

# The European vodka wars



**WHO SAID** the European Union has no sex appeal? One of the hottest topics during the Finnish presidency has been vodka. It doesn't get much better than this – a bunch of EU countries fighting over what actually constitutes vodka.

It all sounds a bit silly, but don't tell that to a vodka drinker, the Finnish government or the spirits industry. For them, it's a serious business. The vodka war is about three things: cultural heritage, equal treatment and money.

Traditionalists say that vodka can only be distilled from potatoes and grain. The so-called vodka belt – Poland, Finland, Sweden and the Baltic States – produce and consume more than 70 per cent of all the EU vodka. At least they know what they are talking about!

**In the other corner** you have France, Spain and Italy, known for their exquisite wines, and the UK with its vast whisky

and gin industry. They want to expand the definition to include a range of agricultural produce, such as molasses, fruit, grapes and berries. Or to put it more bluntly: they want to use the leftovers of their own produce to make vodka.

The vodka belt feels that their cultural heritage is under attack. They claim that the ingredients of vodka have remained the same for centuries. If you want to make a spirit out of fruit, call it fruit vodka, but not real vodka.

Throughout its history

**Real vodka is made of grain or potatoes, not fruit.**

European countries have fought hard to protect their own brands. Champagne has a geographical definition – it can only be made in the province of Champagne. Whisky can only be made out of grain and malted grain. Grappa can only be made from grapes. The list goes on.

**The vodka belt** wants equal treatment. If whisky has a strict definition, the same should apply to vodka. When the previous directive on spirits was established, the vodka belt countries were not members of the EU. They were told that vodka would be given a strict definition in due time. Perhaps they were too naive....

Tradition and equal treatment are naturally only part of the story. Vodka is also a multi-million euro business. The world consumes 4,5 billion litres of vodka every year. Some 11 per cent of it goes down European throats. The

Russians are world champions. They consume 57 per cent of all the vodka produced.

**The Finns love** their Finlandia and Koskenkorva vodka. Swedes are fond of Absolut vodka. The Poles and the Balts all have their favourite brands. The point is not that these brands need to be protected. The point is that the consumer needs to know what kind of vodka he is drinking.

Whatever the outcome of the vodka war, one should not blame the Finnish presidency for being biased. Our prime minister, Matti Vanhanen, has never tasted vodka – he is a teetotaler.

I might be a liberal at heart, but when it comes to vodka, I admit to being a bit on the conservative side. All I need is some real vodka, good company and a snaps song, preferably “Helan går!” 🍷

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