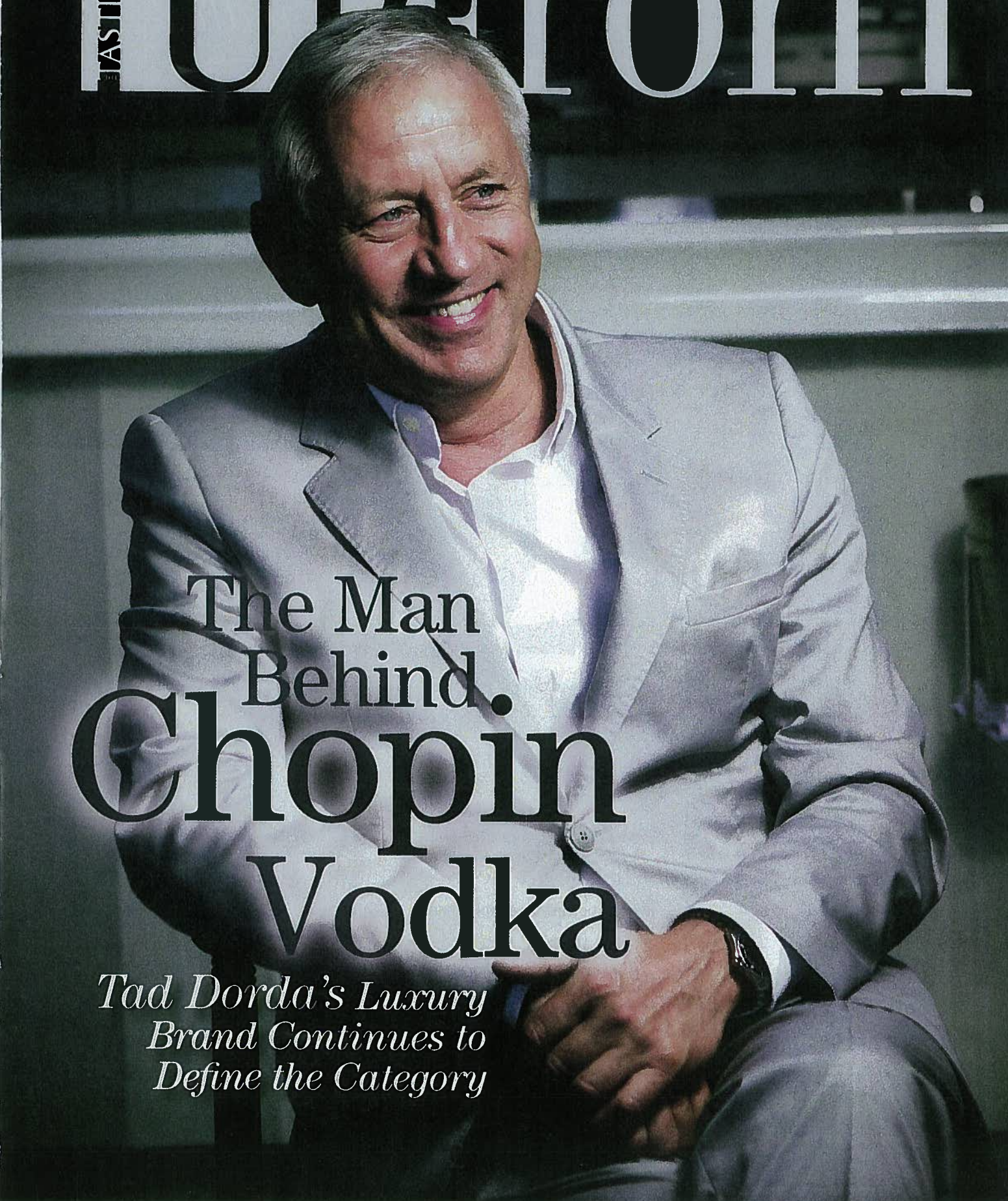


OCTOBER 2012

TASTING
PANEL

UPFRONT



The Man
Behind.
Chopin
Vodka

*Tad Dorda's Luxury
Brand Continues to
Define the Category*

Up Front with

Tad Dorda

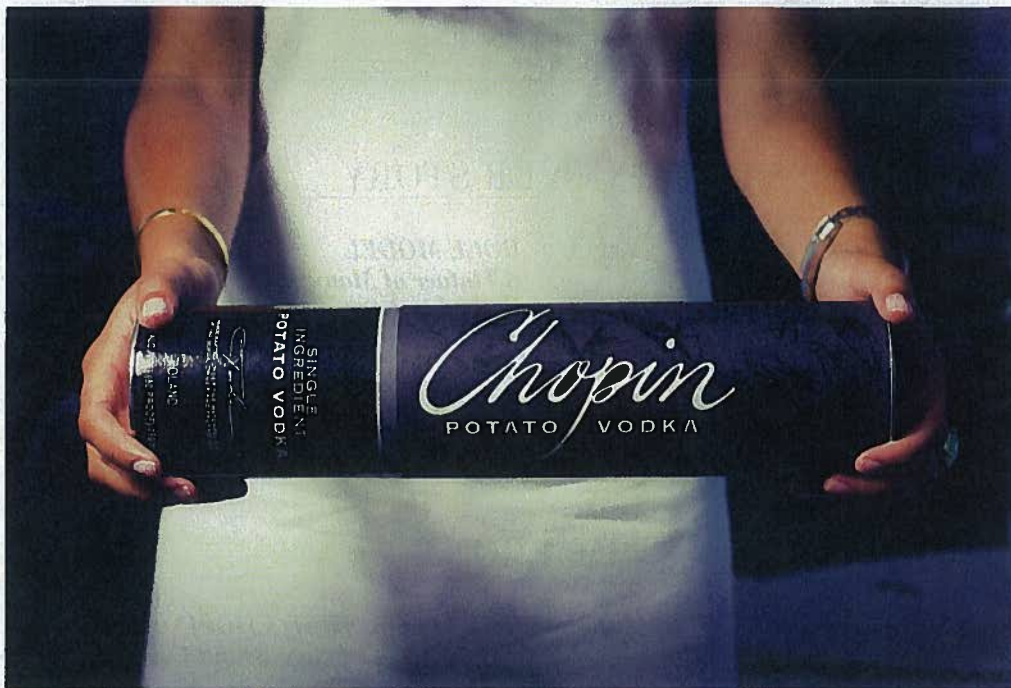
by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball



**Chopin founder
Tad Dorda and
his daughter
Alexandra.**



What really defines a luxury vodka? Is it the tall, frosted bottle? Or simply that it costs more, and therefore must be better than the rest? As a former wine buyer, I could talk for hours about the subtle differences between two bottlings of Pinot Noir. On the other hand, my knowledge of distilled beverages had always relied heavily on the branding of the product rather than its taste. When I sat down with Tad Dorda of Chopin Vodka, I honestly did not know what made Chopin different from other luxury vodkas. The truth is, you just need to taste it.



The Meeting

I met with Tad and his daughter Alexandra at the historic Mr. Chow's in Beverly Hills. Tad is suave, mysterious and could have been easily cast as the next James Bond. Alexandra Dorda assisted with the tasting, and discussed the flavor profiles of the vodkas as proficiently as a seasoned sommelier would discuss wine. A student at Stanford, Alexandra is trying to learn as much about the business as possible to serve in her current role as Brand Ambassador. When asked how she plans to get the message of Chopin to the younger generation, she answered, "Everyone wants to be the most knowledgeable consumer. If we can make drinking quality cool, then I think we can really get our message across."

The majority of vodka producers are rectifiers; that is, they purchase alcohol and re-distill it to create vodka. Some brands are just bottlers, who buy a finished product and bring it to market. Chopin is unique in that they control each step of the process, much like an estate winery would. Tad reasons, "If you don't make it yourself, how do you know what's in it?"

The fertile Podlasie region of Poland is the source for Chopin's trio of single ingredient vodkas: potato, rye and wheat. Chopin works with sustainable farmers to ensure that only the highest quality raw materials are used. "If you start with a good ingredient," says Tad, "all the flavor, the taste, the smell come from the ingredient. We don't add anything to it." This is not a new concept for the historic distillery, which has been producing unnamed vodkas for centuries. Tad has simply given it a name, Chopin—a tribute to the Polish composer, Frederic Chopin, a master of compositional clarity.

Liquid Assets

When we discuss wine, we always ask about the variety and the source. Since unflavored vodkas are not aged, put into barrels or infused, why aren't we asking the only relative questions: Where did it come from? What was it made from?

As I begin to understand what truly sets Chopin apart, Tad emphasizes that "The consumer needs to understand that, depending on what you make a vodka from, it will taste different."

We start with the Chopin Rye. The rye is spicy and slightly sweet on the tip of my tongue and finishes with a slight bitterness and mild burn. There's nothing subtle about it "which is why it's good for mixing, since it won't get lost in the mix," he says.

We move on to the Chopin Potato. The potato has a higher viscosity, making it seem oily on the palate; there's a slight sweetness to it, and a

smooth finish. Potato is the signature vodka for Chopin, as it was the first vodka they released to the U.S., in 1997.

Next, the newly released Chopin Wheat. Butterscotch and popcorn burst from the glass. At each pass, the liquid, and its aromatic and distinguishable character, become more generous, spreading across my palate. Even at room temperature, there is no burn, as this vodka is dangerously silky-smooth.

The Unveiling

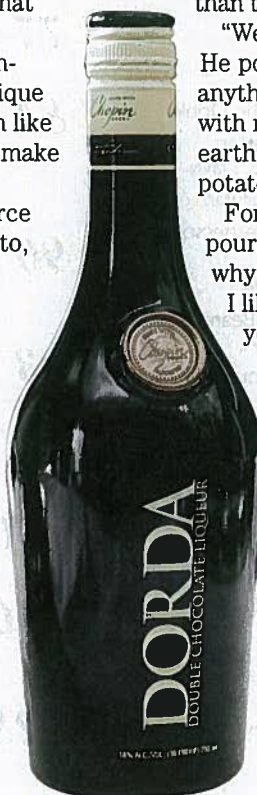
The very limited bottling of Chopin Single "Young Potato" Vodka was made from young potatoes rather than the traditional late-harvest potatoes. Due to the lower starch content, it takes three times as many potatoes to produce than traditional Chopin Potato.

"We asked the question, Why not?" Tad discloses. He pours. The vodka is one-time-distilled and unlike anything I've ever smelled. It's fragrant and is dotted with minerality, yet possesses a sweetness of vanilla and earth with the unctuousness you may expect from a potato vodka.

For the finale, we take an unexpected turn as Tad pours the Dorda Double Chocolate Liqueur. When asked why he decided to create this, Tad simply states, "Well, I like chocolate, and I like vodka. That's it." This is not your grandmother's after-dinner liqueur. Real chocolate—from some of the best chocolate producers in Poland—is melted and infused into Chopin Rye vodka. The spicy rye harmoniously accents the richness of the chocolate.

So what is the future for luxury vodka? It's time for a re-definition. We've allowed vodka to persist in a box that limits our ability to see, feel or taste. It's our job to take a new perspective and rely on our palates, not just on marketing.

As Tad Dorda puts it: "We know what good vodka is supposed to taste like, so why aren't we talking about it?" ■■



Dorda Double Chocolate Liqueur has a base of Chopin Rye vodka.