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ROSÉ ALL THE WAY

WINE'S HOTTEST TREND
KEEPS EXPANDING



RUM: WHEN
SPICE IS NICE

CELEBRITY
BRANDS
ROCK ON

ALBARIÑO:
SPAIN'S
WHITE STAR



Ryan Reynolds bought Aviation Gin last year.



Rita Ora just launched her whisky, Heaven's Door, at the WSNA Convention in April.



Bob Dylan also arrived at the WSNA's Door festival.

STARS SHINE ON

THE BREADTH AND INFLUENCE OF CELEBRITY-BRANDED WINES AND SPIRITS KEEP EVOLVING

BY W. R. TISH



Once upon a time, celebrities made the covers of wine magazines just for drinking wine. Then they started making it. Or at least Francis Ford Coppola made it—and made it look easy. And Marilyn Merlot made it fun.

Next thing we know, as Americans were drinking lots of different kinds of wine and spirits, brands with celebrity connections—from movie stars and musicians to athletes and politicians and porn stars—started to creep up. And never stopped. Enough Reality TV stars had wines (count 'em: 12) that a pop culture website staged a taste-off.

The star-studding of beverage alcohol extended to spirits, too. (Even the Hatfields and McCays have a whiskey.) Indeed, it was on the liquor side where the financial clout of star power would be felt in the form of P. Diddy's Ciroc Vodka, which launched in 2007. Other star-aligned spirits that have established themselves include Dan Aykroyd's Crystal Head Vodka, Kenny Chesney's Blue



Surfer star Luke Davis is one of several celebrity influencers who has partnered with Bealbox RTD party punches.



Kenny Chesney's runs it his "No Stone Without a Brand."

Chair Bay Rum, Sammy Hagar's Cabo Wabo Tequila and Jay Z's D'Ussé Cognac.

But there is no simple formula—otherwise, P. Diddy's tequila, DeLeon, would sell like Ciroc cakes. And what happened with Effen Vodka and 50 Cent? Does anyone even know that Ludacris had a Cognac (Conjure); or that Martha Stewart had a wine brand; or that Pitbull had/had a vodka (Vol!)? And how many people know who Steven Soderbergh is (a film director), let alone his Singini 63, a Bolivian distillate of Muscat of Alexandria grapes?

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG WHISKEY

■ Bob Dylan's Heaven's Door is the new Kentucky thoroughbred in town. The Nobel Prize-winning musical outcast is clearly adept at whiskey selection as well. Heaven's Door expressions have snagged multiple awards and high critic's scores.

■ Longbranch. Wild Turkey's collaboration between Matthew McConaughey, in his role as the whiskey brand's creative director, and Master Distiller Eddie Russell, has caught fire. This small-batch Kentucky bourbon is refined with Texas mesquite and oak charcoals.

■ Conor McGregor's Proper No. Twelve sold out within months of being introduced last fall. The professional grappler's fan base is large and passionate, and after ironing out supply issues, Proper No. Twelve looks to have staying power, give or take McGregor's recent mumbblings about retiring and brushes with the law.

■ Here's a sleeper celebrity whiskey that is both new and different. In 2016, rapper Yelawolf created and launched Creek Water. The whiskey is made in Durham, NC, using a patented system that enhances barrel aging so that maturation can take place in days rather than years.

■ Blackened, the new whiskey project from heavy metal rockers Metallica, was created with the late Dave Pickens—a celebrity in whiskey circles. While aging, the whiskey is enhanced with its own Metallica playlist, selected and arranged by the band members.



Special aging brings Blackened Water of the Phobos Distillery to life.

WHITE SPIRITS GONE WILD

■ Country music superstar Kenny Chesney's "No Shoes Nation" is about lifestyle, not just music, so his brand Blue Chair extends seamlessly to his laidback, beachy line of rums and rum creams.

■ Sovereign Brands is targeting the hip-hop culture with their Panamanian Bumbu Rum; they created "The Bumbu Room," an online video series of no-holds-barred interviews with well-known rap artist Lil Wayne.

■ Ryan Reynolds bought into Aviation Gin, now a larger-than-life version of the actor can be seen sporting a three-day beard and a gin cocktail on the sides of Southern Glazer's trucks.

■ One to watch out for in 2019: The mansion featured in the British TV drama Downtown Abbey—Highclere Castle—is also the namesake for a gin. The castle and the gin are owned by George Herbert and his wife Fiona, the eighth Earl and Countess of Carnarvon. The gin is likely to get a boost from a film version of the beloved show. It is also worth noting that the couple have already launched a successful cigar line based on Highclere Castle.



Crystal Head has company in the vodka arena.

■ Belvedere and Janelle Monáe teamed up for "A Beautiful Future," a digital series of new content by three creative women filmmakers. Their films will be posted to Belvedere's YouTube channel starting in April and extending into other content and events for the next two years.

■ Stillhouse—a spirits line launched in 2009 in 750ml metal containers that resemble paint tins—made news recently using Bacardi. Rapper G-Eazy (part-owner since 2017) claims the rum giant backed out on a partnership deal. Stay tuned?

■ Virginia-based Belle Premium American Vodka has partnered with two-time Grammy nominee saxophonist/vocalist Mindi Abair, of Mindi Abair and the Boneshakers.



Keeping with its metal theme, each bottle of Blackened is "re-bottled."



Conor McGregor's Proper No. 12 is named after the Dublin neighborhood he grew up in.



Matthew McConaughey with Wild Turkey Master Distiller Eddie Russell.

STARS SHINE ON

In a way, the proliferation of star-driven wines is a natural byproduct of wine's overarching boom, and a sign of alcohol, despite regulatory hurdles, becoming more in tune with American consumer culture. But just when it seemed the idea of star-branded wines and spirits might have plateaued, the past few years have seen a spike of huge hits. George Clooney's and Rande Gerber's Casamigos Tequila and Conor McGregor's Proper No. 12 Irish Whiskey practically broke their respective bottle molds. And last summer's sudden must-have rosé was David

Into Hampton Water, South of France veteran Gérard Bertrand's collaboration with rocker Jon Bon Jovi and his son Jesse Bongiovi.

Predicting a hit is dicey business. It can't be just the juice in the bottle. Having a television platform never hurts, as evidenced by Avión's boost from HBO's *Entourage*. Rebecca Frankel's *Skinny Girl*—built on an audience of TV-tuned-in, calorie-counting women—effectively flipped the script: the street-savvy *Real Housewife* of New York became more famous after launching her brand of alcohol.



Julia D'Amico and Jen Bon Jovi with their smash Mt. rosé.

Perhaps most important of all, today's digitally-fueled society has recalibrated the whole notion of celebrity. The stars can be completely unrecognizable to people who don't follow those specific genre of arts or sports. So, part of the trick for wine and spirits merchants is determining just what (and how relevant) a celebrity angle is.

There are also matters of supply and promotion. Many celebrity beverages are made in tiny quantities; so, for example, even if you did know about Pink's wine label Two Wolves, you would not be able to sell it. As for promoting a celebrity connection,

there is every reason to flag it in the store. Distributors are usually happy to provide brand details, but they don't always have point-of-sale materials. In that case, house-made shelf talkers can play silent publicist.

Here is a look at some of the obvious and not-so-obvious celebrity-connected wines and spirits to consider carrying, depending on availability in respective markets. The fans are out there. Even when the star is not in-store signing bottles, making sure that celebrity connection is evident is a common-sense means of helping make sure you don't miss out on sales. ■



Sarah Jessica Parker



Lisa Vanderpump with her daughter, Pandora



Sam Neill



Country music star Blake Shelton's Smithworks Vodka is made in Kansas using corn from Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma (no hate state)



Latino boozer Caetano Alvarez was one of several celebrities featured in Hennessy Cognac's "Never stop. Never settle." campaign.

99 BOTTLES OF CELEBRITY WINE ON THE WALL...

■ Wine has no shortage of hands-on therapist writers. Drew Barrymore's eponymous label, for instance, and Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's **Château Miraval**. Sam Neill's **Two Paddocks Pinot Noir** from New Zealand are serious. Sarah Jessica Parker will be tapping into **New Zealand** this year, partnering with Inwio. The "**Supernatural**" project brand is so new that they had not finalized the name that will appear on the label as of press time, but the plan is to launch this year.

■ Bubbly wine makes for odd table-fellows sometimes; **Licita** is a new Lambrusco from Wu-lang Clan's Haekwon. Drake is behind the luxury **Champagne Mod Selection**. Christie Brinkley has "Zero Sugar" **Bellemea** and **Bella Spritz** sparklers from Italy. Usher Butler, the world's fastest man (2017), is the global ambassador for **G.H. Mumm**. It's also worth remembering that **Sofia** sparkling wines were named after Francis Ford Coppola's daughter, Sofia Coppola.

■ Other musically connected vintages include **Ferguson Estates** (by Fergie), **Z. Alexander Brown** (Zac Brown Band), and Train's "**Save Me, San Francisco**" label. Dave Matthews inspired Constellation's

The Dreaming Tree line of California wines; he also owns Blenheim Estate in Virginia. Sting's Tuscan estate wines are imported in small quantities by Taub Family Selections, but his **Roxanne** is national.

■ Perhaps the best indicator that celebrity power is alive and well in wine and spirits can be seen in the ongoing success of the Fine Wine & Good Spirits stores in Pennsylvania have had with bottle signings, including **Vanderpump Rosé**. "Some huge crowds at some of our events surprised us," notes Shawn Kelly, for the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. "Having people camp out 24 hours to meet Cheung Ching-tsun [for the **Old Forester** special Kingman edition] was not a surprise, but seeing more than 1,000 people line up at the Ardmore Fine Wine & Good Spirits Premium Collection to meet Lisa Vanderpump was somewhat unexpected. The sheer number of people who arrived at the store that morning was almost overwhelming."



AGAVE STAR TURN

■ **Casamigos** is the alpha dog among star tequilas, but this category is primed for more action. Chris Noth (best known as *Big in Sex & the City*) recently became majority owner of **Ambar**; he will be involved in creative direction and was reportedly key in securing national distribution with RNDG.

■ Professional wrestler turned actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is working on a new tequila brand as well, to be called **Mama**.

■ In March of this year, Consejo Brands announced a partnership with international pop singer Rita Ora to launch **Próspero Tequila** in the U.S. The brand promises even more girl power as Próspero was created by Stella Anguiano, one of Mexico's first female distillers. "With both Stella and Rita behind it, Próspero will appeal to strong vibrant women and tequila aficionados alike," asserts Roy Danis, Consejo's President and CEO.



Country star Toby Keith has a mesquite, Wild Shot, tequila with wine.



RTD: IT'S PARTY TIME

■ Check out Jenny McCarthy's **Blondies** line. Available as Lemonade and Strawberry Lemonade, Blondies uses coconut water, stevia and vodka; after several months of being offered only in husband Donny Wahlberg's Wahlburgers chain, Blondies distribution has expanded steadily since the 2017 launch.

■ Nikki Minaj's **Myx** RTDs play directly to her female fan base; these sweet, tropical mixes are strong in multiple markets.

■ **Beetbox Party Punch**, propelled by a normal appearance on *Shark Tank* where Mark Cuban invested \$1 million, continues to grow thanks to a network of influencers. These celebrities are specialized, mostly clustered among extreme athletes (such as surfer Luke Davis, with 96,000 Instagram followers) and DJs (GTA and Cut Snake, among others). As these celebrities have a vested interest in the brand, they naturally promote it via social media, custom content and the like.

MORE CONNECTED STARS AND BRANDS

