



Habaneros from my backyard garden infused this vodka with a glassy golden hue. I angled the bottle toward the window, tilting it just-so. Plenty of sunshine streamed through. I had whipped this batch up from Belaya Berezka, a premium brand I had brought back from Moscow last month. My homespun recipe called for a ratio of three habaneros to one liter. When I sliced the peppers, a vapor wave of pungent heat wafted up and engulfed me. I even recoiled somewhat, because the skin around my nose suddenly tingled. The peppers were richly pigmented inside and out—zesty, orange and bright—and my knife left bold fiery streaks on the cutting board.

On the day I sieved the vodka and filtered it through a fine mesh cloth, nothing about the spent slices or seeds said “habanero” any longer. Three weeks in a cool dark place allowed Scoville Units to transfer massively to the vodka. A 40% alcohol content

had performed a Total Takedown on the habaneros. The exchange between the two had been supreme. When I flew back from Moscow last month, this liter of Belaya Berezka was crystalline and clear. It had now acquired a striking amber glow but remained as transparent as glass.

I stood the bottle in the freezer all afternoon and then later that evening downed a shot “in one,” as my Muscovite komradski might say. Cold and spicy at the same time, this vodka would torch a Bloody Mary to perfection. I mixed another shot into an icy glass of ginger beer, twisted a splash of fresh lime and sipped the concoction, toasting only myself.

Molotov Mule anyone?

Hello!

Having flown to Russia every six months for the past five years, I had spent long hours tempted by luxury items in the Duty Free shops at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, sometimes browsing the liquor shelves at 7 a.m., which was actually midnight in New York.

Midnight in New York was still a respectable tippling hour.

For those who had just travelled 6000 miles at an altitude of 35,000 feet, the practicalities of 7 a.m. in Moscow would not come crashing down for several days. Over many jet lagged years I had discovered that until circadian rhythms had reset it was perfectly fine when transiting through Sheremetyevo at 7 a.m. to act like it was still midnight in New York. Standing before sparkling shelves of grain alcohol, somewhat mesmerized at that hour, was okay. Any traveler under those circumstances was equally capable of making good decisions as well as bad ones.

I had been that traveler.

I had made those decisions.

One consequence: I now had vodka for life.

A lifetime supply was a good thing. Vodka, one of Russia’s most stable of commodity items, held its value well even when the ruble cratered. Through tough times citizens sometimes exchanged it as a form of currency until cash-money strengthened. My komradski in Moscow had once explained this to me, “The person who has the vodka has the power.”

Every time I opened my liquor cabinet I saw how powerful I actually was. The proof was standing right there. Hand-crafted from boutique grain combos and

enhanced in innovative ways with birch sap, Russian vodkas were often the odds-on favorites in any world competition. They over-dominated in every class, just as Russian figure skaters did in the Olympics. There was the Bronze category, the Silver and of course the Gold—but then there was Russian: untouchable, elite, a superlative all its own. Redolent of freshly scythed wheat, Russian brands defined the canon.

Legend of Kremlin, Zyr Black and the Green Mark—award winning organic biologique vodkas were now part of my power house collection alongside artisanal brands not available in the U.S. I had Grelotchka, whose bottle came wrapped in a mitten, and Tsarsky Bodka with the likeness of Peter the Great on the carafe's frosted glass. The tsar, in noble profile, exemplified this particular vodka's royal history. Inside its bottle, flecks of 24 karat gold twirled like glitter in the clear liquid.

As much as vodka could trace its lineage to the Romanov Dynasty, it also could boast of a formidable pedigree in Russian science. No less a luminary than Dmitri Mendeleev, the hallowed creator of Chemistry's periodic Table of Elements, had studied ethanol hydrate formation and distillation—and then he forged his epic recipe. The brand Russky Standardt followed Mendeleev's work to a 't'. Under Tsar Nicholas II it became *the* global standard for vodka.

Pyotr Smirnov distilled his own competing recipe around that time and grabbed pre-revolutionary market share. He sparked an international thirst for so-called White Whiskey, described as having "No Taste, No Smell." The makers of White Whiskey were also white Russians, however. After October 1917 they had to flee the country. Today's Smirnoff was the proverbial ex-pat, available everywhere in the U.S. (and note the European spelling of the surname, too.) Of course, Stoli was the Soviet-era relic whose CEOs were now trying to jump-start their brand for the 21st Century by offering Stoli Salted Karamel. The stuff tasted like cotton candy at a carnival.

In my trips to Moscow I had wandered through plenty of neighborhood package stores, not specifically to browse the liquor selection so much as to pick up bottled water for use in my hotel room.

Boda, not bodka.

During my last visit, I felt drawn to those brightly lit shelves, though, the national treasure on full display. It was a Friday night during the Group Phase of the World Cup. Fans were in celebratory mode. Tons of visitors—people from all over the

world—had taken charge of the streets. Moscow was like a giant bar. The police were not cracking down on public drinking.

Feeling a little dazzled, I admired the shiny display of liters, all the varieties of “little water.” (The word “bodka” was the affectionate diminutive of “boda.”) Business was brisk in this aisle. A couple Millennials drew near and began browsing alongside me. Most stores stocked at least two dozen different brands, and this store tonight had that many and more. The State still regulated the vodka industry and also produced several modestly priced types of its own, including one named for the Russian president.

I studied a bottle of Putinka, “little Putin,” its label decorated with stickers commemorating the numerous trophies it had won. My komradski once said to me, “If you slam 5 shots of Putinka, you can hear tanks rumbling into Crimea.” Bedecked with so many awards, the bottle itself looked like a Soviet war hero whose chest was full of medals.

Since the end of the CCCP a free market competed against the state brands, too. Russky Standardt, for instance, was privately held and employed 12,000 workers. The company not only distilled and distributed vodka but also boasted a diversified portfolio in manufacturing, banking and insurance. Even if the government was not selling you an actual bottle of vodka, it was nonetheless taking a cut from whatever brand you had just purchased. The Ministry of Finance controlled the excise tax on vodka, set at 200 rubles per liter (\$3.50 U.S.) whether you bought an ultra-smooth brand for 4000 rubles or an unpretentious one for 400. An investment in any given bottle, no matter how extravagant or modest, was an investment in Russia.

The one who has the vodka has the power.

Futbol hooligans bustled through the liquor aisle, selected a liter or two from the shelf and then headed back out to the streets. If there were places on earth where it was more fun to be drunk, Moscow during the World Cup was surely one of them.

A guy standing beside me picked up a bottle of Zver, a vodka from the Ladoga Group near Saint Petersburg, privately owned. It came packaged not in glass but in aluminum. The bottle had an ergonomic technical profile. Thoughts of survivalist gear came to mind or military grade equipment. The word “Zver” meant “Beast,” so a rampant, hard-charging sense of unrestrained wildness got represented on its label. The more the imagery could evoke the gaping jaws of a wolf or bear, with gleaming

fangs designed for ripping flesh, the better. An informative panel on the back described triple filtration through Zeta Carbon. Any evening that combined an 80-proof premium vodka with Zeta Carbon in the guise of a beast promised to be memorable.

Baikal Ice, marketed in sapphire-colored glass and festooned with a platinum label, incorporated the 9-5-3 formula, according to its logo. Intrigued, I turned the bottle and found an explanation: 9 filtrations-5 distillations-3 taste-testings. Sometimes producers used quartz for filtration, sometimes charcoal from staid Taiga forest, often sand and exotically even diamonds. The intent was to suggest the most elegant sense of purity possible.

Vodka imagery was all about conferring status. The packaging idealized something about the target consumer, selling a sense of self as well as identity. It struck me that gazing upon the gallery of labels was like a pre-intoxication intoxication, another way to participate in vodka. Before you had tasted a single drop or even untwisted the cap, it was possible to feel a little tipsy.

Kremlin towers, malachite chess pieces, a shimmering Siberian lake, the tsar's jewel-encrusted crown—how did you want your evening to unfold? On Friday, you could be the romantic, sipping *Старья Москва*, Holy Moscow, whose label depicted a stylized cathedral with glowing onion domes. On Saturday, you could swear allegiance to *Архангелы*, Archangelsk, and the homespun peasant jugs emblazoned on its liter. Vodka was an invitation to adopt a variety of styles and moods. The packaging was like jewelry for the thirsty—booze bling, in essence.

I gripped the liter of Baikal Ice, judging its heft. The solidity inspired confidence. An ordinary person with 300 rubles to spend (\$5 US) could walk into a store like this on any street corner in Moscow and feel how close at hand opulence actually was. The weight of a bottle announced it.

More footballers, more commerce, more celebrations. Unlike most customers that night I left the store with only my *boda*. Walking back to the hotel, I was probably the most sober person on the street. For me, a vodka purchase could wait until I was at the airport, heading toward my scheduled flight back to the U.S., ticket in hand and ready to let the Duty Free Shops tempt me. Evading a duty or tax was not my motivation, of course, just the proximity of easy shopping to my boarding gate.

A thriving market for tax-free liquor did in fact exist in Russia, however—and not just at international ports of call. Through a quirky legislative loophole a surrogate

alcohol industry eluded the Finance Ministry's reach altogether. Ethyl alcohol tinctures, liniments and rubs for medical purposes were exempt from taxation, also veterinary preparations—equine hoof softeners and the like. Ditto cosmetics.

Perfume manufacturers, for instance, were compelled to use consumption grade alcohol in their products, not pharmaceutical grade, and *they* were regulated under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. What they made was not a beverage but a “perfume.”

The Ministry of Finance collected duties only on actual bona fide liquor sold as liquor. Everything else was off limits, even if it was consumption grade. As long as the instructions on the label specifically described topical use and nothing more, the manufacturers of the surrogate alcohol were in the clear. No matter that these products all clocked in according to Mendeleev's classic recipe of 40%. Vending machines sold shot-sized containers (50 ml) for 20 rubles. In comparison, a same-sized shot of Beluga in a mid-Moscow bar cost 300 rubles.

Any cash-strapped citizen could do the math.

When the authorities did the math, they discovered that a booming black market grabbed an estimated 20% of annual liquor sales. Surrogate vodka cheated the government out of 50 million rubles per year. Because the need for cheap drink among the impoverished was a given, legislators in the State Duma found themselves stuck between a cask and a keg.

Not even Russia, mighty holy Russia, nuke-wielding missile-cruising Crimea-snatching Russia, could stop people from drinking perfume if they damn well wanted to drink perfume.

A dilapidated parking garage in a back alley part of Moscow had one of those vending machines bolted to its cinder block wall. I had passed it when I was taking a shortcut to Red Square and paused to have a look. The machine resembled what you'd find in a laundromat, with the chrome coin slots that front-loading clothes dryers for commercial use had. I fished two 10-ruble coins from my pocket, placed them upright in the designated slots and shoved them in. A small amber bottle rolled through the chute. Boyarka was the brand—a tincture of hawthorn. The label showed a crimson cluster of ripe hawthorn berries nestled in a clutch of green foliage. Next to the word “lotion” on the front was “75%” in a bold script, flashier than anything else on the bottle.

No pretense of booze bling here, I thought—and at 75% Boyarka was a lot more booze than it could ever be bling.

I turned the bottle and read the instructions on the back: “Rub a cotton pad into the skin of the face for a tonic effect.” Framing these words was the picture of a summery vista that showcased another bright bunch of hawthorn berries. A sidebar panel indicated that the lotion inside the bottle was antimicrobial. Briskly rubbing it on your hands would kill germs. Everything about the stuff spoke to health and freshness, also white blossoms and butterflies.

For a tonic effect, you know.

The figure 75% got repeated two more times on the little bottle in that bold flashy script.

Boyarka was dog whistling to its peeps, and the government could do nothing about it.

It put me in mind of sizzurp, the U.S. analogue to pharmacy alcohol. Purple Drank, it was called in the St. Louis neighborhoods of my youth.

Purple Drank was a sippin’ syrup, a non-energy beverage which would, folks said, “Slow Your Roll.” You stirred 25 times the dosage of Robitussin into grape Fanta and then tossed a grape Jolly Rancher in for extra sweetness. This was mixology for the near inner city—cheap, over the counter and undetectable in drug testing. Also known as Lean, it caused mild euphoric side effects, closed-eye hallucinations, motor skill impairment, drowsiness and dissociation. Robo-tripping, everybody said back in the day. Just as Martinis and Old-Fashioneds required special barware, Purple Drank had a stock method of presentation too. People sipped it from white Styrofoam cups.

Hip Hop artists referenced Drank from time to time in their mixtapes, including Soulja Boy in “Molly on the Lean,” Pimp C in “Pourin’ Up” and Slim Thug in the eponymous “Drank.” These cuts always emphasized tragedy and personal consequence as a result of sippin’. They narrated existential journeys into the perils of cheap gritty thrills, always backed up by trippy beats. In a counter-intuitive way, because of an edgy dynamic unique to Hip Hop culture, these raps ended up glamorizing Drank at the same time that they warned against it.

Sacramento artist Mozzy the Motive started a Kick da Cup challenge on social media, encouraging others to post selfies of how they’d opened a bottle of Robitussin and poured the thick purple syrup onto the ground. Mozzy said he had had to drop the

habit so he could be a better father and artist. “I need my bag,” is what he said, an allusion to success and stability.

Poor Li'l Wayne was still addicted, however. He often appeared onstage at his concerts with a white Styrofoam cup. Everybody who knew what Drank was knew what was in that cup. They knew the color of it. They knew the consistency of it. Li'l Wayne was a millionaire free-styler, living the life. He could afford the good stuff, but he kept reaching for Robitussin. His personal struggles rolled out like an ad campaign for reckless genius.

On the Russian side, Boyarka lacked the cool subculture and panache of Drank. It had zilch in the category of P.R. No Influencers had taken up its cause on Instagram. Boyarka was more edge than edgy. Big vodka brands like Beluga and Kremlin Award possessed elaborate 7-figure promos for media blitzing and marketing. The surrogate vodka industry nonetheless did in fact offer business tips for its own entrepreneurs. “No need to set the vending machine up in a visible location,” the Boyarka website explained. “Patrons will find it within 1-10 days. Everyone else will learn about it through the grapevine.” The website showed owners how to manipulate the dispensing chute so that occasionally two bottles would come rolling out, not one—a la Las Vegas slot machines engineered to pay out Jackpots willy-nilly. This would, the website enthused, create excitement among patrons. Vendors were also encouraged to stock their machines occasionally with 95% proof bottles, which would dispense unpredictably, resulting in more crowd-pleasing bonanzas.

Even with all that happiness, no one would ever hold a 50 ml dose of Boyarka in its little plastic bottle and feel what they'd feel when hefting a substantial glass liter of Baikal Ice—but they would still feel something. Anticipation, plus a sense of calm—knowing that help was on the way—and then after downing it “in one” that characteristic burn in the gullet.

Like Purple Drank, Boyarka's use was inconsistent with its labeling. Like Drank, it was never going to be Top Shelf. There would never be flecks of 24K gold twirling in it like glitter, no matter how powerful your closed-eye hallucinations. Rappers were never going to rhapsodize it.

Even though both beverages came very powerfully from the people—Bottoms Up solutions, quite literally, from the bottom-up—nobody would ever say, “The one who has the Boyarka has the power.” Somebody like Que, however, had already in fact

said, "Might pop Molly, make the time move forward / Might sip lean make the time move slower."