

Getting Into The Spirits Of A Taste Test

By **MATTHEW TAYLOR**
Staff Writer

MONTPELIER — The Chef's Table restaurant over on State Street was hopping Saturday, a familiar portrait of epicurean decadence, a keen complement to the crisp perfection of a February morning. But despite the early hour, scones and coffee did not make the menu at this gathering. The time was 11 a.m. The guests today had come to drink vodka.

All sorts of vodka, in fact. Sixteen different kinds. From eight different countries. And then, as if that was not enough, there was also this: rabbit Stroganoff, Kuvslibiak of salmon, black bread and eggplant caviar.

The first Annual Russian Life

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Vodka Taste-Off — an opportunity for a few dozen Russian (or just plain vodka) enthusiasts to wet their palates and hone their tastes — had

begun. And it was, by all obvious accounts, on its way to becoming a smashing success.

"As long as you have some food in your mouths while you're tasting the vodka, you should not get inebriated," Darra Goldstein, professor of Russian studies at Williams College, was telling the six judges and 25 guests aligned at three long tables in the restaurant's main room. "The goal today is to have a tasting."

A cardboard placard greets tasters at the top of the stairs: "A Taste of Russia." Once inside, an elaborate spread of cooked-up delicacies flanks one wall; 16 bottles, their labels shrouded in plain white cloth tagged only with a single Russian letter, line the other. Scores of small plastic shot glasses sit poised in the foreground.

The festivities are set to begin.

"We're talking degrees of subtlety here," says Alec Adams, director of operations of the New England Culinary Institute, who together with the Montpelier-based Russian Life, a magazine covering Russian culture, history, travel and life, is sponsoring the seminal event. "We've invited you here because we feel you're experts — like it or not — in the field of vodka."

Krista Allen, a 25-year-old of Russian descent who trekked up from White River Junction to partake in the festivities, begs to differ. A vodka enthusiast, yes; an expert? Well, not exactly.

"I like vodka," she asserts. "But I

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Photo by Stefan Hard

Paul Richardson, publisher of Russian Life magazine, compares two samples of vodka in front of shrouded bottles during a vodka-tasting in Montpelier Saturday.

Vodka

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wouldn't call myself an expert."

Over at the sun-drenched, white-clothed tables, Adams is explaining the rules of the Taste-Off. There will be two rounds. In the first round, the mystery vodkas are to be assessed on a scale from one to six. Participants will log their votes on small white cards, which will then be tossed into a adjacent silver cauldron. After round one, eight inferior brands will be eliminated from competition.

The panel of rapt guests gaping, Adams is using words like "creami-ness" and "medicinal" to describe the criteria for evaluation. "The vodka is to be judged in mouth feel," he explains, "and not so much in flavor."

Sufficiently admonished to guard their recorded assessments of vodka quality, the participants are up and swarming the tasting table. Alternately swishing vodka, and logging their results, their faces register equal parts deference and confusion. After all, this is a first for most. Not many here have had much experience with vodka tasting.

To hear Adams tell it, it's a wonder this hasn't been done here before. "It's a one-of-a-kind thing," he says. "But we've had a tremendous interest. We sent a direct mailing on a Wednesday to 170 people. By the following Monday, we had more responses than we could use."

Paul Richardson, publisher of *Russian Life*, thought the Taste-Off would be an appropriate adjunct to the magazine's self-proclaimed "Vodka Issue," a break-out edition he affectionately describes as "sort of our version of the swimsuit issue."

At the tasting station, Krista Allen's friend Emmet Hickory, a 23-year-old Boston resident, is grimacing. Dressed casually in a dark sweater and black jeans, Hickory has just sampled a vodka identified only as 'K.' While Allen gave this entry a favorable rating, he's not sure he agrees. "It's got kind of a medicinal taste to it," Hickory says. Retorts Allen: "I guess we have very different tastes."

Which is pretty much the theme here: different tastes. Dan Frederick of Portland, Maine, gave Vodka 'M' a rating of six; Darra Goldstein gave it a 2. In the end, little-known Mig Pilot Vodka will finish higher than Russia's coveted mainstay Stolichnaya. It is that kind of day.

In between rounds, participants are treated to a lecture by Goldstein on some of the finer points of Russian culture, focusing, of course, on its favorite beverage.

"If you have vodka in the freezer in the summer, it's really refreshing," Goldstein is explaining. "And in the winter it's kind of warming. It's really



Photo by Stefan Hard

Ketel One, a Dutch vodka, was judged the best tasting vodka.

the perfect drink."

Goldstein explains that the characteristics of a particular vodka depend on what grain is used and how many times it is distilled. The purest vodka in Russia, she says, is distilled four times. It is then filtered through various types of charcoal, also enhancing the flavor.

While she speaks, four NECI employees tally the scores and remove the eight lowest ranked brands. Eight remain, to be voted on now solely by the six judges: Goldstein, along with a chef, a politician, a journalist, another professor and a NECI associate. Culled by Richardson and Adams as a sampling of critically astute local opinion, the final say in the great Vodka Taste-Off will be theirs alone.

The vodka shots are carried out on cocktail trays, two at a time. The

judges taste each, log their scores, move on to the next round. In between, they gnaw on bread and look uncomfortable in their newly cast roles of experts.

Meanwhile, the conversation flows as well:

"I like that dry, yeasty taste," remarks one judge.

"Yes, you see, I don't," replies another.

"This is all starting to have a cumulative effect," adds a third a bit woozily.

In the end, there would be a tie-breaker. The tension would mount, and finally a winner would be announced. Holland's Kettle One Vodka would take home the honors, while some others would finish strong, and still others — including Vermont's own Mad River Vodka — would bring up the rear. There is a distinct feel

here that on another day, the results could be entirely different. But for today, one thing is clear: The essence, call it the beauty, is wholly in the process.

Indeed, no one here seems quite sure just how seriously they should take themselves.

After all, it's midday, and everybody here's been drinking — and learning to appreciate — vodka all morning. And even if those gathered today haven't become the instant experts they thought they might, they've certainly developed a little more of an appreciation for the Russian drink of choice.

Perhaps Nancy Lloyd of Jaffery, N.H., puts it best: "Vodka has a tendency to taste like diesel fuel," she says. "But some of this is actually pretty smooth."