



NIGHTCRAWLIN'

BOOZE PATROL



It must be hard to keep bars fully stocked when so many ridiculous varieties of liquor are introduced to the market each year. Vodka is the main culprit of expanding bar shelves and, most likely, frustrated bartenders and consumers. When you consider the limitless variety, a trip to the liquor store becomes some weird branding exercise gone horribly wrong: There's the obvious cash-in Hendrix Electric Vodka (because vodka was Jimi's favorite way to unwind), useless Trump Vodka, O2 vodka (the world's first sparkling vodka), Zygo Vodka (forget adding Red Bull, this stuff already has "energy boosters") and Diaka, an expensive imported Polish vodka made with a unique diamond-filtration process. (Just make sure it's not conflict vodka

that you're drinking.)

According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, nearly 260 vodka brands were introduced in the U.S. from 2001 to 2006 and, surely, that tide of entrepreneurs wagering money on fads will keep flooding the market. The article also mentioned two key facts that really make investors see dollar signs -- vodka sales jumped 4.5 percent in '05, and the profit margin for the neutral spirit can be up to 40 percent. Those are Exxon-type numbers.

Vodka proliferation is increasing for many reasons. It's odorless and tasteless, so creating a unique new flavor is limited only by what you think the public palette will accept. Second, as far as the production of vodka goes, most brands have a similar start. A handful of companies in the United States produce the majority of the neutral-grain spirit, the distilled liquid that comes from fermented starches and sugars. This neutral-grain spirit is then mixed with water, because it's way too alcoholic to drink alone. Since most brands start with the same neutral-grain spirit, it's the water that adds the taste. Or, in the case of most big brands, it's the shape of the bottle and the marketing. You have to wonder if there are some bottle-sculpting consultants that get hired by start-up vodka companies.

Of course, you can always ditch the trendy, corporate spirits and support the passionate, smaller distillers. Family-owned North Shore Distillery in Lake Bluff, Illinois, makes a nice vanilla vodka with real Tahitian vanilla beans. Tito's Handmade Vodka from Texas is made in an old-fashioned still. And Charbay makes flavored vodkas, like blood orange and meyer lemon varieties, with fresh fruit. This year, the company luckily picked up their fruit before a big cold streak obliterated much of the citrus harvest in California. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to make some varieties. Of course, these brands are a little more expensive, and in many ways, have just as much hype as the other vodkas. Then again, you probably know exactly what you're going to drink. Plus, there are no dead rock stars on the bottle. **words: Patrick Sisson**

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