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URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

# The Hangover Upgrade



I don't want anybody to think that because I'm writing about a hangover prevention drink on Sunday morning, it means I overdid it Saturday night. I drank responsibly and was asleep by midnight. Not for one second did the bedroom spin.

I can't even attest to the efficacy of Mercy, the product in question. It's a carbonated beverage, said to be packed with vitamins and amino acids. It comes in a white can decorated with an angel in an azure one-piece bathing suit, who I suppose is to mean to signify purity and the customer's seriousness about begging the gods for forgiveness after a night of overdoing it.

To know whether it works would probably require me to drink four or five vodkas, or several shots of tequila in quick succession. I'm not above such antics, but I'm certainly not going to challenge my kidneys, bladder and brain for something as inconsequential as a newspaper column. There would have to be a really good reason, such as my birthday or New Year's Eve, to test the potion and suffer the consequences if it didn't live up to its claims.

I considered giving it to my older daughter and her friends to try. And I may yet; there's a case of the stuff, which retails for around \$3 a can, sitting in my hallway. But it wouldn't be the parentally responsible thing to do to encourage her to get drunk—though my impres-



Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal (2)



Mercy CEO David Racicot, left, and founder Dave Shor at the Manhattan restaurant Bagatelle, top; above, cans of the drink.

Beam and Campari. It's not for me to second-guess the Mercy team's marketing strategy. But I'm not sure jumping on the healthy-foods bandwagon is the way to do it.

I was slightly surprised when Mr. Racicot spoke of "the integrity of the ingredients" in a can of Mercy in the same breath as "farm-to-table" cuisine. Indeed, he even raised the beverage in the context of family values. "Mercy allows me to be out and be social with loved ones," he said, citing Sunday brunch. "Mercy will allow you to wake up and feel great on Monday."

My hunch is that if you drink so many bloody marys



tion of the current 20-something Brooklyn bar scene is that little encouragement would be required.

No, I was more interested in Mercy—its genesis, marketing and potential for becoming the next Red Bull—from an anthropological point of view. In short, did Dave Shor, the company's founder and the beverage's inventor, create it because he's a shrewd businessman who spotted an unfilled niche in the beverage marketplace, or did he suffer one too many hangovers and resolve to do something decisive about it—not that the two are mutually exclusive?

"College is really where it started," he explained, meaning his student days at SUNY Albany during the '90s. "I didn't puke that much. I got hangovers after two or three drinks. It was more just being debilitated."

In Mr. Shor's defense, he didn't bring up vomiting, I did. I recalled a losing encounter with Southern Comfort my freshman year of college and wondered whether something like that had set him on his course to come up with a hangover cure. I also vaguely recalled my head hanging out my bedroom window one New Year's Eve well into adulthood, that strategy becoming necessary after a night of drinking

and several friends deciding it would be fun to pile on top of me in the snow. Tree climbing might also have been involved.

But Mr. Shor explained that his interest was as much scientific as profit-oriented. As a matter of fact, he proved a challenging interview subject because every time I asked a question with a seemingly simple answer—such as "yes," "no," or "No, I never woke up in Macau wrapped around a toilet bowl with no recollection of having left New York"—he launched into explanations about how Mercy worked, employing multisyllabic words such as acetaldehyde, glutathione and an entire glossary of vitamins and amino acids. These ingredients, Mr. Shor claimed, when combined with bubbles and flavoring ("You're tasting light citrus with a bit of lemongrass," Mr. Shor informed me when I took a swig) will rid your body of toxins, replenish its antioxidants and provide the relief that civilization from the ancient Greeks and Romans, through medieval friars and the kings of France, up to and including the sional president of the United States, have been praying would come along before morning.

My father, who did a lot of business in Poland during the '50s, where no deal was signed

without first consuming a bottle of vodka, told me the secret was to eat a hearty meal before you start drinking. I asked Mr. Shor his opinion of what I'll call "the cheeseburger strategy."

"A cheeseburger is unhealthy," he said. "It's bad for the system. It doesn't have any scientific benefits."

I suspect that when your ultimate goal is to avoid feeling like you want to die, and then getting fired when you

### **'College is really where it started,' said Mercy's inventor.**

show up to work for the fifth week in a row unable to function until noon, who cares whether the cure potentially raises your cholesterol. You need a take-off-the-gloves, fight-fire-with-fire (or rather with ground sirloin, melted cheddar and smothered onions on a bun) approach.

When we met at Bagatelle, a bistro in the Meatpacking District that carries Mercy, we were also joined by David Racicot, Mercy's new CEO. Mr. Racicot previously held senior marketing positions with companies such as Coca-Cola, Jim

Sunday afternoon that you're still recuperating Monday morning even Mercy won't help, unless in conjunction with the Betty Ford Center. Rather than going medicinal, I think I might change the labels to black and white, replace the angel with a priest, and market Mercy as an exorcism in a can.

In any case, Mr. Shor said that the shrewdest way to consume it is to make it your last, or next-to-last drink of the night. His hope is that when last call comes customers order a Mercy instead of another vodka on the rocks, or a Mercy and a vodka on the rocks. The possibility was even floated, though perhaps only by me, of combining the vodka with Mercy instead of tonic.

Indeed, ultimately, the Mercy executives would prefer that their drink not be associated with weakness, lack of discipline or anything sinful, but rather as one more weapon in a winning All-American arsenal that includes things like a take-charge personality, a Harvard Business School degree, and revolving-door stints running the U.S. Treasury and Goldman Sachs.

"I've always thought of Mercy," Mr. Racicot said, "as giving you a competitive advantage."

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