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Ann Dowsett Johnston

She's the image of poised perfection: a come-hither blonde in a sexy gold dress, balancing a martini between polished red nails, painted just a shade darker than the swizzle stick perched jauntily through the "o" in "Classic Cocktails" above her head.

Call her Ms. February. She's the LCBO cover girl — a Betty Draper lookalike posed on the front of a glossy celebration of the Sixties. "You're swingin', baby!" it reads. "Do it up right like they did when after-work martinis were de rigueur..."

For several weeks this year, Ms. February was the hottest girl in town, her image towering tall in LCBO storefronts.

By March, she was toast, supplanted by a lanky brunette in a fuchsia mini-dress, cover girl for the LCBO Trend Report.

By Easter? The cover girl was no girl at all. Instead? An egg. Peach-toned, hand-painted, inscribed with the name "Lily." Martha Stewart picked up where *Mad Men* left off, and a bottle of Ontario bubbly — "Girls' Night Out" — had replaced the martini. "A homestyle Easter" featured napkins folded in the shape of bunnies.

Welcome to the new face of alcohol advertising, the "pinking" of the wine and spirits market.

Women are the target and they're big business. Earlier this year, Clos LaChance, makers of a wine called MommyJuice, tried to get a California court to declare that they were not infringing on the trademark of a rival wine called "Mommy's Time Out." Clos LaChance argued that the word "mommy" was generic, one that no company could monopolize.

Eventually, the two companies settled out of court, agreeing that both could use the mommy moniker.

As you might expect, Mommy's Time Out features a chair facing the corner, with a wine glass and a bottle on a nearby table. The MommyJuice label features a supple woman in a yoga position, juggling a computer, a teddy bear, a saucepan and a house. "Moms everywhere deserve a break," coos the back label. "So tuck your kids into bed and have a glass of MommyJuice — because you deserve it!"

Says Cheryl Murphy Durzy, so-called "Mom in Charge" and founder of the label: "My kids are 8 and 4, and they call my wine, 'Mommy's juice.' Lots of kids I know do this. Moms love talking about why they need MommyJuice, things like their kids wetting the bed. 'Can't wait for MommyJuice!' " And dads? "Oh yes, a huge, huge hit — on Mother's Day."

What are her thoughts about play dates with wine, about the fact that risky drinking is on the rise for women? "I think it's sexist," says Murphy Durzy. "For years, men have been relaxing at the end of the day. Does anyone ever say anything about a dad who has a beer at the ball game? No. Anyhow, I find it hard to believe that an alcoholic would want to drink a \$10 bottle of wine with MommyJuice on it!" Right now, she has her fingers crossed that the LCBO will pick up her label.

Meanwhile, the makers of Girls' Night Out wine, which features "aspirational" cocktail dresses on their labels, have gone to the trouble of registering their hot title in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand. According to the LCBO, these wines rank third in terms of dollar sales for the Ontario VQA wines.



Winemaker Cheryl Durzy photographed in San Jose, California.

Lucas Oleniuk/The Toronto Star

Doug Beattie, VP of marketing for Colio Estate Wines and originator of the Girls' Night Out name, says: "Eighty-five per cent of the purchase decisions in the \$12 to \$15 range for wines are 'female driven.'" For that reason, Beattie was "just shocked" to discover that the name Girls' Night Out was up for grabs in Canada. Having expanded into "wine-flavoured" beverages — Strawberry Samba and Tropical Tango, being two — he says the future of his successful label looks "terrifyingly fun." Says Beattie: "Those of the female gender are the ones who have done all the hard work!"

Girls' Night Out. MommyJuice. Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade. Smirnoff Ice Light. Wines with names like French Rabbit and Stepping Up to the Plate (with a label sporting a very high heel). Berry-flavoured vodkas. Vex Strawberry Smoothies. Coolers in flavours like kiwi mango, green apple, wild grape.

Women's buying power has been growing for decades, and their decision-making authority has grown as well. What these labels are battling for is women's downtime — and their brand loyalty.

When did the alcohol market become so pink, so female-focused, so squishy and sweet? When did booze bags turn pastel? When did women become such a focus of the alcohol industry?

David Jernigan is willing to ballpark a date. The affable, boyish-looking executive director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, based at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has spent his career watching the industry. He cites the mid- to late 1990s, when the spirits industry decided that women were the target market. Beer had ruled North America in the '80s and early '90s. Beer marketing was the stuff of pop culture: beer was fun, beer was sport. The spirits industry was languishing, seen as stodgy and boring. Suddenly, it decided to play catch up.

"They became incredibly aggressive at growing the market," says Jernigan. "They did market segmentation. They looked at who was underperforming, and of course, they saw women. For them, this was a global opportunity. This was conscious: the spirits industry understood they had to shoot younger and they had to shoot harder."

Thus was born the alcopop. Also known as the cooler, "chick beer" or "starter drinks" — sweet, brightly coloured vodka- or rum-flavoured concoctions in ready-to-drink format. "They're the anti-beer," says Jernigan, "drinks of initiation, cocktails with training wheels. They're the transitional drinks, particularly for young women, pulling them away from beer and towards distilled spirits. Getting brand loyalty to the spirits brand names in adolescence, so that you get that annuity for a lifetime that beer marketers like to talk about. An obvious product for reaching this wonderful and not yet sufficiently tapped market of young women."

According to 2010 data, 68 per cent of eighth-grade drinkers who drank reported having had an alcopop in the past month, 67 per cent of tenth-grade drinkers and 58 per cent of twelfth-grade drinkers. But in the 19-to-28 category, fewer than half had had an alcopop in the past month. Broken down by gender, they were more popular with girls and women in every age group. "The height of the craze for alcopops was 2004," says Jernigan. "By then, they had done what the industry needed them to do — reach out to females, and establish a bridge to the parent brands like Smirnoff vodka and Bacardi rum. And of course, none of the marketing shows the consequences of drinking."

"Smirnoff's is the girls' vodka," says Kate, 27, who loves Blueberry Stolichnaya. The McGill grad, now a Toronto marketing professional, has a firm handle on her own limits. "I'm 5-foot-2," she says. She also has a clear view of the various stages of drinking: between the high school days of drinking in friends' bedrooms — "There was definitely some stealing from the parents!" — through the university years. "University is the acceleration of drinking, not the initiation," says Kate. "People drink their faces off in university. There were times when I went drink for drink with guys. Guys think that's cool."

She has a lot of friends who do shots, but thinks twice before joining them, or having a martini. "I can't imagine dating without drinking, but I tend to stick to wine," she says. "I can't handle shots."

Says Jernigan: "Compared to distilled spirits, it takes a lot more beer, wine or alcopops to produce alcohol poisoning, to produce impairment, to impair judgment around risky sex, to make you fall off a balcony, than it does distilled spirits, which is why distilled spirits, in most cultures, are treated differently.

"And there's an additional public health issue for women: not only are they experimenting with the strongest beverage, but they're more vulnerable to alcohol because of the way that alcohol metabolizes differently in male and female bodies. If you're female and you're drinking spirits, and the guy's drinking beer, you're at a complete disadvantage. He's drinking a weaker beverage, he's metabolizing it more efficiently, and you're trying to keep up. And you've got Carrie Bradshaw saying that this is the image of the powerful woman — a woman with a cocktail in her hand virtually every moment that you see her, except when she's trying on shoes!"

Is Carrie Bradshaw, the *Sex and the City* character played by Sarah Jessica Parker, to blame for the martini-shots-vodka culture? Can it all be laid at her Jimmy Choos?

“Let's put it this way,” says Jernigan. “We cannot discount Carrie Bradshaw. But if Carrie Bradshaw hadn't been accompanied by a push by the spirits industry, she would have been a pebble in the pond. As it was, she was a boulder. Women had never been targeted before in the way they were targeted: after alcopops came distilled spirits line extensions — flavoured vodkas, absolutely every fruit you could imagine.”

In recent years, several countries, including Germany, France, Switzerland and Australia, have imposed special taxes on alcopops, addressing widespread concerns about their popularity as a drink of initiation. Germany nearly doubled the tax; Australia boosted it by 70 per cent. Many countries found substantial reductions in the consumption of these beverages.

Last year, in a move to reduce over-consumption, Saskatchewan created a new methodology for minimum pricing, based on the amount of alcohol in various products. Targeting low-priced high-alcohol products, 120 different beverages were impacted. A year later, consumption of products “at risk for abuse” is down 18 per cent, says Jim Engel, vice-president of the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority, referring to high-alcohol beer, fortified wines, plus certain ciders and coolers.

“Does that mean people substituted with a lower-alcohol alternative? We can't tell. But presumably, people chose products that were lower in alcohol, or drank less. There was an affordability barrier.”

With this pricing increase and others, there was an \$18 million revenue bump in the province. There was also a significant reduction in alcohol-related hospitalizations, especially those related to injuries.

Tim Stockwell, head of the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C., thinks all jurisdictions should follow Saskatchewan's lead: “Roughly 10 per cent increase in price leads to five per cent reduction in consumption,” says Stockwell. “We need to link all our prices to inflation, so alcohol doesn't get cheaper. The minimum price will be most relevant to the high-risk, the heaviest and youngest drinkers.”

And what about the glossy brochures from the LCBO, the ones with Betty Draper look-alikes holding the martini, and ads for Girls' Night Out wine?

“This is another example of slippage,” says Stockwell. “People have forgotten that the government monopoly was created with a social responsibility mandate.”

Jürgen Rehm, director of social and epidemiological research at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, agrees. In fact, if he had his way, Canada would ban all alcohol marketing. “We don't need a campaign saying that rosé is an indispensable part of summer,” says Rehm. “From a public health point of view, there is too much marketing. Canada is still drinking way above the world average. As a responsible regulatory agency, the LCBO does not need to maximize its revenue without considering the overall costs.”

Ontario may have pulled in \$1.9 billion from the control and sale of alcohol last year, but the direct alcohol-related costs for health care and enforcement exceeded that figure. This is true in most Canadian jurisdictions. Says Rehm: “People may not see alcohol as a problem, but they pay for it.”

The LCBO looks at things differently. “We take great pride in our emphasis on social responsibility,” says Nancy Cardinal, vice-president of marketing and customer insights, citing the bottles of water featured on the Canada Day insert.

What about their lush magazine, *Food and Drink*? “We have been wrapping food and entertaining around alcohol,” Cardinal says. And the beautiful stores? “Women complained that the stores felt like a guys' bar in the basement, so we have been working to make the shopping experience an enjoyable one.”

So where is all this heading?

“In the past 25 years, there has been tremendous pressure on females to keep up with the guys,” says Jernigan. “Now, the industry's right there to help them. They've got their very own beverages, tailored to women. They've got their own individualized, feminized drinking culture.”

His final thoughts?

"I'm not sure that this was what Gloria Steinem had in mind."

Ann Dowsett Johnston spent a year researching and writing on the issue of women and alcohol as part of the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy.

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