



# REGIONAL RE-BRANDING

DIXIE VODKA PROVIDES A NEW TAKE ON SOUTHERN SIPPING

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING /// PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DIXIE VODKA

Sometimes, you need to fight branding to create solid brand awareness.

This may sound like a contradiction. After all, a catchy name or a funky bottle shape can draw attention or create a conversation around your craft spirit. But that's not what we're talking about. The battle that occasionally must be waged concerns the geographic branding that builds a city or region's reputation or colors their public perception. It's the type of labeling that can often set viscous boundaries around creativity that are tricky to penetrate. Those that attempt to break through may find themselves covered in the film of novelty, which can be extremely difficult to scrub off. It takes careful planning to emerge on the other side.

Matti Antilla chose to engage in such a battle when he launched Dixie Vodka in 2014 through his craft-driven distilling company Grain & Barrel Spirits. Produced in Charleston, South Carolina, Dixie is a low-country tentpole of southern heritage.

On its own, the city of Charleston is all about rum and whiskey. Expanded to the Deep South, its brand becomes part of bourbon and moonshine country. Either way, vodka isn't supposed to come from here. Sure, Tito's demonstrated vodka could come from unique places. But Tito's comes from Austin, the Berkeley of Texas, and the city's celebrated unorthodoxy makes vodka production there feel somewhat on-brand. Charleston doesn't have this cachet with the casual observer, who may view it as a city built around southern charm and massive antebellum structures.

This left Antilla with a mission: To convince people that Dixie was a contemporary southern vodka. This took a commitment to use Dixie to help highlight the region's strong, modern embrace of craft and epicurean innovation, a concept he refers to as a New Southern Renaissance.

"Charleston's the epicenter of southern craft," he said. "There's still a sense of pride and heritage, but this is balanced

by a strong sense of innovation and experimentation that moves things forward. With Dixie, we wanted to be a craft brand that helped draw a bridge between the two worlds."



Careful market strategy and development defines Antilla's career, although the skill has not always been used to grow booze awareness. Prior to jumping into the spirits industry, he was an analyst for J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. A chance company assignment sent him to Brazil, and he was there long enough to become immersed in the country's relaxed culture and get introduced to cachaca, the country's national spirit. A career change was inevitable. He launched Cabana Cachaca in the U.S. in 2006, fueled by a passion to share a bottled version of the Brazillian ethos that compelled him to leave the investment banking world behind. It wasn't an easy task — the brand hit the market at a time when not too many

people in the states knew what cachaca was and even fewer people knew what it was used for. Despite this, Cabana landed national distribution within a year.

Sharing the ethos of the New Southern Renaissance, where old-school heritage intersects with modern craft, is paramount to Dixie's strategy. The brand is unapologetic about its roots. You can't get much more southern than slapping the word "Dixie" on a label. Go to Dixie's website and you'll be greeted with "Yes, Sir" and "No, Ma'am" buttons on their age verification prompt. If you've spent even a lick of time in the South, you know the significance of such verbiage.

While nods to tradition are outwardly present, regional craftsmanship forms the soul of the juice. This is best represented by Dixie's quintet of flavored vodkas: Black pepper, wildflower honey, citrus, mint, and peach. Each iteration focuses on ingredients associated with the South, and they're chiefly sourced from appropriate locales. For instance, Antilla sources his peaches from Macon, GA and his mint from Louisville, KY. More importantly, Antilla only works with those that align with his own passion for southern craft. "We didn't want to add flavors just for the sake of adding flavors," Antilla said. "We had to find the right partner that could help us tell a genuine story about what's happening in the region."

This approach resulted in an interesting sequence of release dates. Dixie's peach vodka was the most recent flavor launched, even though peaches are the South's most iconic fruit. The strategy has also produced

stories with extra layers of goodness. Part of the proceeds from each bottle of Dixie's Wildflower Honey Vodka sold goes to The Bee Cause Project, a honeybee protection non-profit launched by Dixie's honey-harvesting purveyor Savannah Bee Company. "It's the perfect marriage of local ingredients and non-profit aid to promote awareness of a cause," Antilla said.




Before Antilla could sell the country on regional craft vodka from South Carolina, he had to sell the region first. Without this, there'd be no point in going nationwide. One of the tactics he used was to encourage people to think outside the box. Or, more specifically, outside the category. "When we started building relationships with regional consumers, we wanted them to think about Dixie like they may think about craft beer, in a regional or local sense," he said. "That way, when they were in a city and saw our bottle on a bar or [in] a store, they'd identify it as a label they could call their own."

It worked. The region embraced Dixie and national recognition gradually spread. In 2019, Dixie's Black Pepper Vodka picked up a "best flavored vodka" award at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. The brand was also asked to be a sponsor for NASCAR that same year, a fitting national endorsement since stock car racing's left-turning roots circle back to the Carolinas' bootlegging heyday. As Dixie's star continues to rise, Antilla still attributes the brand's regional approach as key to its growing success. "You may have a great idea, but the market may not be

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ready just yet," he said. "That's why working with the locals and building relationships with them are so important. They'll give you the time you need to get your idea right, so you'll be ready to tell the story you want to tell at the right time."

That's especially the case if the tale you plan on telling goes beyond the contents of the bottle. 

*Dixie Vodka is located Charleston, South Carolina. For more information visit [www.dixievodka.com](http://www.dixievodka.com).*



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