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# WATER *of* LIFE

Aquavit, the spicy spirit of Scandinavia, is not just for pickled herring anymore

**THE EARLY HISTORY** of aquavit is the history of all distilled spirits. Almost every country has its version of the spirit with a name derived from the Latin *aqua vitae*. Even whisky gets its name from the Gaelic for “water of life.” Like other spirits produced in the 15th century, aquavit was valued for its supposed life- and health-promoting properties and at first, mostly used for medicinal purposes. It was considered a cure for any ailment—including alcoholism (Drink this and you’ll never drink again!).

Scandinavians added caraway, anise, fennel, cumin, dill, coriander and other spices and herbs to cover the harsh flavor of the alcohol. The precise ingredients vary in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, but all aquavit is basically flavored vodka. Though it’s considered the national drink in those countries, aquavit is typically reserved for special occasions or served with special foods. At certain times of the year it’s practically mandatory: paired mid-summer with smoked and pickled herring, flavored with dill and cumin to complement autumn’s crayfish, and served with smoked salmon, meats and other traditional delicacies from the Christmas buffet (*yulebord*), usually served very cold in shot glasses—though Norwegians like it at room temperature—and always accompanied by beer and drinking songs.

When toasting with aquavit, traditionalists hold the glass at chest level, look directly in the eye of friend, neighbor or stranger, drink, and return the glass to chest level and gaze again. (Like the handshake, this friendly custom has its origins in self-preservation.

If your companion is looking you in the eye, he won’t be in a position to harm you.)

To be sold as aquavit in the U.S., the spirit must include the flavor of caraway, familiar to many as the piquant, nutty seed in rye bread. The flavor can be from an extract, or even artificial, but most reputable distillers use whole seeds.

Aquavit was never a headliner in American cocktail culture, though Hollywood star Rosalind Russell is said to have given a recipe for an aquavit cocktail (2 ounces aquavit, 1 ounce dry vermouth) to Lucius Beebe, author of the 1946 *Stork Club Bar Book*. And there was a moment in the 1980s, according to Toby Cecchini, owner of Passerby, a tavern in New York, and author of *Cosmopolitan*, when bartenders spiked Bloody Marys with the savory liquor.

The restaurant Aquavit in New York City pairs housemade aquavits—flavored with ingredients like grapefruit and lemongrass, or fig and cardamom—with fresh juices in crowd-pleasing culinary cocktails. In 2005, the restaurant introduced its own commercial brand, white-cranberry-flavored Aquavit New York, distilled and bottled in Sweden and sold at liquor stores in the U.S.

Widely available imported brands, like Aalborg, O.P. Anderson and Linie, attribute most of their sales to Scandinavian-Americans. But two U.S. micro-distillers—Oregon’s House Spirits and the Chicago area’s North Shore Distillery—recently introduced their interpretations. —Nancy Davidson

## TASTING NOTES

### AALBORG (Denmark)

Light and bright with a nutty caraway finish.  
\$19.99, aalborgakvavit.com

### AQUAVIT NEW YORK (Sweden/New York City)

Round-bodied, with notes of fresh grape, lychee and sweet white cranberry.  
\$28.99, aquavitnewyork.com

### HOUSE SPIRITS KROGSTAD (Portland, Ore.)

Multi-layered, with hints of caraway, star anise, dill and other herbs and spices.  
\$23.95, medoyeff.com

### LINIE (Norway)

Every drop travels around the world by ship, crossing the equator twice, sloshing around in sherry barrels, as it ages. Strong caraway flavor, with hints of mellow oak.  
\$28, linie-aquavit.com

### NORTH SHORE DISTILLERY

#### PRIVATE RESERVE (Lake Bluff, Ill.)

Rich, full-bodied and complex, with flavors of caraway, cumin, pepper, sweet clove, anise, cardamom and oak.  
\$26.99, northshoredistillery.com

#### O.P. ANDERSON (Sweden)

Strong caraway flavor is rounded by fennel and oak.  
\$24.99, crillonimporters.com

Prices are estimates for 750-milliliter bottles.

## STOCKHOLM MULE

Inspired by the Moscow Mule vodka cocktail, and Aquavit restaurant's Moscow Reindeer. Battle spice with spice!

2 oz. aquavit  
3 oz. spicy ginger beer  
Ice  
Glass: highball  
Garnish: lime twist

Pour aquavit in an ice-filled glass and top with ginger beer. Garnish.

## COPENHAGEN COCKTAIL

From the Internet Cocktail Database (cocktaildb.com), maintained by Imbibe columnist Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh with fellow enthusiast Martin Doudoroff. By adding caraway and other spices to this martini, you get to call it lunch.

1 oz. gin  
1 oz. aquavit  
1/2 oz. dry vermouth  
Ice  
Tools: mixing pint, bar spoon, strainer  
Glass: cocktail  
Garnish: olive

Stir ingredients with ice in a mixing pint and strain into a glass. Garnish.

## DANISH MARY

Adapted from the Internet Cocktail Database. Drink this herbal eye-opener with brunch and you'll be ready for a game of Kubb.

1 1/2 oz. aquavit  
2 dashes Worcestershire sauce  
Dash each salt, pepper and celery salt  
Tomato juice  
Ice  
Glass: double rocks  
Garnish: celery stick

Pour aquavit in glass and add Worcestershire, salts and pepper. Add ice and fill glass with tomato juice. Garnish.

