

By Michael Pinkus

Why, oh Why would an editor suggest a wine writer with little experience with vodka — besides the occasional summer-time Caesar and the infrequent burning shot — write about the one beverage he knows so little about? (Heck, I know more about tea than I do about the making of vodka.)

“Because wine people get it,” says John Vellinga, president of Multiculture Bevco, located in Oakville. “We talk about vodka the same way we talk to people about wine,” and this fact shows in the people he has chosen to surround himself with: people who know wine or have a wine background.

Vellinga grew up in Kitchener and spent the first 25 years of his life there. He studied at the University of Waterloo where he met his wife, Katherine (vice-president of operations), and where he got his degree in systems design engineering.

He often gets asked about the “departure” from engineering to vodka, and he is quick to point out that his degree plays a very influential role in what he does today.

“In the end, it’s a product we have to create, manufacture and get here. And a lot of engineering-type thinking goes into the vodka; it was designed for a purpose. We were meticulous about how we created the liquid, the package, everything.”

Take the bottle design for Slava as an example. “At first we thought we needed one of those beautiful bottles because everyone was doing it. But when I found out how much they cost, I almost had a heart attack. From 25 cents per bottle up to \$8, which is ridiculous because that was more than the vodka is to produce. So we decided against that and went another route.

“Many people put their vodka in the freezer, so we made the bottle more convenient for them to do just that. It’s a shape that doesn’t roll around (triangular); we also made the bottle shorter, so it’s easier to



Katherine and John Vellinga of Multiculture Bevco met at the University of Waterloo.

UW degree *has* unusual use

Engineering degree comes in handy in creating, making and marketing vodka

get into the freezer.”

And here’s where his university experiences have come in handy. The bottle is also designed to fit into a dorm-room fridge/freezer. “You can fit four bottles of Slava into that little freezer section. You couldn’t fit another vodka into that freezer, unless on a diagonal with a bag of peas to keep it from

falling out.”

Vellinga has two vodkas that he helped design and bring into Ontario: **Slava Ultra Premium** (\$32.95 - #600585) and **Zirkova Premium** (\$23.45 - #168617), but don’t just think he imports some regular old vodka he found on his travels.

“People think this is a spirit that we randomly found in the Ukraine and brought over. Truth is, we’re a Canadian product, we just went to the birthplace of vodka to have it made. All the branding and design was done here and for this market; it’s not even sold in the Ukraine.”

John also defends his choice to make vodka in the Ukraine. “Think of it this way: we don’t expect Ukrainians to know how to make maple syrup, but they are the best at making vodka. If we could have manufactured this in Canada, we would have.”

He points out that Ukraine is the second largest producer of vodka in the world. “They’ve been doing it for over 600 years; they even have people with PhDs in it, so as you can imagine, they take vodka incredibly seriously. They’re sort of like the French or the Italians with wine. They have a long history of working with it and their standards are incredibly high. We thought it was just better to do everything there.”

Vellinga hired Ludmila Petrivna, who has a PhD in vodka. Ok, not exactly. Her degree is in chemical engineering, “but everything about her PhD has to do with spirits.” (As he mentioned, the Ukrainians take their vodka very seriously.) Petrivna would create samples in Ukraine through different filtration methods and concoctions of spirits “There’s a myth about vodka being all the same,” Vellinga says. “That is absolutely false. There’s potato versus corn versus grain and all make a massive difference. What we do is buy already distilled spirits, and there are 240 types available ‘to play with’: different levels of quality, ingredients, ways made, cuts within the still, number of times distilled; all these differences, at the sake of repeating >>

>> myself, make a difference.”

So Petrivna would create a batch then “we would bring over two batches at a time. We had 44 people as a test group and they would compare them to three benchmark vodkas. We then kept reformulating until ours beat everything on the top shelf.”

The thing that Vellinga finds the most interesting is that batch 23 (out of 25), which is the one they ended up finally deciding upon, had a 70-per-cent approval rating over the “top shelf brands” and to this day, he still sees the same results when he pits his Slava against others in a taste test.

But don't just take his word for it. In 2011 Zirkova won gold at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, and in 2012 Slava did the same.

Zirkova also picked up a Best Buy award from the Beverage Testing Institute. They are looking for “top shelf quality at bottom shelf price, which is exactly what we were going for,” Vellinga confirms

“Anytime we enter either vodka into


competition, we win an award,” says Vellinga proudly, “and this year we're going for another one. Our medals are getting kind of old,” he finishes with a wink

So what are the differences between these two vodka brands: Zirkova and Slava? Both are made in Ukraine and both are small-batch produced using a quadruple filtration method, but that is where the similarities end. Slava is a blend of three types of spirits; Zirkova is made from a single spirit.

But what does all of this mean to the vodka drinker?

“Slava is a gorgeous sipping vodka,” explains Vellinga. “People who want a shot right out of the freezer or to make classic martinis or cosmos — this is the vodka you either drink on its own, or not too heavily adulterated.

“Zirkova is the livelier, more traditional vodka, it's an amazing mixer — it makes the best Caesar.”

Now, with all this talk about vodkas and a Caesar, I think it's time to give one a try. 

ChEeSE-CAKE SMooThIE

Recipe from John Vellinga

OMG this is good. After we found out Slava and cheesecake go so well together, we created this cheesecake smoothie. It sounds weird, but you have to try it. It is amazingly good.

For 2 drinks:

Graham crackers

Crushed ice (4 cubes equivalent)

2 oz. of Slava Ultra Premium Vodka

3 oz. (one inch by two inch) piece of M&M Meat Shops' Just Cheesecake, cut into bits

2 oz. of two-per-cent or whole milk

With a mortar and pestle (or a food processor), grind up graham crackers into a grainy powder and spread onto a medium sized plate. Dip the rim of a martini glass in small amount of milk, then into the graham cracker powder.

This will make a nice rimmer to the glass. It is the “crust” on the cheesecake! We use M&M Just Cheesecake since it has no crust. It is also perfect for a Slava + Cheesecake combo. You can keep it frozen and just hack off chunks as you need them.

In a blender (or magic bullet), add the crushed ice, Slava vodka, the cut up chunk of M&M cheesecake and milk. Blend until smooth and a bit frothy. Pour into the rimmed martini glasses and serve.

You can also shave on some fresh nutmeg. Prepare to be amazed.

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