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George Kyrntatas, chef/owner of SweetWater Bar and Grill in Cinnaminson, pours a SweetWater Love Elixir at the bar.

The clear choice

Vodka-based drinks shake up bar menus.

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Rarely on AMC's "Mad Men" is the dapper Roger Sterling seen without his signature vodka, Smirnoff or Stolichnaya, thank you very much.

Post-boomer Carrie Bradshaw of "Sex and the City" tipped the colorless spirit with cranberry juice, branding the Cosmopolitan the "it" drink of all the single ladies.

And let's not forget about a guy named Bond, who likes his vodka martini shaken, not stirred.

When it comes to drinking, whiskey portrays an air of gentility, while swilling wine lends a regularity to the holder, much like chugging a beer does. But, vodka is the amiable friend: it can stand alone or be good-natured enough to be mixed among other ingredients.

In this age of dreamy cocktails, vodka is a clear choice.

"We've got a whole lot of vodka drinks," said John Kyrntatas, co-owner of SweetWater Bar and Grill in Cinnaminson, adjacent to Hathaway's Restaurant & Lounge. SweetWater offers more than 15 vodka specials.

In the last decade, Kyrntatas said, the vodka industry really took off after introducing fruit-flavored categories, fueling vodka's popularity.

A top seller at Kyrntatas' place is the Sweetwater Love Elixir, made with Van Gogh

cherry, acai and raspberry vodkas, and a splash of cranberry juice. Another fave is the Mediterranean Martini served with Van Gogh pomegranate vodka, and cranberry and orange juices.

The exact origins of vodka are uncertain.

The Poles claim they distilled the first vodka formulated from grain 600 years ago. While the Russians argue, they began drinking the stuff for medicinal purposes in the ninth century.

Today, distillers from around the world make it from either wheat, rye or potatoes. More than 300 vodkas, from all price points, soak the market.

"A good vodka should not have an overpowering smell. It also should have a smooth aftertaste," said Serge Chistov, founder of Exclusiv Vodka, which is made in Moldova and distributed in 21 states, including New Jersey.

Chistov added: "Vodka wasn't meant to be expensive. It used to be the drink of peasants."

Nevertheless, it has risen from its humble beginnings and now accounts for 32 percent of all distilled spirits sold in the United States, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. In 2012, 65.2 million 9-liter cases of vodka were sold, generating \$5.5 billion in revenue for producers.



The restaurant offers more than 15 vodka specials.



A SweetWater Love Elixir is made with cherry, acai and raspberry vodkas.



George Kyratas mixes a popular vodka-based drink at the bar.

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Vodka

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At Firebirds Wood Fired Grill in the Moorestown Mall, the beverage team has reinvented faves like the Dirty Martini, served with Belvedere Vodka and cheese-stuffed olives. There's also a twist on the vodka gimlet made with EFFEN Cucumber Vodka.

But, bartender Love Guysick said it's the Double Black Diamond martini that devotees desire. The cocktail (410) is served with citrus-flavored Svedka Vodka and hand-squeezed fresh pineapple.

"It a sweet, smooth go-down," said Guysick, "but they sneak up on you."

Pam Camishion, bar manager at the three Madison restaurants in Riverside, said more and more patrons have been substituting vodka for drinks usually laced with gin. The Madison restaurants carry more than 15 different types of vodka, used to make apple, chocolate, raspberry martinis, and much more.

Camishion said all it takes is one good vodka concoction, "And, you become a vodka drinker."



Modern Ambrosia Parfaits

4 ounces whipped cream cheese, at room temperature

1 (6 ounce) container low-fat vanilla yogurt

½ cup stemless maraschino cherries plus

1 tablespoon cherry juice, divided

1 cup small dice fresh pineapple

¾ cup shredded sweetened coconut, divided

½ pound strawberries, hulled and quartered (about 1½ cups)

1 (11 ounce) can mandarin oranges, drained well

Whisk cream cheese, yogurt and cherry juice in a large bowl until smooth and mixture turns pink. Gently fold in remaining ingredients, reserving 2 tablespoons coconut.

Divide among 4 glass serving cups or bowls. Sprinkle each with reserved coconut on top to garnish. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate to chill, 1 to 2 hours.

Serve immediately. (Note: If the ambrosia sets too long, the fruit will release a lot of juice, making the cream watery.)

Makes about 4 cups.