

Exposé

Vodka, Art and Fashion

A Documentary by Irene Langemann

When Mikhail Gorbachev launched his anti-alcohol campaign in the former Soviet Union in 1986, Dr. Eugene Gabovitch, a mathematician living in Karlsruhe, West Germany, decided "to save vodka for the history of civilisation". What started as a joke soon became a passion. His vodka collection began with a dozen bottles from the USSR and Poland. A few years later, the vodka bottles displaced the books from his bookshelves. In 1996, Dr. Gabovitch was entered in the Guinness Book of Records for the largest vodka collection in the world. Today, 3,000 full bottles of vodka from most of the countries of Europe, from Asia, Australia, and North and South America fill the shelves of his garret studio and the many boxes throughout his house. He is especially proud of the superb brands from his former home of Estonia. His greatest wish is to create a vodka museum. As a vodka connoisseur, Eugene Gabovitch, who actually much prefers red wine to the "little water", could form a sort of connecting element in the film, leading to the various vodka stories, anecdotes, and brands.

For example, there is Starka Vodka, which enjoys cult status in Poland. It is not entirely a matter of course to classify it in the vodka family. It is true that it is distilled grain spirits, but is then aged in casks for at least ten years. In this respect, as well as by its dark golden hue, it is more like a whiskey. Starka dates back to the sixteenth century. At that time, it was a custom among the country aristocracy, when a girl was born, to pour vodka into an old wine barrel, and let it age until the daughter's wedding. The best Starka is supposed to be made in Poznan, the centre of the Polish vodka industry. Other top brands roll off the production line here as well: Wyborowa, Zytia, and Zubrówka, praised by connoisseurs for their many undertones. Oily, concentrated, of delicate sweetness, woody or gentle on the palate, with a light scent of rye, with a bitter note, with an aroma of freshly-mown grass—one could continue these descriptions endlessly. For Poland is the only country that can challenge Russia's claim to be the homeland of vodka. It is estimated that about 1,000 different brands of vodka compete in Poland today.

Gorbatschow [German transliteration of Gorbachev] vodka is by far the most popular vodka in Germany. The distillery owner Gorbachev (not related to Mikhail Gorbachev) fled with his family from St. Petersburg to Berlin in 1917. Since many Russian émigrés missed "the spirit of their homeland", he decided to re-establish the firm in Berlin. He used the closely guarded special recipes to produce especially clear and pure vodka. Soon, the Berliners acquired the taste, and after the Second World War, all of West Germany. The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev opened marketing opportunities for this vodka which its competitors can only dream of. It was introduced onto the international market in 1987 under the slogan "the vodka of friendship". Today, Gorbatschow Vodka belongs to the champagne makers Henkel & Söhnlein. However, the distillery is still located in Berlin.

The beginnings of the vodka craze date to the Fifties, when the Smirnoff fever broke out, elevating Smirnoff Vodka to the leading Western brand of vodka. With its high-quality 'little water', the Pyotr Smirnov distillery, founded in 1860 in St. Petersburg, was very successful until the Russian Revolution. After the family fled from the Bolsheviks, the son Vladimir founded the firm of Smirnoff in Paris, but did not have any great success in marketing it. After some lean years, he sold the Smirnoff brand to the Heublein company of the United States in 1939. The new owner, John F. Martin, had the brilliant idea of marketing vodka as the base for mixed drinks. The accent was placed on purity and elegance, in contrast to the masculine image of scotch or gin. Martin's concept of mixing vodka with orange juice (the "Screwdriver") or ginger ale was a huge success. In the Fifties, he developed the "Moscow Mule" cocktail, which became a hit, not least through a cunning advertising strategy. One anecdote is still told: John F. Martin used to take a Polaroid camera when making the rounds of the bars. He always photographed the same motif twice: the barkeeper mixing a Moscow Mule; one copy he gave to the barman, and the other he took with him to the next bar to demonstrate to the barman there what everybody was drinking now. Even Woody Allen was featured in an advertisement for the Moscow Mule.

Thanks to James Bond, Smirnoff became world famous. For Agent 007 mixes his legendary vodka martini with Smirnoff vodka. However, in the latest Bond movie "Die Another Day" it was replaced by Finlandia vodka. The Heublein liquor corporation gives as its reason for abandoning the product placement in the spy thrillers that they want to concentrate on the consumers in the especially sociable age group from 21 to 29. Smirnoff Vodka is marketed in 150 countries today.

The advertising campaigns for ABSOLUT Vodka in the Eighties changed attitudes towards vodka in the West radically. Suddenly, an air of chic and class surrounded it. ABSOLUT vodka, the world's third-largest brand of spirits, has its roots in fifteenth-century Sweden. Since 1879, it has been named ABSOLUT Vodka. But only in 1979 was the first bottle produced for export. The main customers are the U.S.A. and Canada. It continues to be bottled in Åhus in southern Sweden.

"I like this bottle, I like to take hold of it, I would like to do something with it," Andy Warhol said when he was invited in 1985 to contribute to its artistic marketing with his own interpretation of the brand, in the ABSOLUT ART campaign. He took up his brush, and painted the ABSOLUT bottle in black on a yellow background. With this colourful representation of the famous bottle, the link between ABSOLUT and the art world began. Since then, more than 500 artists, designers, and photographers throughout the world have created artworks for the company's art collection.

The well-known Cologne artist Rosemarie Trockel is also participating in the successful series of recent years, ABSOLUT ORIGINALS. In this year's series, ABSOLUT GENERATIONS, she presents two of her master-class students. Together with Bettina Pousttchi, and Thea Djordjadze from Georgia, she will prepare a six-part video projection. The designs will be published in Time magazine in March, and realized in Cologne in May. In June, this work of art will be exhibited at the Biennale in Venice.

The original works of the various series are gathered in the Absolut Art Collection in New York and Paris. But the exhibits are also displayed on loan in various museums. For the artists involved, this kind of collaboration offers not only financial support, but also an opportunity to exhibit and market their works to a broader public. Until now, the ABSOLUT series have concentrated on art and fashion. Last year, they made their first attempt to enter the music field, with the singer Nina Hagen. "Celebrating the spirit of a new era in Europe, and tearing down the barriers between art and the public" — that is what all the ABSOLUT Vodka campaigns are about.

On the realization:

The film begins with a humorous collage of images from the largest collection of vodka in the world, in Karlsruhe. Eugene Gabovitch tells about the beginnings of his passion, which originated in a save-vodka joke, "Gabi versus Gorbi". With vodka tasting, the expert leads us to some Polish brands.

Vodka bottles rattling along the production lines of the distilleries in Poznan. A proud manufacturer praises the qualities of Polish vodka. He has no doubts—the homeland of vodka is Poland, of course! At a wedding in provincial Poland, we experience close up people's drinking habits, hear a few vodka anecdotes, and follow the wedding guests in the joyous excitement of the celebration.

While in Eastern Europe, vodka is drunk straight, in the West it is considered as neutral alcohol for mixing with fruit juices, and as a basis for cocktails. In a discotheque, we observe young people dancing, drinking, and relaxing, and talk to them and the barkeepers about drinking preferences and fashionable drinks, such as Gorbatschov or Smirnoff. The past history of the two brands is outlined briefly, so as to illustrate vodka's triumphant progress in the West better. The pictures of the Gorbatschov distillery in Berlin could be used to discuss the quality and special features of production of Gorbatschov. When presenting Smirnoff, a James Bond episode would be very desirable, of course.

As a counterpoint, a critical consideration of the increasing consumption of alcohol—by young people in particular—must be included. The starting point could be such disco offers as 'spray drinks with fig vodka'. An expert will point out the dangers of young people's behaviour with respect to alcohol.

Finally, Eugene Gabovitch will lead over to ABSOLUT Vodka. With this year's ART project Absolut Generations, we have a good opportunity to present the firm's involvement. We will film the young artists and Rosemarie Trockel during the creating of their joint work of art in Cologne. The shots during the Biennale in Venice and the interviews with the artists offer a wonderful opportunity to speak about new career prospects and opportunities on the art market. ABSOLUT Vodka has recorded all the ART campaigns on Beta. These recordings could also become part of our film.

The film is intended to have a dynamic visual language, working with tilted perspectives, rhythmic cuts, and music. In an entertaining form, this "vodka reel" will tell of the pleasures and risks associated with the world's favourite hard liquor.

Length: 30 min.