

Not your grandfather's vodka



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Vodka is hot. You probably know that, because you're the ones who have made it popular.

The traditional image of vodka — a freezing Russian winter, poured into tiny glasses and slugged straight until the bottle is empty — is gone. Today vodka is seen as light, pure, clean, fun. The higher quality the better. Flavours? Bring them on.

I knew I had to write something about this trend when, in the course of about 10 days, four different vodka samples arrived at my desk.

Most vodka, certainly domestic vodka, is made from grain (wheat or rye), fermented, mixed with water and distilled. A few products, mostly eastern European, are made from potatoes and even sugar beets.

To my taste, a vodka must be clean and dry, with the only real flavour that of the ethyl alcohol, and with a smoothness that masks the drink's potential harshness.

It had been years since I had tried ALBERTA PURE VODKA (\$22.65 for 750 mL and available in other sizes, code 1073). It has a new, sleeker package for the first time in decades. What's inside jogged my memory. This is good, clean everyday vodka, ideal for any mixed drink.

It also happens to be the top-selling domestic vodka in the country.

Next up were two new flavours from Polar Ice, a leader in premium Canadian vodka, distilled four times and filtered three times for purity and smoothness. The idea here is to draw on distinctly Canadian flavours.



I was quite struck by POLAR ICE NORTHERN MAPLE (\$24.65, code 83428). I dislike most flavoured vodka because it's too sweet, too liqueur-like, although that's why a lot of people like them.

The use of real maple could be

expected to add sweetness, but it has that dry edge at the back of the throat that you get with real maple syrup, so it's not cloying and quite delicious. Try it iced and neat.

POLAR ICE ARCTIC BERRY (\$24.95, code 83410) uses wild raspberries and maritime huckleberries. It is fragrant with the smell and taste of real fruit. The sweetness is prominent, and the texture is creeping up on that liqueur feel.

The company suggests mixing an ounce of Arctic Berry with four ounces of lemon iced tea in a tall glass with ice.

ABSOLUT MANGO (\$25.95, code 71597) is in the same boat — super quality Swedish vodka made with real mango — with a natural impression verging on liqueur if drunk straight. I mixed it with a tropical fruit juice blend, and it was superb.

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We've dabbled from time to time with the marketing aspect of wine, particularly style and packaging geared to younger women. It doesn't mean others won't like what's inside — the idea is that the target audience will like it and spread the word.

Here's the latest entry in the field, to my knowledge the first from an Ontario winery (Collo).

The line is called Girls' Night Out (subtitle: Best Enjoyed With Friends), and it consists of three fruit-driven VQA-designated wines in what market research shows is the optimum price range for women: \$12 to \$15 a bottle.

The labels feature different coloured evening dresses against a white background, and the offerings have been carefully crafted with their audience in mind.

First off is GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

CHARDONNAY (the black dress, \$12.95, code 89821). To my mind, the best of the lot in pure varietal character; dry, clean and crisp style, no oak, with flavours of pear, grapefruit, a whiff of papaya and a fresh citrus quality. The splash of Gewurztraminer gives it a little bounce as well. GIRLS' NIGHT OUT MERLOT (the red dress, \$12.95, code 89847). A softer, aromatic, gentler approach to the grape, as I'd expect. Good ripe fruit comes across as blackberries and damson plums, perhaps some red raspberries, with a vanilla and buttered toast/oak finish.

GIRLS' NIGHT OUT MERLOT/CHARDONNAY (the pink dress, \$12.95, code 89862). A rather pretty rosé that will hold up into fall. Certainly the tannic value of the Merlot is compensated by 40 per cent Chardonnay, suggesting this one should be lightly chilled and served with fun fare such as pizza. Flavours are of morello cherries and rhubarb pie.

If you like these wines, add them to your Christmas shopping list: The three will be available in a special Vintage Gems jewellery box for \$49.95 when special holiday packs hit the shelves next month.

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In the mood for an affair? You can kindle your love of the wines of Sonoma at the Sonoma Wine Affair in Toronto on Sept. 18.

The large and varied Sonoma Valley and its subappellations produce some of the most interesting and sophisticated wines in California. This is your chance to taste from 80 of the top ones, poured by almost two dozen leading wineries. It takes place at The Arcadian Court, 401 Bay St. (at Queen Street), from 7 to 9.30 p.m.

Tickets are \$60, with samples included, and are available by calling the California Wine Institute at 905-336-8932, or 1-800-558-2675 or online at calwine.ca.

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