

Russian Vodka With a Feminine Kick

Michael Schwartz



MARKETING POWER The emerging role of women in the Russian economy has vodka makers looking to cash in.

THE vodka ads tiling the walls of the Moscow metro station's lengthy escalators abound with hypermasculine imagery. One poster for the Olymp brand in the central Tverskaya metro station shows a boxer with Cro-Magnon features wearing armor and chain mail, and carries the slogan: "The time for the strong has come."

Recently, a new billboard has appeared here, displaying a lavender-tinged bottle with a distinctive feminine shape, adorned in a white skirt billowing upward, à la Marilyn Monroe, to reveal the label, Damskaya.

"Between us girls," is the catchphrase for this vodka intended for women, a marketing campaign as jarring as, say, a Super Bowl commercial for women's Budweiser.

As the economy continues its skyward race, marketers are taking note of Russian women and the discretionary income they represent. Scores of seemingly unisex products, from cigarettes to juice, breakfast cereals and even mobile phone plans have adopted a feminine flare. A fleet of pink taxis with female drivers spares the women here the callous flirtation of male cabbies.

And now there is vodka for women.

"In Russia, vodka is definitely a masculine product," said Natalya Shumilina, the marketing director at Deyros, the distillery that produces Damskaya. A woman also likes "to relax with her girlfriends" and drop a few shots when the children go to bed, Ms. Shumilina said, but desires a vodka with a bit more femininity that retains a traditional kick.

In truth, vodka is vodka, and much of what makes this particular brand feminine is marketing. Damskaya, which is about \$12 a bottle, comes in five flavors, but otherwise tastes about the same as similar, midprice brands. It is still 40 percent alcohol, as required by Russian law to carry the vodka label, and is meant to be consumed neat rather than in cocktails.

Still, the trend is indicative of a changing dynamic in relations between men and women here.

With an infusion of new wealth, women have gained financial independence unheard of during Soviet times and the economic chaos that followed. The English word "shopping" has entered the Russian lexicon to mean a recreational activity often associated with women, many of whom are increasingly seeking products tailored specifically to suit feminine tastes.

"We are leaving — but not quickly — the idea of men supporting women and the idea of women seeking men who will support them," said Lena Vasilyeva, the editor-in-chief of the Russian edition of Cosmopolitan magazine.

Unlike in the Soviet era, when husbands and wives traditionally kept their money in a single account, women are increasingly creating bank accounts separate from their husbands' and saving a portion of their salaries to spend on themselves without input from their families, Ms. Vasilyeva said.

In large cities, Russian women have indeed grown more active in business and politics — there are two female cabinet ministers on the federal level — but are as disinterested in breaking from traditional roles as wives and mothers as shedding their patent-leather spike heels and miniskirts.

"Society is dictating new goals like making a career, et cetera, but the core still remains," Ms. Vasilyeva said. "For a Russian woman the family will always come first, I am certain, but this won't interfere with her building a career."

These are the women that Deyros covets. The distillery says it has aimed its marketing at women age 25 to 45 with average incomes and surplus cash, and focused on their families rather than wealthy, upper-class careerists who have been cultivating a taste for dry wine.

"This is not some super businesswoman, simply a girl who wants to visit her friend and relax a little because her husband is home with the children," Ms. Shumilina said.

The concept is a radical one for Russia and violates a golden rule of alcohol marketing: never advertise solely to women.

"You alienate the men, and women think it's too girly and feminine," said Adrian Goldthorpe of FutureBrand, a global branding consultancy that counts Russian vodka distributors among its clients.

Yet Mr. Goldthorpe violated the rule with Damskaya, helping to lead the team that developed the bottle design and label.

"It felt like it was a golden taboo in alcohol that we could actually break," he said by telephone from his London office. "When we look at Russia, we look at a very machismo society on the surface, but there is also a very, very strong matriarchal undercurrent that runs through it."

In a country awash in vodka, however, any new brand will have difficulty breaking in, said Oleg Yegorov, a press secretary for Russky Standart, a leading Russian vodka company. To be successful, he said, the company would need to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising to compensate for the small market of female vodka drinkers. Deyros has an \$8 million advertising budget for 2008.

Others worry that the product could be too successful and claim that promoting vodka to women could turn a bastion of sobriety in a country with a fondness for alcohol into hard-core drunks.

"Most likely, the next step will be infant's vodka for infant consumption," said Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's head sanitary doctor, the nation's equivalent to the surgeon general, in a recent interview about Damskaya with the Interfax news agency. He called the creation of a vodka for women "nothing more than refined cynicism" and said Russia's consumer protection agency would look into filing charges against Deyros for violating consumer rights laws.

Russian women do tend to be more conservative drinkers than men, one reason why they tend to live into their 70s, compared with men, whose average life expectancy is about 60.

Yet, vodka drinking is and nearly always has been part of the nation's tradition for both men and women, said Victoria B. Tochieva, director of the Vodka Museum in Moscow.

"I'm a follower of Peter the Great, who told people to cut their beards and enjoy vodka in lovely bars," she said.

In the early 18th century, Peter the Great granted women permission to drink vodka in public for the first time and even mandated that husbands take their wives to the bars of the new capital, St. Petersburg.

Three hundred years later, Damskaya has taken men out of the equation. Ms. Shumilina said she envisions women gathered around a bottle of Damskaya at the kitchen table, rather than at a bar, chasing shots with homemade snacks and giggly banter.

And, while pretty packaging might be more alluring than the actual product, the women-only market is expected to keep growing, Ms. Vasilyeva from Cosmopolitan said. (Damskaya is an advertiser.)

"We will not soon escape the color pink," she said. "To the contrary, these products will decorate our lives more and more."

And if Russia's men feel slighted by this revolution in rose, the Russian affiliate of Nestlé has come up with a consolation prize: a chocolate bar called simply "For Men."

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