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## **SKOAL! COMRADE**

### **VODKA DARES TO CHALLENGE GREY GOOSE**

By COELI CARR

Your next vodka martini could cost you a little less.

The red-hot vodka category is about to get a bit more competitive as a value brand popular outside the U.S. is about to launch a stateside marketing blitz - taking aim directly at Grey Goose, the category's No. 1 super premium name.

The upstart brand, Sobieski, produced in Poland, sells for less than \$11 a bottle - compared to the \$30 a bottle, or more, that super premium brands command

In brash marketing materials aimed at the U.S. market - where it is just now starting to sell - Sobieski calls out the pricey brands, including Bacardi's Grey Goose, the favorite of Wall Street types and uptown hipsters.

"Sincerest regrets to those who'd like to spend more on their vodka," reads one ad. Another, alluding to Poland's long-ago battlefield victories over savage foes, the ad claims "It's unlikely a Grey Goose will stand in its way."

Other marketing materials aim to convince vodka drinkers that Sobieski's ingredients are equal to any other vodka on the shelf. "We're not bad-mouthing Grey Goose," said Chester Brandes, president and CEO of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.-based Imperial Brands, which is importing Sobieski. "We're just saying we're a serious brand and a force to be reckoned with."

## Potato/potatoes

In a blind taste test, we pitted the \$29 Grey Goose against Sobieski and our three taste testers could hardly tell one from the other.

**Subject one:** Harry Dubin, Real estate developer, bon vivant:

**Grey Goose:** It's very smooth and with a nice clean taste

**Sobieski:** Smooth, a little sweeter, a bit harsher with a pleasant aftertaste.

**His Choice:** Grey Goose

**Subject two:** Don Rowland, liquor distributor:

**Grey Goose:** Silky smooth, with scents of vanilla and some smoke.

**Sobieski:** You can actually taste rye. Has a bit of a bite.

**His Choice:** Grey Goose

**Subject three:** Janice O'Connor, hotel bartender:

**Grey Goose:** Very smooth with notes of pepper and vanilla.

**Sobieski:** Like it. Has a malty, slightly minty flavor with a kick to it.

**Her Choice:** Sobieski



That remains to be seen.

Since its mid-1990s launch, Grey Goose has been the top dog in the top spirits category, getting top dollar in liquor stores and the top shelf in saloons from The Battery to The Bronx.

"Everybody loves their Goose," Ruben Alban, bar manager at Harry's at Hanover Square, said last week. "Grey Goose is the name in vodka," said Alban, who has served many a trader and Wall Street bonus baby. "People who have money don't care about the price."

Amanda Schuster, spirits buyer at Astor Wines & Spirits, doesn't think Sobieski will have an easy time making it in the Big Apple. Customer brand loyalties, she said, are hard to shake. But, the buyer added, a key factor will be how the professionals rate Sobieski. "The general public has to hear someone else say it's good," she said.

Sobieski has already tip-toed into some New York City bars, restaurants and stores but Brandes intends on turning the heat up on his higher-priced rivals very shortly. *Additional reporting by Braden Keil.*

