

Mark O'Brien

Mark O'Brien, along with his co-conspirators Mark Simmonds and Steve Turner, are crafting a New Zealand-made vodka punching well above its weight on the global scale.

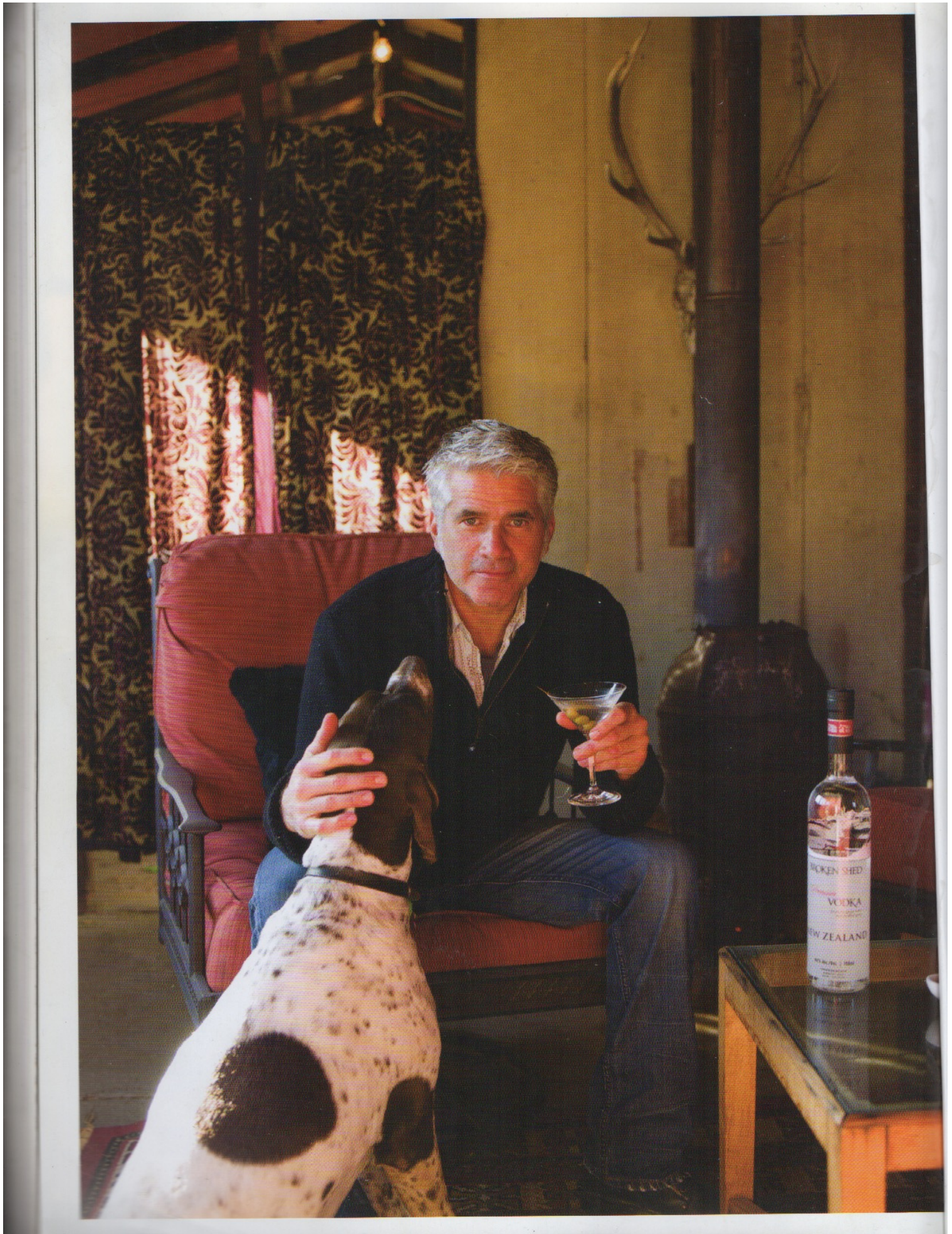
My first question elicited a 25 minute answer so I knew from the get-go that Mark O'Brien, the American co-founder of Wanaka-based Broken Shed Vodka, was truly passionate about his creation. If international acclaim is anything to work from, the two silver medals recently won (at the 2011 International Wine and Spirit Competition and 2011 San Francisco World Spirits Competition) indicate this self-titled ultra-premium vodka more than lives up to its claims. When not hitting the road to press the flesh and spread the good word, Mark spends a substantial portion of time in the actual broken shed on his lakeside property that gave rise to its namesake.

Mark's is an interesting story. Moving from New York to the South Island of our faraway corner of the globe, this former real estate developer arrived to continue his career in a new, relaxing and hospitable location. But as with so many around the world, the Great

Financial Collapse led to hard times and Mark found himself in a bind with the need to diversify and find something new to do. 'I came here with my wife and five kids and thought, what can I do in Wanaka? It was a lifestyle thing, but I needed to do something serious and real, because I've got five kids! There was another American, Steve Turner, who had also moved here, and we'd sit in this broken shed on my property drinking martinis and thinking up ideas – suddenly we thought, well why not vodka?'

The inevitable assumption, one Mark is clearly familiar with, is that the brand looks to follow in the footsteps of 42 Below – the often touted local success story sold to Bacardi for a cool NZ\$138 million. And while Mark heaps praise on those trailblazers who came before them for putting New Zealand vodka on the map, they've got a clear route in mind that differs greatly from the story we have heard before.

It was a combination of logical thinking, a love of good drinks and finding themselves in a location they describe as, 'very high-end but approachable and non-pretentious – that's what we wanted for our vodka and that's how we see New Zealand.' I'll admit to being flattered by this talk of my home being ultra-premium, and Mark assures me it's true. 'Being from the States we've got a different perspective of your country,' he explains. 'We think that while it's so premium it's also rustic and classic. Most people around the world think New Zealand is a part of Australia, or most people are not quite sure where New Zealand is on the globe. They think, 'Oh New Zealand! Isn't that where they filmed *Lord of the Rings*? Don't they have a really good soccer team?' Droll banter aside, it was the image of New Zealand as this clean, green Mecca, blended with our abundance of pure ingredients that allowed Broken Shed to form, and has no





doubt contributed to its success. And after the aforementioned evenings of knocking back drinks (in true Kiwi fashion) they came to the conclusion that if the country had such a world leading reputation, why not focus on nothing but the best? This they tell me, is where they differ from the 42 Below story and begin to carve out their own niche. '42 Below did it and did a great job, really creative and sophisticated with good marketing – we're not nearly as good as them with their marketing – but we couldn't figure

something Forterra has provided our nation with an abundance of, why. It wasn't an easy decision Mark tells me; they sampled grains from South Africa, sugar cane from Australia and locally sourced grapes – but it was why that gave the best results in their personal blind taste tests. 'We decided why was the best at first,' Mark admits, 'but then thought no, it has to be grain, and convinced ourselves that grain was better. But after getting more people involved, with a bit of self-couraging and a lot more taste

commitment to producing nothing but the best – cleanliness is next to godliness after all. There's only one characteristic that backs the trend and that's the same – a self-intentional variation no doubt. As Mark puts it, 'We're ultra-premium vodka but named after a broken shed. Our design agency didn't like the name the first time, because it should be premium and pure – and the name Broken Shed doesn't really resonate with that, but we disagreed. We thought maybe people were over being

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out why they didn't position themselves more premium, and that's where we're heading – aiming for the Grey Goose and Belvedere of the world.' This implies they are a force for the state, and good on them. Another thing that truly sets Broken Shed apart is the unique ingredients that are used to produce the pure alcohol we know and love. While potato, rye or wheat are the most common derivatives for vodka, this Wanaka-based outfit decided to do things a little differently, and ended up producing their spirit from

testing, we agreed to go with why. It has a creamy, crisp taste, and after sending samples to Otago University for analysis, we found that it was the cleanest spirit we could produce.' It's this concept of purity and cleanliness that Broken Shed has steadfastly adhered to throughout the development and production process – hell, even the product design follows the same pattern. It's a commendable attribute and one that resonates well with its God-given sourced ingredients and

splashed with gold and diamonds, they wanted something real – something first-class, but a little bit rustic – just like New Zealand.' As the saying goes, only time will tell if this unique twist on vodka will resonate internationally, but with 20,000 bottles arriving in New York this week (at the time of writing), I'd say it won't be long before Broken Shed receives the five-star international treatment. It definitely will from me. Words by Will Seal. Photos by Guy Frederick.