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WASHING
DC

UP FRONT

Master Mixologist Patricia Richards mixes a Chopin Rye-based cocktail at Sinatra at Encore Las Vegas.

A Major Composition

Chopin Rye is the Next Opus in the Brand's Single-Ingredient Vodka Collection

Photo: Sam Orr

UPFRONT

Chopin Vodka's Single Ingredient Collection Grows

"We've always been known as a potato vodka—that's our identity," says Dana Chandler, VP and General Manager of Chopin Vodka, the Polish-distilled brand named for that country's most celebrated musical son. Potatoes are actually a rather rare raw material in vodka (contrary to popular myth, fewer than one percent of the world's vodkas are made from spuds), so Chopin already has a head start on exclusivity. But now the brand is opening a whole new chapter—or perhaps "whole new musical movement" would be a better way of putting it—with the introduction of Chopin Rye.

The idea of single-ingredient vodkas might seem as obvious as single-varietal wines, but Chopin is the first brand to explore the possibilities. "We're introducing everyone to the single-ingredient vodka," Chandler says enthusiastically. Vodka can be made from nearly any fermentable vegetable matter, so in a sense, the earth's the limit. But Chopin is concentrating on 100-percent estate-distilled luxury expressions made from raw materials grown in Podlasie, a bucolic agricultural area known as "the green lungs of Poland."

Currently, Chandler and brand owner Tad Dorda are touring the U.S. doing component tastings for trade (and ultimately for consumers) that demonstrate the significant differences between original Chopin Potato and new Chopin Rye. By pouring only the first distillation of each product, the unique qualities of each are enhanced. "You can really taste the potato, its earthiness" says Chandler; "the smell of the rye is in your face."

The component tastings emphasize one aspect of Chopin that sets it apart from many other luxury vodkas: Chopin makes its own base spirits. "Most luxury vodka brands do not make their base spirit," notes Chandler; "they buy it from a commercial producer and rectify it. If you don't make your base



Chopin brand owner Tad Dorda holds a giant bottle of Chopin Rye, the newest member of the Chopin single-ingredient collection.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHOPIN VODKA

spirit, you don't get involved in the quality of the product."

The final products are four-times-distilled and bottled at 80 proof. Chandler sums up their differences succinctly: "Chopin Potato is creamy and more viscous, with a big mouthfeel and a fairly long finish. Chopin Rye is spicy, with a touch of sweetness and vanilla and slightly shorter finish." At just 50,000 nine-liter cases, Chopin is a true craft spirit that stands out in a field of industrial brands the way Frédéric Chopin towers above Muzak.

"We're getting calls from all over the world," says Chandler, but Chopin Rye, like its potato-based counterpart, is aimed squarely at the all-important American market (only Russia consumes more vodka than the U.S.), and consumers here seem to appreciate these vodkas' hand-crafted nature and polished style. Chandler says that Chopin Wheat will be released later this fall, giving the brand a trio of single-ingredient vodkas that will be unique in the category. "We have a pretty aggressive growth plan," he states: "to grow from one facing on the backbar to three."

Frédéric Chopin wrote an early piano trio that's now nearly forgotten. That means the Polish vodka brand, not the composer, will certainly be the first thing anyone will cue up when a "Chopin trio" is called for. As Chandler says, "Two products isn't a collection—but three is."

—David Gadd

*"We're
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*—Chopin's
Dana Chandler*

Chopin Rye On-Premise at Wynn and Encore in Las Vegas

Patricia Richards oversees some 25 restaurant, lounge and casino bars at the acclaimed Wynn & Encore resorts in Las Vegas. So when the Master Mixologist crafts a new cocktail, there are many considerations beyond her own award-winning inspiration: What outlet the drink is for, who is the intended clientele (casual/fine dining), what's inspiring her, what are the hot trends, what thoughts the chefs and managers have, what products she has in surplus and more.

Amid her busy schedule (currently implementing several summer drinks, as well as establishing a property-wide year-round series of nine "signature sips"), Richards was happy to allow THE TASTING PANEL inside her creative process, showing us her remarkably overstocked beverage kitchen before settling down to create two exclusive Chopin Rye cocktails in the gorgeous bar of Encore's restaurant Sinatra.

First we taste new Chopin Rye vodka, Richards noting immediately that its profile matches the typically assertive Russian/Polish style, offering a little sweetness, pepper, good length and a clean finish. With the rye's character, she says, "I want to work in harmony with the spice." Immediately, she notes it would show nicely in a Bloody Mary, a Dirty Martini with blue cheese-stuffed olives or her own Basil Gimlet.

Patricia's first thought is to do a twist on a Moscow Mule using lemongrass and mint. "Let's think outside the box," she says. "I'm over the whole muddled Mojito look." With a heavy pour to showcase the product, she adds some lemon juice, mint, housemade lemongrass/ginger syrup, grapefruit bitters, ginger beer and a big stalk of lemongrass to create the Fresca, a tart, bright, slightly sweet drink that stimulates the salivary glands—great for poolside refreshment or as a light aperitif.

The second one takes more time: Richards envisions a lighter summer twist on a Bloody Mary to pair with lunch. She softly muddles some fresh grape tomatoes, adding the Chopin Rye, just a bit of fresh marjoram and ground pepper to accent the herbal qualities, lemon juice and some red balsamic vinegar, shaking then straining into an up glass. It isn't quite there, though. So we cut down on the tomatoes and the marjoram (which affects the nose and mouthfeel more than flavor—it's a very interesting accent), switch to white balsamic and bring in some Cajun seasoning specially blended by Chef Carlos Guia of the Country Club at Wynn. That does it. It's elegant, savory, but still light and food-friendly. The Creole Mary, a truly original cocktail.

"Hey, some guys can make a cocktail 50 times before it's right," Patricia says with a smile, clinking glasses. In fact, after we depart, Richards still isn't quite satisfied, later tweaking the recipe with Clamato and Worcestershire, to intensify the flavors.

Note that both are very simply garnished, almost minimalist presentations. "That's where I think things are going," says the mixologist. —E. C. Gladstone

For complete recipes for the cocktails mentioned, see www.tastingpanelmag.com.



Patricia Richards created two inspired cocktails using Chopin Rye: the Creole Mary (left) and the Fresca.

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