top seller. “My dad didn’t think it would work,” says Marko, “so I had to start with something he could relate to the fruit liqueurs we’d been making all along.”

Charbay uses fruit that is sourced from small farms and pressed whole before being added to their base spirit, which is itself an oddity as a vodka made from corn and rye. The family’s distilling history and focus on flavor in all their products gives Charbay a unique expertise when it comes to flavored vodka.

Both distillers suggest that you try their flavored vodkas with simple things. Miles says he enjoys his Ruby Grapefruit Vodka cocktail “in a pint glass with a pump of tonic,” and Marko agrees, suggesting that Charbay flavors are best with “ingredients from your backyard, a little mint or basil with soda.”

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