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Spirits of the World

Aims and learning outcomes

This chapter explores in some detail the categories of distilled spirits, their background and origins, their ingredients, how they are produced and their different types, styles and grades. We will also explore the regional variations, common misconceptions, quality controls and legal definitions. On its completion, the learner should be able to:

- Describe the raw materials, producing regions, legal definitions and quality controls for the world's best known spirits.
- Outline the styles, characteristics and leading brands of the world's major spirits.
- Explain the recreational, culinary and medicinal uses for spirits.

7.1 Akvavit

This Scandinavian flavoured, distilled liquor, ranges in alcohol content from about 42 to 45% ABV and is spelled differently across these countries. It is clear to pale yellow in colour, distilled from a fermented potato or grain mash, flavoured with caraway seeds or cumin seed, or sometimes with lemon or orange peel, cardamom, aniseed, and fennel. It is served icy cold and drunk in a single gulp.

Origin and traditional variants

Akvavit production in Denmark emerged in the 15th century at about the time distillation skills were being established throughout the rest of Europe. In Denmark it is traditionally associated with Christmas lunch. In Norway it is particularly drunk at celebrations, such as Christmas or May 17 (Norwegian Constitution Day). In Sweden it is a staple of the traditional midsummer celebrations dinner, usually drunk while singing one of many drinking songs. It is usually drunk as a snaps during meals, especially during the appetizer course — along with pickled herring, crayfish, lutefisk or smoked fish. It is claimed that the spices and the alcohol helps digest the meal which is very rich in fat.

Ingredients and how it is made

Historically Akvavit, like vodka, is distilled both from either potato or grain, but often the grain could be poor and was stretched and flavoured with pretty well anything botanicals including weeds, herbs such as caraway seeds, anise, dill, fennel, coriander, and grains of paradise. The Danish distillery Aalborg makes an akvavit distilled with amber. The recipe and flavors differ between brands, but typically caraway is the dominating flavour. Akvavit usually has a yellowish hue, but can vary from clear to light brown, depending on how long it has been aged in oak casks. Normally, darker colour suggests higher age or the use of young casks, though artificial colour (caramel E150) is also permitted. Clear akvavits called Taffel akvavits are typically matured in old casks which do not colour the finished product.



Figure 7.1: Selection of popular Akvavits.

Some popular Akvavit brands

Akvavit is distilled in several locations by a number of different producers.

Norway: Gammel Opland, Gilde, Lysholm Linie Aquavit, Løitens Export Akvavit, Simers, Thronhjems.

Denmark: Aalborg Akvavit, Brøndums, Harald Jensen Akvavit, Aalborg Nordguld Akvavit.

Sweden: Akvavit is often referred to as Vodka (Brännvin) in Sweden.

Gammal Norrlands (Swedish Spiced Vodka), Hallands Fläder, Herrgårds (Swedish Spiced Vodka), Hjärtansfröjd, Nyköpings Brännvin (Swedish Spiced Vodka), O.P. Anderson, Porsbrännvin, Rånäs Brännvin Skåne, Svart Vinbärs

Germany: Bommerlunder, Malteser Kreuz Aquavit, Wikinger Feuer Aquavit

7.2 Anise spirits

Anise spirits are defined as aperitifs based on alcohol and aromatized with the aniseed plant (oil of Badiane). Made by distillation of fermented aniseeds and any other botanicals or maceration in neutral spirits, for example Pernod.



Figure 7.2: Star anise (Water Codex II).

Categories of anise spirits from France

- **Pastis (aniseed, liquorice):** a French flavoured spirit made by maceration with fewer flavour elements than Anise. Examples include Ricard (45% ABV), Pastis 51 (51% ABV), Duval and Casanis.
- **Coloured Aniseed** (less liquorice, plenty of aromatic plants): Examples include Pernod (45% ABV).
- **Uncolored aniseed** (plenty of aniseed): Example: Cristal, Anis Gras, Berger Blanc.
- **Anisette:** A clear very sweet liqueur made with anise seeds and tasting of liquorice, mainly consumed in France and Spain. It is sweeter than most anise-flavoured liqueurs (such as pastis), and also has a lower alcohol content (typically 25% by volume, versus 40%). Made from macerating 16 different seeds and plants, neutral spirit and sugar syrup. Anisette undiluted with water is generally clear, while undiluted pastis is transparent yellow.
- **Absinthe:** Reputed to be an aphrodisiac, absinthe is a potent, bitter liqueur distilled from wormwood and flavoured with a variety of herbs. It has a distinct anise flavor and is 68% ABV. When diluted with water the liqueur turns from green to milky white.

Historical background to anise spirits

Absinthe, once known as the green fairy, originated in the late 1700s but had its heyday from the late 1800s to the 1920s. The first absinthe factory was opened in Switzerland in 1797 by Henri Dubied, who sold the spirit as an aphrodisiac. Dubied's son in law, Henri Louis Pernod, followed him into the business starting his production of absinthe, made from a green aniseed spirit, fennel and hyssop in a base of wine spirit, in France in 1805. Its popularity grew and imitations followed. Markets were awash with Pernod absinthe. These spirits were at least 75% alcohol by volume the cause of many health problems.

In the French Algerian campaign of 1847, the soldiers were given a daily ration of absinthe, and this habit was continued when they returned home. It was common place to witness the large jug of water and bottle of absinthe on many tables in cafes and bars.