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## THESE VODKAS ARE MEANT FOR SIPPING NOT CHUGGING

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If tequila is often imbibed as a shot and they say gin is made for cocktails, where does that leave vodka? With a good variety of premium vodka on the market these days, the answer is clear: Leave vodka out of cocktails and start sipping. After all, Russians have been drinking it neat for centuries, and it's the best-selling spirit in the U.S., with premium sales rising. So who needs a mixer? Using unique grains, stills and filtration techniques, these eight vodkas are worth tasting neat.

## 1. STOLICHNAYA ELIT



With roots in Russia, elit (\$60) is made with elements of old and new, including grains from Stolichnaya's own farmland, a triple-distillation process and filtration via fine quartz sand and activated charcoal and then freeze-filtered at 18 degrees Celsius to eliminate any last impurities (taking a cue from an old Russian tradition of leaving casks outside in frigid winter elements). What's left is a clear, balanced product with light notes of wheat.

**What to expect:** A clean, fresh and smooth creamy taste and a velvety feel

## 2. ABSOLUT ELYX



The first luxury vodka from the famed Swedish company, Elyx (\$40) is made, distilled and bottled in a 15-mile radius of the Åhus in the Skåne region of Sweden. Using single-estate winter wheat, a copper column still from 1921 (which naturally eliminates any unwanted sulphur-based compounds via copper), the liquid is later blended with Åhus purified water. The bottle's copper accents are a nod to the still and, while familiar, set it apart from **Absolut's** other offerings.

**What to expect:** Slightly peppery and sweet with a clean, light finish

### 3. AYLESBURY DUCK



Made with winter wheat grown in Canada and bottled in California's Napa Valley, using water from a well in Mendocino County with exceptionally clean water, Aylesbury Duck (\$25) is the result of a no-nonsense approach. **The 86 Co.** uses three stills in distilling and a particle filtration system resulting in a spirit with medium complexity and dryness.

**What to expect:** A touch of sweetness with notes of vanilla, fennel and bit of black pepper

## 4. GREY GOOSE VX



What happens when you take **Grey Goose** vodka and spike it with **cognac**? A French blend called VX (\$75), made with 95 percent of the clear spirit with 5 percent cognac. Grey Goose's creator began as a cellar master in cognac and sought to marry the two spirits, creating limited batches designed to be sipped neat. The grapes are from the Grande Champagne region in southern France and aged for two years before blending with the vodka, but despite coming in a bottle that looks like a cognac decanter, this falls squarely in the vodka category.

**What to expect:** Hints of cotton-candy sweetness with plum and citrus notes and a rich but light feel

## 5. HOPHEAD



**Anchor Distilling Co.** branched out from brewing beer into distilling more than 20 years ago and in 2013 added Hophead (\$35) to its portfolio. Made with two kinds of hops, the vodka is colorless yet smells hoppy (much like a brewery) and is distilled using small copper pot stills, instead of a continuous still, resulting in a spirit that retains much of the flavors—just what one would expect when a distillery partners with a brewmaster.

**What to expect:** Fresh and aromatic with hoppy qualities and a grassy, floral taste sans bitterness.

## 6. SNOW LEOPARD



Started as a way to save endangered snow leopards by philanthropist Stephen Sparrow in 2005, Snow Leopard (\$40) uses high-protein grain spelt, which is costlier than wheat or rye, grown without pesticides. Distilling spring water six times, the result is a smooth and slightly nutty spirit. In keeping with the company's mission, 15 percent of profits are donated to snow leopard conservation.

**What to expect:** A creamy, nutty slightly vanilla flavor with a hint of peppery spice

## 7. CRYSTAL HEAD



Encased in a skull-shaped bottle that stands out on any shelf with a celebrity name behind it (Dan Aykroyd), Crystal Head (\$50) was certainly met with a fair amount of skepticism when it launched in 2008. It proved to be a hit with both customers and critics and is selling quite well, no doubt due to grains and Canadian water that are quadruple-distilled and triple-filtered through crystals (known as Herkimer diamonds), resulting in a pure spirit without added sugar, glycerin or citrus oil.

**What to expect:** A hint of sweetness and creaminess with a smooth finish



## 8. REYKA



When you combine some of the world’s cleanest water with grains from nearby Scotland, lava rock filtration and a Carter-Head still, the result is something that can only come out of Iceland. Reyka (\$23) utilizes the best of Iceland’s natural elements, most notably lava rocks that eliminate all impurities, and the still, the first of its kind to distill vodka, yielding a smooth, clean product made in very small batches.

**What to expect:** A well-rounded, clean and slightly sweet taste with hints of fruit