First of all, when talking about Canadian whisky, drop the “e.” That “lightens” the word, so to speak, as is appropriate for the style. Lightness is a key word when discussing Canadian whisky, which is known as being light in flavor and not as rich and full-bodied as single malt Scotch or American Bourbon. Even Irish whiskey, considered lighter than Scotch and Bourbon, is known as a “heavier” spirit than Canadian whisky.

The reason for the lightness of Canadian whisky is the way it’s produced. It’s almost always a blend of a light “base” whisky and a heavier “flavoring” whisky, according to John Hansell, a whisky expert and publisher of Malt Advocate magazine.

A confusing aspect of Canadian whisky, one that might baffle many retail salespeople or bartenders, is that customers routinely use one of three terms when asking for a whisky from Canada. “I’d like a bottle/glass of Canadian Whisky (or Canadian Rye Whisky or Rye Whisky).” All three are correct.

By Canadian law, Canadian whisky may be labeled by any of these three names. It can also contain caramel coloring and flavoring. This flavoring may include up to 9.09% of “imported whisky or spirit, domestic spirit other than whisky or wine.”

The dictates of the law are that Canadian whisky must: 1) be mashed, distilled and aged in Canada; 2) aged for a minimum of three years in “small wood” (no type specified); and
3) contain not less than 40% alcohol by volume and “possess the aroma, taste & character generally attributed to Canadian whisky.” That last stipulation leaves a bit to the imagination. “Lightness” comes to mind.

**CANADIAN WHISKY SOUTH OF THE BORDER**

Crown Royal, from Diageo, is the number one Canadian whisky in the world, and the eighth largest spirits brand in the U.S. It has led the Canadian category in the U.S. for many years, with steady growth. Preliminary figures for 2006 from Adams Beverage Group puts Crown Royal’s sales at 3.7 million nine-liter cases, up 3.4% from 2005. Crown Royal Special Reserve, a Super Premium brand, sold 91,000 cases in 2005.

Black Velvet is the number two Canadian whisky in the U.S. Owned by Constellation Brands, Black Velvet sold about 2.1 million nine-liter cases in 2006, up 2.2% from 2005. Constellation also sells Canadian LTD and Northern Light, brands in the top ten of Canadian whisky sold in the U.S.

Canadian Mist is Brown-Forman Beverages’ entry in the Canadian category, and is the number three Canadian whisky in the U.S., selling about 1.9 million nine-liter cases in 2006. Mist’s brand director, Mike Haering, said the Mistology campaign for the brand is positioning Mist as a more contemporary, up-to-date light whisky.

“We’ve been re-positioning Mist,” Haering said, “with new packaging that adds more blue and making sure our focus is on the drink. That’s what the customers told us they want.”

Mistology debuted last spring and so far has gone to 12 museums in cities across the country. Why museums? Haering explained: “It’s the science behind the cocktail.”

The museum events are attended by Mistology’s CEO (Chief Entertainment Officer), as well as an R&D lab person from Brown-Forman. Consumers are shown how to create casual cocktails they can make by the glass or by the pitcher. Experiments are conducted at each table with flavor wheels and different raw ingredients to teach aromas and tastes. Cocktails include the Misthattan, Mistopolitan, Mistarita, MistySour and MistyMary.

“The light taste of Mist is its versatility,” Haering said. “This is what the consumer is going for.” He stressed that with a lighter whisky, the flavor of the mixer doesn’t over power a cocktail, as it might do with lighter white spirits like vodka and rum, which can get lost in a cocktail. Stronger, full-flavored and full-bodied whiskies like Scotch and Bourbon can, on the other hand, be too much for a cocktail. “It’s that hint of whisky that we’re focusing on,” he said.

Canadian Club, from Beam Global Spirits & Wine, is the number four Canadian whisky brand in the U.S. (although the number two Canadian whisky in the world), with U.S. sales of about 1.2 million nine-liter cases in 2006. The flagship product is the six-year-old. In the Premium Plus segment there are Canadian Club Reserve and Classic 12, aged ten and twelve years, respectively. An ultra-premium...
whisky is Canadian Club Sherry Cask, made in small quantities from whiskies that have been aged at least eight years and then double matured in sherry casks imported from Jerez, Spain. And then there is Tangle Ridge, another high-quality, super premium Canadian whisky.

Two Canadian whiskies in the Beam Global portfolio hold regional pockets of strength in the U.S. market: Windsor Supreme and Lord Calvert. These are value brands which Beam will continue to support, although not without its challenges. Dennis Prado, a senior brand director at Beam Global, says, “It has been a challenge to maintain volume as many other spirit categories continue to flourish.”

In 2007, Canadian Club will continue its involvement with the Indy Racing League (IRL) and a partnership with Andretti Green Racing (AGR) and driver Dario Franchitti. “The racing program provides us with the right blend of consumer equity building and trade hospitality elements,” Prado said. The branding on Dario’s #27 car has been improved for increased television and at-the-track fan exposure.

Canadian Club will also sponsor an Indy 500 sweepstakes in which consumers can register online or via mail for the chance to win four tickets and VIP treatment at the Indy 500. There will also be a promotion with another AGR sponsor, XM Radio, to offer consumers a free two-week trial subscription and the opportunity to win XM radios and tickets to private XM soundstage concerts.

Forty Creek is a much smaller brand in the U.S. (“barely a blip on the radar screen,” Hansell said), but it’s one that has attracted the attention of many for its great taste and innovative distiller. John Hall, who makes Forty Creek, is a former winemaker who purchased an eau-de-vie distillery in Grimsby, Ontario, in 1992, and began making Canadian whisky with a winemaker’s perspective. Using the same grains as a Bourbon distiller — corn, rye and malted barley — he distills and ages three separate whiskies (fermented with wine yeast) and marries them before bottling. Hall calls this process a “meritage” whisky. His casks are Bourbon, new oak and sherry barrels, and the finished whisky is from stocks that have aged six to ten years.

Forty Creek is brought into the U.S. by Gemini Spirits & Wine and sold about 45,000 nine-liter cases in 2005. Kristy Crane of Gemini said the marketing approach to building Forty Creek “is centered around induc-

Revenue growth for Canadian whisky in the U.S. grew by only 1.7% in 2006. However, 4.1% was for super premium brands and 22.6% for high end premium brands.*

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* per Adams Beverage Group