



PHOTO BY PAUL WELLMAN

Vodka from Stem Cells? Santa Barbara Nano-Scientist Invents the Perfect Liquor

By **Matt Kettmann**

Michael Wyrsta is a man who solves complicated problems, like making solar panels from renewable resources, turning natural gas into gasoline, and capturing carbon dioxide exhaust to create eco-friendly building materials. But last October, while eating Thai food at Siam Elephant in Carpinteria, the 35-year-old entrepreneurial nano-scientist found himself up against a most perplexing dilemma. “I was irritated that there wasn’t a good American vodka I could point to,” said Wyrsta, a Rochester, New York, native who’s proud to be a “Gaucho pure-bred” with undergrad and doctorate degrees from UCSB. After mentioning as much to his dining companion and brainstorming buddy Mark Collins, the two—along with the help of “creative director-slash-savior” Kimberly Kavish—spent the ensuing 10 months developing RND Vodka, a “brilliant American” liquor that debuted on the shelves of Santa Barbara retailers and restaurants two weeks ago.

Over cocktails and dinner at The Hungry Cat one evening in early July, the trio complained to me about the state of premium vodka, which they say is often one step removed from the cheap stuff. “The wool has been pulled over everyone’s eyes for so long,” said Wyrsta, explaining that what he calls “railway car vodka” is often shipped to the major

liquor companies and then split into multiple brands whose only real difference is the label. Wyrsta sees RND as Santa Barbara’s entry in the boutique liquor movement, in which utmost care is given to quality. “You see it in whiskey, you see it in tequila,” said Wyrsta. “There’s no reason that it can’t happen in vodka. We’re part of that trend.”

Though fingers are crossed for a distillery in the Santa Ynez Valley one day, RND Vodka currently is made in Colorado, where about a dozen small-batch liquor-makers have set up shop due to the availability of fresh, clean Rocky Mountain water. Although vodka can be made from potatoes and basically any grain, Wyrsta and Collins settled on corn as the base starch after many rounds of tasting. “It was really clear to us which one we wanted,” said Wyrsta. The other major choice was whether to go with the traditional pot still method of distillation—which can leave certain and perhaps preferable flavors in the liquor—or employ the more thoroughly cleansing continuous glass column distillation. But even that proved an easy decision. “The only way to go is column—it’s so critical,” said Wyrsta, explaining that RND essentially gets distilled 10 times before hitting the bottle, and then gets another round of stone carbon filtration to remove the impurities that give us hangovers.

And that’s critical because the best vodka is the purest, or, as Collins explained, “It’s what’s not in it that counts.”

The result, which I finally got my hands on at Restaurant Roy one evening at the end of July, is about as smooth a vodka as I’ve tasted, settling well alone over cubes of ice or mixing effortlessly with tonic, soda, or juice. Blind taste testers have almost unanimously agreed, according to Kavish, who explained, “In private tastings, it always comes up on top.”

With the quality locked in, the trio shifted their focus to marketing, the key to pulling away from the more than 1,500 vodka brands available. The name RND is a play on “research and development”—which is sure to attract all the vodka-sipping scientists of the planet—but also refers to the drive shaft in an automatic vehicle, where the letters for reverse, neutral, and drive stack up. That’s a metaphor for everything, said Wyrsta, explaining, “Life is back up, start again, and go forward.” From there, Kavish, a former creative director for *Santa Barbara Magazine*, designed the blue, black, and silver label—easily viewable from across the bar or on store shelves—and added on the back of the bottle a brief memoir by Wyrsta about daydreaming of sand and surf while studying at UCSB.

As of press time, RND Vodka was being served in drinks at Paradise Café, Roy, Elements, and the Bay Café in Santa Barbara, Tre Lune in Montecito, the Nugget in Summerland, and Sly’s in Carpinteria. For those who want to take home a bottle for about \$45, you can check out San Roque Market & Liquors in Santa Barbara, the Bottle Shop in Montecito, and City Market in Carpinteria.

Wyrsta believes the American consumer will respond. “Do you want to buy from France, from Poland, or from the United States?” he asked. Though he admits that “our target is to kick ass,” Wyrsta said he’d be happy with whatever level of success comes to RND Vodka. And who knows what could come in the future? “The next thing you know,” joked Collins, “we’re making vodka from stem cells!”

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