



# The Perfect (Potato) Vodka?

By Mike Gerrard | Photos courtesy Vestal Vodka

THE PERFECT VODKA STARTS LIFE IN A FIELD OF POTATOES IN POLAND. PERFECT? WELL, VESTAL VODKA'S, VESTAL KASZEBE 2010 VINTAGE PICKED UP A SCORE OF 5+ OUT OF 5 FROM THE INFLUENTIAL DIFFORD'S GUIDE. THAT'S LIKE ROBERT PARKER GIVING A WINE 100+ OUT OF 100. IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER.



**B**ut a 2010 vintage vodka? Yes, Vestal produces some of its vodka by vintage, like wine, and only 2,480 bottles of that 5+ wine were made. It's all the more remarkable because Vestal Vodka is a father-and-son company that only started business in Poland in 2009.

John Borrell had moved to Poland in 1992, set up a wine importing business and bought a family vineyard and farm. He and his son William were watching the potatoes being harvested a few years ago when they got into a disagreement about whether potatoes had 'terroir,' like grapes. John insisted they did, as there are as many types of potato as there are grapes. His son William was skeptical. To prove his point, John made two small batches of vodka from two different types of potato grown in two different parts of Poland. He presented the two vodkas to his son to taste.

"When we tasted them," William Borrell says, "my father was all smiles. The difference in the aroma and taste of the two batches was astonishing. One had peaches and apricots on the nose. The other was peaty and peppery."

Just to be sure, they repeated the experiment the following year, but picked the potatoes early, when they were smaller. The resulting vodkas, made in exactly the same way, were different yet again. Vestal Vodka was born. The first vintage was produced in 2009, and initially launched in France and the UK. "Our first market was London," says William Borrell. "We thought that if we were able to make it in this very competitive market, and be seen through all the thousands of other brands, we would stand a good chance globally."

Make it they did, receiving a phenomenal amount of press coverage and being stocked by places like

The Connaught Hotel, The River Café, Tom Aikens and other top restaurants. In Paris the Ritz Hotel is a customer. "We also sell in Poland but concentrate on the best restaurants rather than multiple retailers where price is the biggest consideration," Borrell explains.

One of the restaurants, Amaro in Warsaw, is Poland's first Michelin-starred restaurant and the chef, Wojciech Modest Amaro, pairs Vestal Vodka with his food creations.

"The 2011 Kaszebe," says Amaro, "we match with wild salmon, which is marinated in beeswax at 54 degrees Celsius. This influences the flavor of the fish but also is a method of thermal preparation. On the fish, we sprinkle a powder of wild strawberry and beetroot. Together with the fish comes a stock made with lime verbena, tomato and ginger. The fish is eaten, the stock is drunk, and the vodka is sipped in between."

Launching Vestal in the UK wasn't easy, though. "I was working 14-hour days from my base in London," William Borrell explains, "to get ourselves established in Britain and France. I would set out each day with samples in a battered suitcase, begging sommeliers and bartenders to at least taste our vodka. When they did, the common response was: Wow, that's different."

Now the challenge is to introduce Vestal Vodka in the USA, where Vestal's limited production could make them a small fish in a very big pond. "We launched in 2014 with the 2014 vintage," says Borrell. If Vestal is as successful in the U.S. as it's been in the UK, they're going to have to start growing a lot more potatoes down on the Borrell family farm.

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