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The World's Best Vodka—According To The Ultimate Spirits Challenge



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Spirits

You can find me at the confluence of food, beverage and travel.

Up until last May, the US government defined vodka as a spirit distilled or treated in such a way “so as to be without distinctive character, aroma, taste or color.” It helped inform an enduring stereotype that everything within the category is more or less the same. But not all vodka is created equal, of course. Anyone who’s had the misfortune of spending a night with a \$10 handle of the liquid knows as much. And anyone who’s had the pleasure of sipping on Boyd & Blair Potato Vodka is fully aware of how much flavor and complexity this category can carry.

The \$40 bottle just nabbed the highest rating for any vodka at this year’s Ultimate Spirits Challenge. In fact, its score of 98 out of a possible 100 was enough to position it as one of the highest rated amongst all categories of liquor at the annual tasting panel. F. Paul Pacult, founder of the event and chairman of judging had this to say about the exemplary liquid: “To convincingly prevail two years running against the world’s finest vodkas is nothing short of historic.”

It’s important to note that USC is a fiercely independent event. Its panel of judges has no brand affiliations and is subject to a double-blind tasting methodology, administered over multiple sessions spread out over two months. So for them to arrive at the same exact vodka two years in a row already goes a long way in dispelling that whole ‘flavorless’ myth.

But what exactly is that flavor that makes Boyd & Blair stand out in the crowd? To find out, I asked Barry Young. He’s the Master Distiller for Pennsylvania Pure Distilleries, who crafts the liquid just outside of Pittsburgh.

“We distill from locally grown Pennsylvania potatoes in a copper pot still using champagne yeast,” he explains. “These three facts all contribute to the unique flavor profile of Boyd & Blair. Potatoes provide starch and sweetness that is the base flavor of the distillate. Most vodkas are made from grain or corn. Champagne yeast draws more of that flavor out of the starch and contributes directly to the sweetness of the flavor rather than using a traditional distiller’s yeast.”

Beyond the ingredients of fermentation, Young finds distinction through elements of distillation. He drives his copper pot still by hand, and in so doing is able to control many factors of flavor that elude larger industrial producers. He dials in the precise time the liquid interacts with the metal, the heat, the pressure.



“I [also] do something that almost no other vodka distiller does,” he says. “I only use the heart of the run. The flavor from the hearts is delicious and super concentrated. The tails smell like a musty dishrag and provide the bite that is experienced when drinking certain vodkas. In an effort to produce more yield, most distillers include some amount of tails. The amount of tails that are added to the final product greatly impact the final flavor profile. I never include any tails in Boyd & Blair, only the hearts.”

He’s left with a soft liquid, with silky texture in the mouth. It holds a subtle sweetness, almost evocative of lime zest—as noted by the judges at USC. To Young, of course, the notion of vodka without flavor is laughable.

“When people say that vodka should be tasteless and odorless I tell them to take a sip of Boyd & Blair at room temperature and experience why it is ranked so high,” he adds. “I do not believe in categorizations or being contained to a class. Plain vodka is just lazy and when a brand spends more on the actual bottle than what is inside the bottle, it brings the entire category down. Boyd & Blair’s bottle is understated for a reason. Boyd & Blair is about what is inside.”

That ‘understated’ bottle retails for \$30. And the distillery isn’t too shabby at making rum, either. Their BLY Rum Silver also took him a top-score at USC, earning Best in Class in the un-aged category; 95 out of 100. Clearly, they’re doing something right in Pittsburgh.