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## G Force

# Nantucket's Greg Nichols gives vodka making a go with Lucky Dog

By Luke O'Neil | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

### WHO

Greg Nichols

### WHAT

The vodka field may seem crowded, but with the spirits category still growing, Nantucket's Greg Nichols decided to give it a try. The result is Lucky Dog vodka, a recently launched wheat vodka and Gold Medal Winner at the 2011 New York World Wine & Spirits Competition. Nichols, 53, a former US National Freestyle Ski Team member, explained why a little competition isn't going to get in his way.

**Q.** There are so many vodkas on the market now. Why did you decide to go in that direction?

**A.** Well, I'm coming from outside the industry. I've been a designer and builder on Nantucket for 25 years. Then [the economic crisis of] 2008 came along and it stopped the building trades and real estate market down here on the island. I thought it was time for a reinvention, and I made a list, and what I wound up with was vodka.

**Q.** The vodka is distilled in Idaho. Why there?

**A.** I live on Nantucket, but for years I lived out west and I spent a lot of time in Sun Valley, Idaho, so I've always had a lot of back and forth. My distillers I've teamed up with are from Idaho, and it just wound up



MARIANNE KELLEY

being a great fit. It's made out of locally sourced Idaho winter wheat and the water all comes from the Rocky Mountains and the Snake River aquifer, which runs under the distillery. It's a farm to bottle process out there.

**Q.** Vodkas aren't supposed to have a taste, right? How does one stand out?

**A.** You get a whole string of people that say there's no difference between vodkas, it's all marketing, it's just ethanol and water. That's true to a small extent; you're not going to see the type of differences you would with a bottle of wine. But within that, we're a wheat vodka. It's really, really smooth, so I would put us up against any vodka in the world based on smoothness. And the wheat gives it a slightly sweet finish, and there's no burn.

**Q.** You live on Nantucket year round? What's that like?

**A.** It's pretty cool. Right now, it's crazy by our standards. People [complain] about the traffic, which is not anything compared to Boston. It's fabulous. I live out on the tip of the island. Three months of the year it's the greatest place on Earth to live, then three months it's not so great. The wind blows hard in the winter, and there's nobody around, it's all shut down.

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**Q.** You're an accomplished skier. What is freestyle skiing?

**A.** Freestyle skiing, you see it in the Olympics now, with mogul skiing and aerials, where the guys are flipping end over end. This is going back a ways. I'm 53 now, this was my late teens and early 20s. At that time, there was a US National team but it hadn't yet been accepted as an Olympic medal event. Then I spent a few years on the pro tour after.

**Q.** Did you learn anything about business from skiing?

**A.** Maybe when you retire from something like that you're still geared for competition. When I started looking at this vodka thing, talking to people in the know, they would say, “No, the vodka market is saturated, you can't do this.” That kind of hardened me up from a competitive sense. It made me want to do it more. So maybe there is that connection.

**Q.** How big do you want to get?

**A.** It's funny, I think a lot of people get into the vodka field when they're younger. A lot fail, obviously, but everyone gets in thinking they're going to be flying in their own Gulfstream next year. I'm jaded enough where I don't assume any of those things. Right now it's a lot of fun and I just want to keep rolling with it.