



First everyone drank liebfraumilch until they discovered a rich tapestry of white wines. The same was true of mineral water when Perrier was regarded as generic. Now quality vodka houses want to educate the consumer that different vodkas also have different qualities and not just price differentials.

Stewart Shepey, managing director of Shackleford Sales, in Guildford, Surrey, the international office of HC Asmusen, which produces Ultraa, Great Tzar and Alexandre Nevski, is frustrated the British have not yet grasped these differences.

"Most domestic vodka in the UK is made from molasses. In the US when you say grain vodka it means something," he says.

The plethora of flavoured vodkas and pre-packed drinks using a vodka base is not helping the cause of educating the public about the finer aspects of vodka. "Until you get people to taste neat they will not tell the difference between them," says Shepey.

James Garrett, brand manager, at JR Phillips, the Finlandia distributor, which has just had its cranberry variant listed in Waitrose, says: "Vodka is seen as largely generic and this makes it difficult for better brands to command a price premium."

Flavoured vodka and vodka as a base for adult alcoholic "soft" drinks looks like doing for vodka – and soft drinks – what Mars ice-cream did for the adult hand-held ice-cream sector.

New product development is frenetic. Shackleford Sales is looking at the possibility of pre-mixed versions of its brands as are most companies in this market. "Soft spirits" are popular in Germany – made with vodka equivalent Korn mixed with flavours at 10% to 25% ABV. So are Asmusen's pulp products – natural fruit with spirit with the fruit pulp left in the mixture.

Barber Kingsland, which launched the V6 range of alcoholic fruit drinks made with vodka last autumn in cherry, mango and lemon at around 89p for 275ml, hopes to get supermarket listings shortly. It has plans for other products.

MDT Wines and Spirits, which broke into the trade last year with Raw Spirit, is launching a 50% ABV Red Label, which will go with its 37.5% ABV Blue Label in 500ml twin packs in Allders duty-free outlets shortly. It is also launching 275ml pre-mixes in four variants in the aluminium packaged Raw Spirit family.

There is another development in the offing but Lesley Gillespie, UK sales and marketing manager, is keeping it under wraps. "We are doing something that is going to be revolutionary. It is a completely new concept," she says.

Marblehead Brand Development, which distributes Wyborowa Polish vodka (40% ABV) and the "luxury premium" Krolewska (42% ABV), plans to launch Wyborowa in flavours towards the end of the year in pepper, made with peppercorn rather than chillies, citrus, pineapple and

peach styles.

Absolut, the Swedish vodka, will promote the flavours theme in June by combining with Tesco in a promotion called Absolut Seabreeze, which gives Absolut purchasers a free litre of grapefruit and a free litre of cranberry to mix themselves.

IDV has just launched 50ml Blue flavourings sufficient for flavouring two 700ml bottles or one 1.5-litre bottle of Smirnoff Blue in the on-trade. Brand manager Dave Smith doubts they will be launched in that format in the off-trade and it is more likely to look to pre-flavoured products.

IDV, which has given the sector a sharp kick with Smirnoff Mule, containing one-and-a-half shots of vodka with lime and ginger beer, expects a lot of competition to the brand but, Smith says: "We do not have plans for a son or sister, aunt or nephew of Mule."

Garrett says: "It is only a matter of time before the innovation of some on-trade bars finds its way into the take-home environment."

But he adds that merchandising in the take-home market has yet to reflect what is happening in the on-trade where toffee-, caramel- and chocolate-flavoured vodkas sold well through winter.

In the on-trade bartenders have taken to melting Mars bars in vodka, something that has not escaped the attention of Mars Confectionery trade relations manager Lionel Cashin.

There were apparently erroneous reports recently that Smirnoff had launched a Mars flavoured vodka. But Cashin says: "We have no plans to make vodka our latest brand extension." ♦



Absolut: promoting flavours in June

Wacky vodkas!

Vodka really is the flavour of the month, particularly if the flavour is lemon, cranberry, cherry, mango, pineapple, peach or even chilli. Andrew Don investigates where this trendy drink will go next.



V6: hopes for supermarket listings