

Collectible 3-D Vodka Bottles

By Cecil Munsey

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Introduction

In 1978, I took a one-year leave of absence from my first career as an educational administrator to buy and learn how to operate a liquor store. As a longtime collector of bottles, it was delightful to have a store with thousands of bottles to display and sell [Figure 1].

One of the first bottles in the store, I more than casually noticed, was a quart of Izmiria vodka from Turkey. I focused on the bottle of vodka [Figure 2] not because it was from Turkey and the vodka

made from sugar beets, but because of its packaging. The bottle label (made from paper) was designed so that it produced a three-dimensional (3-D) effect – *a flat image that gives the effect of depth, width and height*. On the front (obverse) was a die-cut, donut-shaped label and on the back (reverse) a smaller circular label [Figure 3] featuring a likeness of Ada I, queen of Caria, Turkey (320-340). When one looks through the hole in the front label at the obverse label, the engraving of the queen is magnified and has depth – a 3-D effect is achieved. These two 1978 magazine advertisements for Izmiria [Figures 4 and 5] clearly illustrate the bottle and the see-through, 3-D label.

While Izmiria Vodka may have had the first bottle of vodka to feature a 3-D label, it was not the last as will be shown later when top-of-the-line, see-through vodka bottles are shown and discussed. (A difference to note up front is that the 3-D bottles to be discussed and illustrated in this article **do not** have paper labels. Better than that, they are more permanently labeled by the ACL (Applied Color Label) method where the art/lettering are screened onto the bottle and baked into the glass. (Sometimes the resulting labels are erroneously called “Painted Labels” by bottle collectors.)

How to make vodka

Vodka is an easy spirit to make. The end result simply comes down to a matter of taste and government regulations. In the U.S., vodka is classified by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms as: “*neutral spirits, so distilled, or so treated after distillation with charcoal or other materials, as to be without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color.*” This makes vodka distillation simple in the U.S. because the only variety allowed for is alcohol content.

There are a number of products from which vodka can be made. The most popular vodka is from grains, like rye, wheat and, corn. Other options include using potatoes, beets (e.g. Izmiria) or molasses. The selected ingredient is mixed with water then heated to create a mixture called the wort. The wort is drained and the ensuing liquid becomes the ferment for vodka.

Following that fermentation process, the liquid is put into a still and run once while boiling, which makes the vapor return to the stock of liquid after condensing. The ingredient is run at least twice through a pot still – four times for premium vodka.

Finally, the spirit is cut (diluted with water). Since the spirit is distilled at a high proof (usually around 190 proof, or 95% alcohol) it needs to be cut to preferred taste. Most vodka is cut to 80 proof, or 40% alcohol.

Vodka history

The Russians and Poles have been arguing seemingly forever over who produced and drank the first vodka. No matter, most agree that it originated somewhere in northern/eastern Europe around 1400 A.D. and has, since then, spread its popularity around the globe. The word vodka, or more literally, “water” (derived from the word voda), was most conveniently discovered in the colder regions of Europe and Asia when burgeoning distillers



Figure 1



2



Figure 4



3

realized that the wine they were fermenting became more potent after freezing through the cold winter temperatures. With advanced distilling techniques brought over from the west in the 1400s and 1500s, the Slavic peoples were able to refine their vodka and create top-quality alcoholic drinks that would soon become the trademarks of their countries.

The invention of vodka, as we know it today, is connected with the name of the famous Russian chemist D. I. Mendeleev [Figure 6]. The scientist had been searching for the ideal volume and weight ratio of alcohol and water for a year and a half and, after solving the problem, published his findings in his doctoral dissertation: "*On Combining Alcohol and Water.*" Mendeleev's conclusions were appreciated and successfully applied in alcoholometry and vodka production. In 1894-1896 the national standard for vodka was established and the state monopoly on vodka in Russia was created. The name "vodka" was officially and formally recognized.



Figure 6

In the U.S., vodka did not become popular until the 1940s. It was introduced into the American market in the late 1800s and early 1900s when importers realized they could target Eastern European immigrants with a nostalgic drink. Also, many Russian distillers, who lost their livelihood when the Bolsheviks confiscated all private distilleries after the Revolution of 1919, escaped to the U.S. and brought with them their vodka trade secrets and dreams to start again. Still, vodka did not find a prominent place on the stage of alcohol for Americans until the mid-twentieth century.

Once alcohol rejoined the living with the repeal of the Prohibition Act in 1933, the Russian Vladimir Smirnov (changed to Smirnoff) sold the Smirnoff Company to Rudolph Kunnett who in 1939 sold it to the Hublein Company. Several attempts were made at breaking vodka into the American market, but it was not successful until the company began to market it as a cocktail base. This proved to be a great strategy and vodka was on its way to make its mark on the American drinking culture. With its great versatility as a drink mixer it became a favorite at parties and social

gatherings.

While popular, vodka did not see a great boom in popularity until the 1960s and 1970s when many more brands were launched in the U.S. and U.K. The timing coincided with the Cultural Revolution in these countries – the "Swinging 60s." A more affluent younger generation, a generally more relaxed lifestyle and the emphasis on adventure and experimentation, led to its huge and ever rising popularity. Currently the global vodka market is \$12 billion and still growing.

Today one can see many vodka varieties at the liquor stores. Among them are the high-end, top-of-the-line (premium) unflavored and flavored vodkas that have come on the market in the last few years in their beautifully designed bottles. It is in fact the beautiful bottles designed to project the illusion of three-dimensionality (3-D) that are the focus of this article. Besides their beauty and uniqueness, 3-D vodka bottles are an easy projection as the future of a segment of bottle collecting.

SUPER-PREMIUM or TOP-OF-THE-LINE-VODKAS

Grey Goose Vodka 3-D bottle (SIDNEY FRANK 1919-2006)

The man behind Grey Goose vodka understood that Americans want to pay more – "*You just have to give them a good story.*" The man who really did say that was Sidney Frank [Figure 7].



Figure 7

According the New York Magazine the

story goes like this:

"At 5:20 on a Sunday morning in the summer of 1996, Sidney Frank—liquor baron extraordinaire, dapper elderly gent, CEO of the Sidney Frank Importing Co.—picked up his phone in a fit of inspiration. He dialed up his No. 2 executive, who listened in a groggy daze as Frank proclaimed, 'I figured out the name! It's Grey Goose!'"

And so was born one of the most astonishing brands in the history of distilled spirits. Grey Goose vodka, created from thin air that summer morning, had as yet no distillery, no bottle, and – perhaps the most pressing order of business – no vodka. Yet almost exactly eight years after Frank gave name to this nonexistent liquor, Grey Goose vodka was sold to Bacardi for more than \$2 billion.

After the Grey Goose sale, everyone at Sidney Frank Importing Co. got a hefty bonus. Longtime secretaries, for example, were handed checks for more than \$100,000 apiece. Grey Goose was a spectacular success.

How did Grey Goose become such a valuable property? To try to provide an answer for that question one has to realize that the premium vodka in 1996, when Grey Goose came to market, was a brand called "Absolut" [Figure 8] that sold for (amazing-at-the-time) \$15 to \$17 a bottle.



Fig. 8

A humble old label ices its rivals in a taste test! According to one writer, Eric Asimov: "*It was not exactly a victory for the underdog, but chalk it up as a triumph of the unexpected.*" He was referring to a blind tasting of a range of the new high-end unflavored premium vodkas that have come on the market in recent years and a comparison of them with a selection of established super-premium brands. To broaden the comparison (or more likely as a bit of mischief) the tasting coordinator added to the blind tasting a bottle of that humble old brand Smirnoff (the single best-selling unflavored vodka in the U.S.) a definite step down in status, marketing and bottle design. After the 21 vodkas were sipped and the results compiled, Smirnoff was the hands-down favorite.

Shocking? Perhaps. Delving into to the world of vodkas reveals a spirit unlike almost any other. Again, according to Asimov, "*Vodka is measured by its purity, by an almost Platonic neutrality that makes tasting it more akin to tasting bottled waters or snowflakes.*"

[In other words, since vodka is almost pure alcohol (grain-neutral spirit) cut with water, the different brands are all very much alike which explains why Smirnoff won the tasting mentioned above. The tasting coordinator made the point.]

[History: Absolut vodka was invented in Sweden in 1879 and called, “Absolut Rent Branvin” – (Absolute Pure Vodka). A hundred years later, in 1979, it was first imported to the US. Selecting a bottle for the vodka happened as advertising man, Gunnar Broman, was looking through an antique shop window in Stockholm’s “Old Town” when he saw an old Swedish medicine bottle, a cultural icon that was unchanged for more than a hundred years. The bottle was elegant, different, simple, and very Swedish. In the 16th and 17th centuries vodka had been sold in pharmacies as medicine to cure everything from colic to the plague.

The choice of an old medicine bottle was a stroke of genius. Several Swedish designers were given the job of helping further develop the bottle. It had been decided that there should be no label to hide the crystal clear contents. After much discussion and several prototypes the team came to the conclusion that some kind of colored lettering was required. Blue was decided upon as the most visible and attractive color. The lettering was applied to the bottle using the Applied Color Labeling process. While not a three dimensional bottle, it is considered by Swedish customers as quite beautiful.

The Swedish government, incidentally, recently decided that after 90 years in state hands, Absolut vodka will be offered up for sale for an estimated \$5.7 billion.]

It would seem quite normal that to steal Absolut’s market share, the new Grey Goose vodka would have to undercut the price of Absolut. Instead Sidney Frank decided to price his vodka extravagantly higher than Absolut, at wildly more profitable margins. That was Sidney Frank’s great insight.

With both vodkas vying to be the premium brand (with Absolut mostly winning) Frank sidestepped the fray altogether and charged an unheard-of \$30 a bottle. The markup amount was pure profit. He was the first person to see that there was a super premium category above Absolut, if you had that good product and a great story to go along with it. (The old adage about selling the sizzle instead of the steak is apropos here.)

In the Grey Goose story, since image was of paramount concern, the name came first. Frank recalled he’d once sold a Liebfraumilch named Grey Goose back in the 1970s. (It may have been that he liked the name because he already owned the worldwide rights to it.)

Next Frank sent a couple of his lieutenants to France to buy vodka. They met with cognac distillers, whose business had slowed. The stills were switched to vodka, and at last Frank had an actual product.

At a later time, when quizzed about his decision to buy vodka from France when it most often came from Russia and Scandinavia, he explained that people are always looking for something new and if you’re going to charge twice as much, you need to give a reason (story).

Frank further reasoned that Grey Goose, the brand, was about quality. So Grey

Goose’s story hinged on the following key points:

- It comes from France, where all the best luxury products come from.
- It’s not another rough-hewn Russian vodka – it’s a masterpiece crafted by French vodka artisans.
- It uses water from pristine French springs, filtered through Champagne limestone.
- It has a distinctive, carefully designed bottle, with smoked glass and a silhouette of flying geese in three-dimension (3-D) as one looks through the vodka to the reverse of the container [Figure 9].
- It is shipped in wood crates, like a fine wine, not in cardboard boxes.
- And the most important piece of the story – the twist that brings it all together: Grey Goose cost way more than other vodkas. “So it must be the best.”

So it was, as the Influencers peddled the Grey Goose tale far and wide and people began to call for it in bars, a great thing happened – the characters of the TV program, *Sex and the City* pointedly all called for Grey Goose Cosmos. In the battle for vodka supremacy, that was the atom bomb. The war was over for the time being and Grey Goose had won.

These days, every spirits marketer is diving headfirst into super-premium products. AND as part of every story offering the reasons to select their products – distinctive, carefully designed bottles [Figure 10] are one of the most important components.

(Bottle collectors of the future will



Figure 10

certainly envy those who can own today’s novelty 3-D bottles merely by taking a shopping trip to wherever fine liquor is sold instead of buying them at auction or otherwise on the collectors’ market.)

Vincent Van Gogh vodka 3-D bottles

It takes five countries a period of three months to produce a bottle used to contain Vincent Van Gogh Vodka. The 3-D-labeled bottle is made in Germany, etched in France, silk screened (Applied Color Labeled) in Belgium and filled in Holland. The corks are from Portugal. The two gold bands and the gold palette on the bottle are made of 18 karat gold. By slowly rotating the bottle, the art gallery scene changes from one of the five paintings to the next, while each painting is enlarged by the magnifying effect of the bottle and the vodka [Figure 11]. The bottles are collectible and each has five 3-D images in the back. The vodka also comes in 16 flavors that include Citrus, Orange



Fig. 9



Fig. 11



Figure 12

Raspberry, Vanilla, Dutch Chocolate, and Wild Apple. Four of the bottles are pictured as **Figure 12**.

Van Gogh vodka is made in Holland, in the city of Schiedam, where distilleries have been part of daily life since the middle 1600s. According to the local Chamber of Commerce, *"The current distillery has been rebuilt under the supervision of the Holland Monument Society, including the windmill in front along the canal and the cobblestone streets."*

Grain alcohol, made mainly from wheat and a little corn and barley, is distilled twice in column stills and then a third time in a traditional pot still at 194 proof to remove the congeners (bad tasting by-products). Purified water (not distilled) is used. The multiple distillation is done at 176 degrees Fahrenheit to create a 120 proof alcohol, which is reduced to 80 proof. (*"The Master Distiller tastes each batch of vodka, and only with his signature can it be bottled. When he is on vacation, no vodka is produced."*)

Vincent Van Gogh Vodka was first released in January 2000.

Vincent Van Gogh, impressionist artist (1853-1890)

Van Gogh's works are perhaps better known generally than those of any other Impressionist painter. His brief, turbulent, life is thought to epitomize the mad genius legend. During his lifetime he mounted two very small exhibitions and two larger ones. Only one of his paintings was sold while he lived. The great majority of the works by which he is remembered were produced in 29 months of frenzied activity, intermittent bouts with epileptic seizures, and profound despair that finally ended in suicide.

It was only ten years before his death in 1890 that he decided to be a painter. In 1888, in ill health, he rented a house at Arles, where fellow painter Paul Gauguin joined him. The brief period they lived and worked together was filled with tension. It was during that period, as most of the world knows, he mutilated his left ear. The women he fell in love with rejected his difficult, contradictory personality, and his few friendships usually ended in bitter arguments.

While confined to the asylum at Saint-Remy in 1889 Van Gogh painted one of his most famous paintings, *Starry Night* [**Figure 13**]. The painting was the inspiration for Don McLean's popular



Figure 13

contemporary song "Vincent" which is also known by its opening words, "Starry, Starry Night."

Chopin vodka 3-D bottles

Chopin is a single ingredient, 80-proof vodka, distilled four times from organic potatoes grown in the Polish region of Podlasie, a historical region in the eastern part of Poland.

"Siedlce-based P o d l a s k a Wytownia Wodek Polmos" company of Poland distills it. It was first introduced to North America in 1997. It comes in two different 3-D see-thru bottles [**Figures 14 and 15**]. The

manufacturer maintains it is the first and only luxury potato vodka in the world.

Seven pounds of potatoes are used to make each bottle of Chopin. The production is made in small batches and under rigorous quality control, to ensure maximum quality. The manufacturer claims that: *"If a taste sampling shows even a small hint of imbalance, the whole batch is destroyed."*

Frederick Chopin, Polish Romantic composer (1810-1849)

The vodka is named after the famous Polish romantic composer Frederic Chopin. **Figure 16** features the only known photograph of the great musician. He was the son of a French émigré (a schoolteacher working in Poland) and a cultured Polish mother. He grew up in



Figures 14 and 15

Warsaw where he studied music. In 1826, at age 16, he entered a music conservatory and soon after, performed his compositions in local salons.

Public and critical acclaim increased during the years 1829-30 when he gave concerts in Vienna and Warsaw until he moved to Paris in 1831. There with practical help from such luminaries as Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt and others, he quickly established himself as a private teacher and salon performer. His legendary artist's status was enhanced by frail health (he had tuberculosis). Of his several romantic affairs, the most talked about was that with novelist George Sand (feminist Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, later Baroness Dudevant). A break in relations with Sand was followed by a rapid deterioration in his health and a long visit to Britain. Nearly 3,000 people attended his funeral at the Madeleine cathedral in Paris.

Belvedere vodka 3-D bottles

Belvedere Vodka is made by the firm Polmos in Zyrardow, Poland from Dankowskie Gold Rye and water purified by a reverse osmosis process. It is distilled four times, *"The optimum number for achieving its unique flavor profile – three distillations leave minor imperfections, five distillations strip away delicious notes."*

The word Belvedere means "beautiful to see." The 3-D bottle has a satiny finish and a window on the front through which the illustration on the back of the bottle can be seen magnified by the vodka. The 3-D bottle is designed to feature Belvedere, the Presidential Palace, with snow and trees surrounding it [**Figure 17**]. (The palace is



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 16

former residence of Poland's Marshal Joseph Pilsudski and more recently, the first residence of Lech Walesa (the labor leader who was elected president) before he moved to the Namiestnikowski Palace to complete his one and only term as Poland's president (1990-1995). Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 for co-founding Solidarity, the Soviet Bloc's first independent trade union.

Belvedere also produces flavored vodkas in 3-D bottles [Figure 18]. Their orange flavored vodka is "Pomaranca" and "Cyrus" is their lemon-lime flavored vodka.

Shakespeare vodka 3-D bottle

Another of the premium vodkas currently on the market in a 3-D bottle is Shakespeare [Figure 19]. The vodka is made in Poland from Dankowskie Gold Rye. It is distilled four times and cut with water purified by a reverse osmosis process.

Looking through the frosted and clear glass bottle reveals a 3-D portrait, in ACL, of William Shakespeare seated with his elbow leaning on a table.



Fig. 19

William Shakespeare, English poet & playwright (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare [Figure 20] was an English poet and playwright widely regarded as the greatest writer of the English language and the world's preeminent dramatist. He wrote 38 plays and 154



Figure 20

sonnets, as well as a variety of other poems. Shakespeare's works have been translated into every major living language and his plays are continually performed around the world. In addition, he is the most quoted writer in the literature and history of the English-speaking world.

Krol vodka 3-D bottle

Krol is super-premium vodka. It is packaged in a 3-D clear and satiny



Figure 22

finish bottle [Figure 21]. It has a window on the front through which the ACL illustration of (King) Krol II (1076-1079) of Poland can be seen magnified by the vodka [Figure 22].

AFTERWORD

The reader should be aware that 3-D bottles are not exclusive with just vodka containers. In the current distilled-spirits market, vodka dominates with 26.5 percent share; rum has 13 percent; gin 7 percent; and tequila's share is 5.1 percent. Each of these segments of the market has their own 3-D bottles.

Other categories of distilled spirits (40.4 percent of the market) such as whiskey, cognac, and the other "brown" goods also sometimes use 3-D bottles.

Another point of interest for collectors is the Russian Vodka Museum in Moscow [Figure 23]. It was opened in 2006 and currently has more than 50,000 bottles of the national drink on display. It showcases many special versions of the drink, including some in bottles produced more than two centuries ago.



Figure 23

The museum also features a collector's edition bottle made to commemorate those

who died on the famous K-19 Russian nuclear submarine in July 1961.

The museum also has a hall dedicated to how Russians dealt with the difficult years of the USSR with hard drinking.

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Fig. 21