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Builder enters booze business with Lucky Dog

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Photo by Jim Powers

Greg Nichols with his Lucky Dog Vodka at the Sconset Casino.

For Greg Nichols, the recent recession was a sign it was time to get out of the building business and into the vodka-making business. A co-owner of Sankaty Builders on Nantucket, Nichols decided it was as good a time as any to switch career paths.

The decision led him on a multi-year project that ultimately resulted in the founding of Lucky Dog Vodka. The spirit proclaimed to be "Born on Nantucket. Raised in the Rocky Mountains" hit the shelves at liquor stores and bars at the end of the spring.

The name Lucky Dog came from a term Nichols and his surfing buddies on Nantucket used for the person in the lineup who the peak of the wave was approaching. It's in that vein that Nichols is marketing his spirits. Think people surfing and skiing and being active, not waif-thin models drinking in dimly-lit bars.

"My only experience with vodka was drinking it," Nichols said, "and I would just see all these vodkas were all pretty self-reverential, all frosted bottles. Everyone is trying to be hip and cool. And I saw a little niche there, our approach is basically we sort of flipped that on its end. Our tagline is 'it's better to be fun than cool'.

We've almost brought the beer model to the vodka market. The marketing is sort of lighthearted and humorous."

The first step for Nichols was to find out where to distill his vodka, and Nantucket was out of the question. He was determined to have his spirits column-distilled instead of batch-distilled.

"First off, I knew I wasn't going to be distilling on Nantucket, just because of the logistics of it. The way I wanted to distill is called column distribution, which is huge. So it's not like a little pot-still that they have out at Triple Eight, this thing looks like the launching pad for the Challenger. It wouldn't have even been possible to do it here."

The journey to column distillation brought Nichols to Sun Valley, Idaho, a familiar stomping ground where in his early 20s he competed as a member of the U.S. National Freestyle Ski Team. There he partnered with Distilled Resources, a private-label vodka distillery that uses column distillation.

"They don't produce their own vodka (label), they're just sort of these guys in lab coats. They're geeks and they just love making vodka," he said.

To create Lucky Dog Vodka,

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Vodka: Islander finds Lucky Dog spirit

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Distilled Resources use local Idaho winter wheat, fermented and distilled with water from the Snake River Aquifer, which is composed of Rocky Mountain meltwater.

Lucky Dog has been on the shelves for three months, and the reviews have been extremely positive. It was recognized as the gold-medal-winning white-unflavored vodka at the 2011 New York World Wine and Spirits Competition. In the upcoming August issue of *The Tasting Panel*, the beverage industry's highest-circulation publication, Lucky Dog received 92 out of

a possible 100 points, placing it in the "exceptional" category.

It is also the official vodka of The American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

"I have an intern who met a girl on the beach who was their special events coordinator, and I think they had a slight romance and the next thing you know I get signed up for that," Nichols said.

As the official vodka, Lucky Dog provides spirits during fundraisers and new exhibit opening parties for the museum.

On Aug. 25, Lucky Dog Vodka is teaming up with the Lucky Dog Music Hall in Worcester for Doga-

palooza to benefit the African Services Committee. The nonprofit organization run by Nichols' sister Kim is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the African community in New York City. Lucky Dog Vodka is donating a \$1 for every Facebook "like" it receives to the African Services Committee.

Lucky Dog Vodka is available at all liquor stores on-island and about half of the bars, Nichols said. The heavy, clear-glass bottles have a picture of a red dog on the front offset by the Rocky Mountains in the back.