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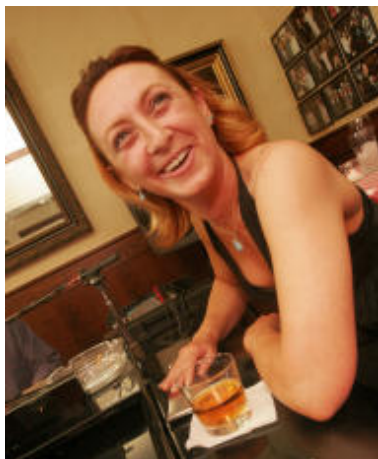
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Neria Elguero relaxes at the piano with a Jack Daniels at Maggiano's Little Italy.

Bill Olive: For the Chronicle



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Listening to the 'silent majority'

Distillers and vintners cater to feminine tastes by tailoring products to gentler palates

By **DAI HUYNH**

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Late one afternoon, Joann O'Connell and her friend arrive at Beso in the Galleria to have drinks before dinner. The waiter takes their order. While her friend opts for a glass of white wine, O'Connell orders Crown Royal Canadian whiskey on the rocks.

"You're the woman for me," the waiter exclaims, amused and surprised.

It's a scene that would warm a spirits distributor's heart — and one that plays out more frequently in restaurants and bars as wine and liquor companies ramp up their efforts to woo the female market.

Enter Lulu B., glass of wine in hand. Lulu is the stereotypical young French woman from an earlier day, wearing a pencil skirt and beret. She's also the alter ego of Nathalie Boisset, a leading French wine producer, and the name of three new wines she has created with the "female palate" in mind.

"As the female wine-consuming market continues to grow at an exponential rate," the company states, "Lulu B.'s place as a female winemaker making wine for women ... sets (it) apart from the rest."

Lulu B.'s chardonnay, syrah and pinot noir arrive at a time when the industry is buzzing with news of women's growing clout in the marketplace.

According to the Adams Beverage Group, women make 55 percent of the country's wine purchases. The Wine Market Council says about 60 percent of wine drinkers are women.

"If you ask the guys when they drink or purchase wine, they will list occasions," says council president John Gillespie. "The occasions are often cued by the women in their life — special occasions, going out to dinner on a date. And if you look at it that way, then women are also responsible for a fairly large number of the wines that men drink."

For Jean-Charles Boisset, president of Boisset America and brother of Nathalie, the influence of women has always been there.

"But it's only today that people are recognizing it," he says. "It's an evolution in winemaking. Oak used to be dominant. Now women are driving this phenomenon of making wines that are softer, more refined and with more depth."

Lulu B. is just one of the labels appealing to women. Olympic Cellars, a woman-owned and -operated winery in Port Angeles, Wash., positioned its Working Girl wine series as the "Official Wine of Working Women."

Rainier Wine launched the Mad Housewife label last spring. The company spent a year surveying women in 10 metropolitan markets before designing the labels and creating its chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon.

California winery owner Bart O'Brien was inspired to make the Bordeaux blend Seduction after eavesdropping on a conversation among his wife and her girlfriends.

"It struck me how they talk about wine, compared to how I and my men friends talk about wine," the Napa Valley vintner says. "Women talk about wine to enhance a social occasion. With men, wine was about one-upmanship, as in, 'I have a wine that's better than your wine.' "

The experience got O'Brien thinking.

"Women were the unrecognized silent majority," he says. "They were the driving force, but all the wine marketing was about men, from a male-dominant point of view. So my wife and I sat down and started talking about how we could pay more attention to the packaging and make it more attractive to women."

Swathed in a sheer, burgundy organza sachet (half-jokingly referred to as a negligee by wine-bar owners around town), Seduction is a sleekly designed bottle with a large gold letter "O" against an onyx backdrop. Beneath, in red, is the word "Seduction."

On the back of the bottle is printed an inscription: "Romance of the heart, passion of the soul. A voluptuous wine with sensual flavors and a velvet kiss." At the Vine Wine Room on Memorial, owner Joe Rippey sold out of the \$40 red within two weeks.

"It's a very feminine, lush and sexy wine," he says. "I bought what I could. Now, like everyone else, I'm waiting for the next release." O'Brien released 2,000 cases of Seduction last year.

He plans the same for June. "We have people calling right now, begging for more wine," he says.

While Seduction is full-bodied, the Wine Market Council found women prefer a

sip that is light and refreshing, or medium-bodied and smooth. Only about 12 percent of women who drink wine weekly choose wines with bold, intense flavors.

This could explain why brown spirits — Scotch and Canadian whiskies, bourbon, brandy, scotch — have had a tough time attracting women.

"One out of 10 women will order scotch," Ashiana Indian restaurant owner Latika Bathija says. "I'm a scotch drinker, (and) it is *the* drink of status in India, as well as other countries. I grew up with that tradition. Women in America didn't, so I think there's an untapped market here."

Spirits companies see the potential and some have started marketing to women.

Last year Minnesota-based Phillips Distilling rolled out Phillips Union whiskey, which comes straight or flavored with vanilla or cherry. Billed as smoother and more mixable than other whiskies, it's a direct appeal to young professionals and the female-driven cocktail category.

"Vanilla whiskey with pineapple is a delicious cocktail, and the cherry whiskey is a great alternative to the Cosmopolitan," president Dean Phillips says. "We're not targeting existing whiskey drinkers here. We're taking a page from the vodka playbook to make it accessible not only to women but also young male drinkers who wouldn't give this category a try."

Another strategy to get women to see brown spirits in a different light is to offer them a taste.

"At first they will say, 'No thank you. I'm not a whiskey drinker,' " Phillips says. "But with a little prodding, they'll give it a try and they'll not only like it, but they'll also buy a bottle. This takes a lot of hours and passion, but the results are extraordinary."

Food pairing is an important consideration for women. Dalmore Scotch whisky's "ambassador," Simon Brooking, has started pairing chocolate with his single-malt scotches.

"Women have a more discerning palate and nose," he says. "I compare single-malt scotch more with wine than any other spirit. ... I also encourage men and women alike to explore single malts as cocktails."

But perhaps the surest way to get a woman to change her drinking habit is through her diet.

"I strongly believe that the main reason you're starting to see women drink more brown spirits is because they're on a low-carb diet," says Stephanie Michels, a bartender at Maggiano's Little Italy on Post Oak Boulevard. Rum, scotch, gin, whiskey, bourbon and tequila contain no carbs.

"Wine has carbs," Michels says. "And that's why wine companies have started making low-carb wines."

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