

EVAN DANNELLS

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FOOD & DRINK

SALUD!

Locally made Valhalla Vodka uses an Icelandic filter

by Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times
Jul 21, 2024



Eric Dahmen is one of six partners at Valhalla Vodka. He works as the brand's midwest manager, but is jokingly referred to as Valhalla's "Corporate Viking."

ASHLEY RODRIGUEZ

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Over the course of his working life, Eric Dahmen has held a number of job titles: wrestling coach, engineering tech, welding specialist and, most recently, "corporate viking."

That's the nickname he has at Valhalla Vodka, a brand the Stoughton resident helped launch in 2023. It started as a joke, but the title has stuck.

"I'm no longer allowed to shave my beard," said Dahmen, who sports a long white imperial (no chin hair) and a white head of hair combed back, in the style of seafaring Scandinavians. "The cool thing is, this all started off as a fun marketing idea. But now we've gotten really attached to the history behind our vodka."

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February 13, 6:00 pm

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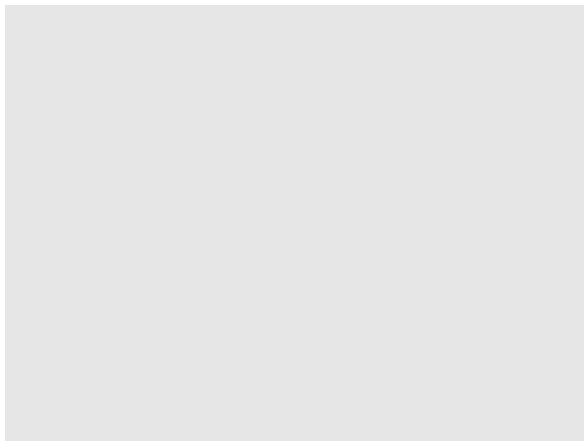
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The bottle seal features the stamp of a Viking compass surrounded by runes.

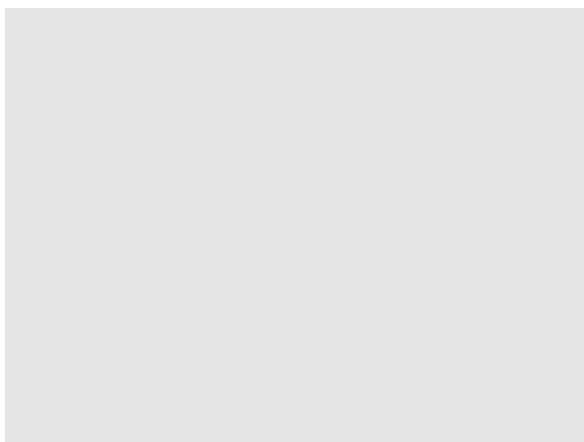
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Named after the Nordic god Odin's heavenly hall where warriors killed in combat are said to ascend, Valhalla Vodka is only roughly a year old. Through Wisconsin Distributors, it's already distributed in roughly 300 Midwest locations, along with hundreds of other locations across the US from Florida to California.

Valhalla Vodka is found in 90 Wisconsin cities alone, including Doudrins Distilling in Cottage Grove and Stoughton's The Revival, along with most local Woodman's and Pick 'n Save locations.

When Dahmen was first approached by his cousin Greg Meffert three years ago with an idea to start a new brand of vodka with a Viking title, Dahmen hadn't anticipated how quickly the vodka would take off. But as a Stoughton resident, he knew where to start.

"There are a lot of ties to that heritage in this town," Dahmen said, referring to Stoughton's Norwegian roots. Those began in the 1850s when Norwegian immigrants settled in the area, and have been kept alive through Livsreise, Stoughton's Norwegian heritage center, and Stoughton's Syttende Mai festival, a weekend-long celebration of Norwegian heritage.



Valhalla Vodka leans into its Viking-inspired identity, like the Viking longship on distribution boxes.

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Valhalla Vodka's label features a Viking longship and the bottle seal featuring the stamp of a Viking compass, surrounded by runes from the ancient Germanic alphabet. But the brand's six founders, including

Meffert and Dahmen, were intentional about making sure Valhalla didn't just look the part of a Viking vodka.

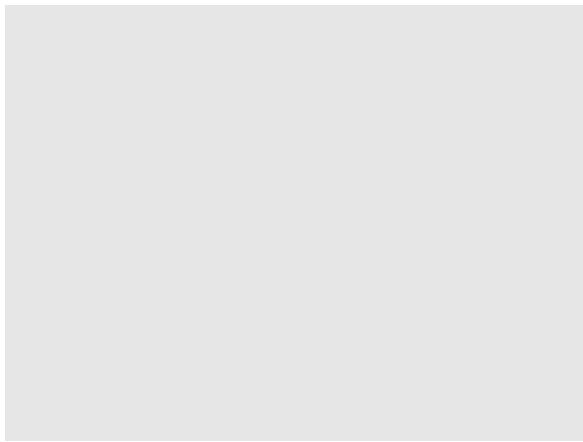
Lava rocks and winter wheat

Valhalla Vodka imports many of its ingredients, including Norwegian glacial water and Swedish Winter Wheat, supplemented with local wheat and water. The brand also imports the lava rock the vodka is filtered through after it's distilled at Doundrins Distillery.

That lava rock is from Fagradalsfjall, a still-active volcano formed in the last glacial period 40 kilometers from Reykjavík, Iceland. Dahmen said this filtering is one of the main reasons Valhalla Vodka is popular.

"It gives the vodka an earthy smell and creamy taste," Dahmen said.

"Normally, vodka has a kind of medicine burn. It's sharp. Ours is almost sweet.

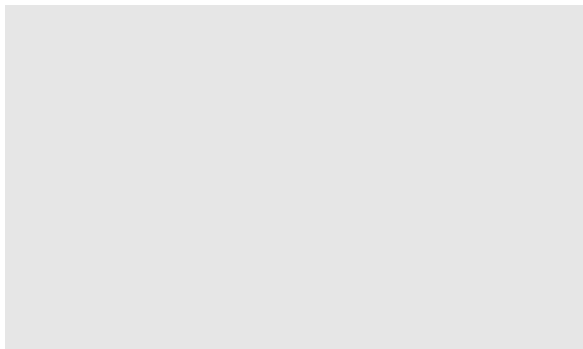


A promotional poster highlights some of the features of Valhalla Vodka.
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"I've seen people forget to use their chasers when they take a shot of our vodka because it's so much smoother than what you normally find out there."

Nick Abramovich, Doundrins' owner and lead distiller, explained that vodka is typically made from a fermentable base, like wheat, along with water. During the distillation process, they are trying to remove as much water as quickly as possible through what he calls a "stripping run" in an automated stainless steel still.

This stops fermentation, makes the drink shelf-stable and removes flavor. After two stripping runs, that's usually the end of the story — what's left is a neutral spirit with lots of burn and bite. But Valhalla has one more step: the lava rocks.





Valhalla Vodka is made at Doundrins Distilling in Cottage Grove. Customers can order drinks made with Valhalla Vodka by request.

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“It’s the first time we’ve done something like this, filtered distilled vodka over lava rocks,” Ambramovich said. “But when Eric brought the idea to us, we were up for it.”

Doundrins boils the rocks beforehand and uses a particulate filter to catch stray pieces of rock.

“Filtering the spirit through the rock does make a difference,” Abramovich said. “It doesn’t just give it a subtle flavor, it mellows out the drink. I believe what’s happening is that compounds from the rock that are more soluble in alcohol than in water are dissolving in the vodka during filtration and raising the pH, causing the vodka to be a bit more alkali. It’s certainly sweeter than our regular vodka.”

Raising the pH (the quantitative measurement of the acidity or basicity of a liquid) would make the alcohol more basic, resulting in a vodka that is more creamy than sharp.



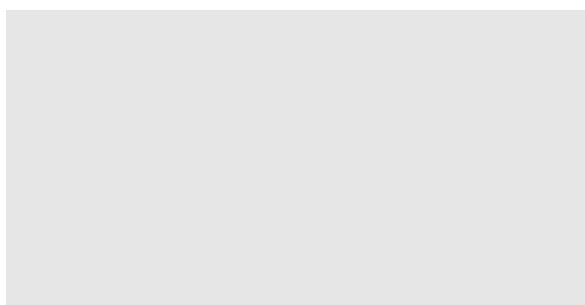
Customers can order any of the vodka-based drinks, like a moscow mule, with Valhalla vodka at Doundrins Distillery.

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Mix up a Skull Driver

Valhalla Vodka has two products — Valhalla Black, which is 80 proof, and Valhalla Red, which is both 100 proof and 100% distilled, which means a single 750 mL bottle contains all the alcohol gleaned from the distillation process.

“I’ll take the Red straight up on the rocks,” Dahmen said. “But it also mixes well with everything.”





Valhalla Vodka is distilled and then filtered through lava rocks from Iceland. Dahmen said it gives the vodka an “an earthy smell and creamy taste.”

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Valhalla Vodka’s website has cocktail recipes that include Valhalla’s Black (\$23.99 per bottle) and Red (\$38.99 per bottle) vodkas. True to theme, each bears a Viking name. A bloody mary becomes a “Blood Eagle,” a white Russian is a “Snow Maiden.” A screw driver is a “Skull Driver.”

“We registered our business as Valhalla Spirits LLC because, at some point, we’d like to expand our business,” Dahmen said. “Maybe we’ll make our own gin or aquavit, a Scandinavian liqueur.”

It may have started out as a marketing gimmick, but this past June, the Valhalla Vodka team took a trip to Iceland. As they walked the black sand beaches, drank from glacial rivers and hiked up volcanos while carrying their Valhalla Vodka bottles, it solidified a passion for Scandinavian culture, heritage and lore that had been growing for the last couple years.



Winners from a Wisconsin Distributors Valhalla Vodka sales contest joined some Valhalla Vodka founders on an adventure in Iceland.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

“That was an incredible trip,” Dahmen said. “It’s funny. We chose the winter wheat because of the Viking history, but when we tested it against corn or a hybrid of both, the wheat won by a mile. And we had no idea the lava rock would have any effect on the taste.”

Though they were originally gimmicks, he said, these have worked in their favor.

“Greg and I say Odin and the Viking gods must be blessing us with ideas,” Dahmen said. “We’ll see what else they give us in the future.”

Salud is an occasional column about wine, beer and spirits in the Madison area. For more food news, [subscribe to The Corner Table](#), our weekly food newsletter.

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Valhalla Vodka at Doundrins Distilling

valhallavodka.com

Doundrins Distilling

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doundrinsdistilling.com

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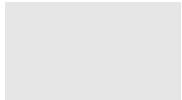
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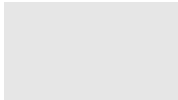
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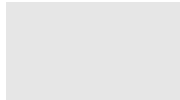
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