

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a bottle of SIA Blended Scotch Whisky. The bottle is clear glass with a white label that has 'SIA' in large black letters and 'Blended Scotch Whisky' in smaller text below it. The whisky is a golden color. The background is a blurred bar setting.

For the Love of SCOTCH



Following a passion, whisky entrepreneur Carin Luna-Ostaseski has turned her own carefully cultivated love of Scotch into a beautiful new brand called SIA, breaking through barriers in the boys club of brown booze ownership while providing a stellar and accessible spirit for consumers to experience on-premise.

By Chris Ytuarte

As you can plainly see, Carin Luna-Ostaseski is not a man. She is a woman. You should also know that she is not Scottish. She is of Cuban descent. And by her late 20s, preferring gin martinis, she had not yet tried a drop of whisky. For some, these traits might indicate strikes one, two, and three against Luna-Ostaseski ever being considered a candidate for creating a lovely new Scotch all on her own. And they would be wrong.

With the release of her SIA Blended Scotch Whisky earlier this year, Luna-Ostaseski has firmly established herself as capable of many things — breaking down traditional barriers associated with the masculine production of brown spirits like whisky; utilizing innovative marketing and financial tools have been around for fewer years than most well-aged bottles of Scotch; and creating an award-winning, recognized product that is hitting the right market at the right time.

"It's a universal Scotch," says Luna-Ostaseski. "There are days when I want a really hard, peaty whisky like an Ardbeg or Lagavulin, but that's not for everybody. What I wanted to create was something for people who are just getting into whiskey. It's for someone who might be a bourbon or a rye drinker, or maybe someone who already knows they like Scotch but wants something that is more of an everyday Scotch. It's in that sweet spot, that gateway, for someone who is just starting to dip their toes in."

And it wasn't long ago that Luna-Ostaseski was doing just that — dipping her toes into the world of whisky for the first time. As a graphic design professional living in New York City in her 20s, it took a friend to lure her away from her gin martinis to try something new. "He asked me to go have a Scotch after work and I told him I didn't drink Scotch," she explains. "I said it was my grandfather's drink and it's too



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strong. He asked me if I'd ever tried it, I said, 'Yes, once,' and he said, 'Well that's stupid. That's like saying you had one glass of red wine once and now you don't drink any red wine at all.' So he took me on a whiskey adventure, as I call it, and I tried three or four that night that were amazing and I completely fell in love with this spirit."

Almost immediately Luna-Ostaseski began experimenting. She paid it forward, now finding herself to be the champion of great whisky, bringing her friends out to try her newfound passion, yet facing the same stereotypes she had moved beyond herself — "Scotch burns my nostrils, it tastes like gasoline, it's too expensive," she was told. Determined, she brought the process home instead. "I started taking single malts in my kitchen and blending them in different proportions and then trying them on friends and eventually on strangers. I started doing some Scotch tasting events to really find out what it was people liked or didn't like about certain brands. And over the course of a decade I decided that I was onto something — and I then had to figure out how to make a Scotch."

Fast-forward some 15 years to find Luna-Ostaseski, a confirmed Scotch enthusiast, realizing that her passion could become her profession. Across those years, the consumer palate had shifted, brown spirits were trending, and the movement was on. There was no better time to break into the market.

"I think this is a good time for whiskey," she says. "A couple of years ago when I was first doing this somebody once told me, 'You know, what's good about what you're doing is that you're a little bit early.' And right about now is when it feels like it's starting to hit because brown spirits are on the rise. Everybody is loving the bourbons and the ryes and they're starting to get into the whiskies. We're starting to see a time where, because of the No Age Statement versions coming out, a lot of single malt brands can't keep up with the demand because they don't have time to age. So you're seeing a lot of these bigger guys like Glenlivet and Glenmorangie leading the charge with these NAS versions and doing consumer education for me, basically. They're telling customers that age isn't that important, it's more about the flavor profile, which is great. It's taking away some of that challenge of when I go into bars and stores and they're like, 'Well, what's the age on it?' It's just not as important anymore."

Indeed the whisky landscape is shifting. For the first time, a Scotch made in Japan won the title of "World's Best" from *Jim Murray's Whisky Bible* when Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013 received 97.5 out of 100 points. And the NAS trend, embraced by industry stalwarts like Macallan with its own Rare Cask offering this year, allows for skilled distillers to create flavor profiles without waiting years to age them. The times are changing, perfect for a female ready mix it up with

the big boys of brown booze. Though, with SIA, that is not necessarily what Luna-Ostaseski is focused on.

"A lot of people don't know that a female is behind it, and that's kind of cool," she says. "I'm definitely trying to fight the notion that this is some kind of a 'girl Scotch.' What I did go for was a really smooth nose, and what I found overall from both men and women is that one of the biggest turn-offs about Scotch was this blast of peat they would get before they even taste it, and so much of the tasting experience is the nose. You could decide in your mind that you already don't like it before you taste it. So the nose on SIA is really smooth, with vanilla and caramel and citrus. Overall, that's what I was going after — making it more about the flavor profile and not so much about being for men or for women."

Indeed, SIA is a standout Scotch beyond its own intriguing backstory and ownership. As an ultra-premium blend with a high malt-to-grain ratio of 40/60, its regional breakdown is Speyside (50%), Highlands (40%) and Islay (10%), a testament to Luna-Ostaseski's early days of blending booze back in her kitchen. At 86 proof, SIA has a long, smooth finish with hints of hazelnut and toffee to pair nicely with its nose. At the 2014 San Francisco World Spirits Competition, SIA took home the coveted Double Gold.

"SIA is the number six in Scottish Gaelic, which is my favorite number and it's the day I was born," explains Luna-Ostaseski. "I wanted something that wasn't difficult to pronounce; with names like Laphroaig and Lagavulin, I think people feel a little silly ordering something they don't know how to pronounce, so I wanted to make sure SIA was something easy to say. And because it's a short name, I could make it really big on the label."

In keeping with SIA's unique entrance into the spirits industry, Luna-Ostaseski funded the brand's launch in 2014 through the crowdsourcing Web site Kickstarter, the first Scotch ever to do so and one of the most successful spirit brands ever to fund through the site. "Successfully funding on Kickstarter means that you already have an audience for your product when you launch," she says. "I was so excited to see that people not only shared and wanted to support my vision, but also wanted to place an order."

Currently distributed in California and Illinois, Luna-Ostaseski hopes to grow that reach in 2015. "I wanted to learn from my mistakes on a small scale before I expand too quickly," she says. And beyond a newly hired intern, she remains a one-woman operation. "And up until about five months ago I was still working my fulltime job. So trying to find the moment where I've got enough money to go for it but also taking those steps as a first-time entrepreneur in an industry that you're not familiar with — those have been huge challenges."

For a woman of Cuban descent launching a Scottish liquor into a male-dominated market, huge challenges are likely nothing new. ▀

The Boys are Back In Town:

Two brothers hope to revive a Tennessee whiskey that their family founded in the 1800s



Brothers Andy Nelson and Charlie Nelson have always had a lot in common. Both graduated from Loyola Marymount with degrees in the Humanities, concentrating on Philosophy; both are history buffs, true southern gentlemen and proud of their family roots. But when they set out to resurrect Nelson's Green Brier Distillery, founded in the 1800s by their great-great-great grandfather Charles Nelson, the boys realized their kinship ran deeper than blood. They both had spirit pulsing through their veins. So in their mere 20s, the Nelson brothers have set on a grand journey — not just to make and sell whiskey — but to rebuild a business that helped bring the term "Tennessee Whiskey" to America and Europe.

Through researching, seeking capital, crafting brands from Charles Nelson's original recipes and putting bottles of their small-batch bourbon on shelves, they are the essence of the American dream and spirit. "For us, starting the businesses was mostly about carrying out the family name," Charlie recently told *Forbes.com*. "People can see that passion in the product."

Distilled from a mash of corn, wheat and barley then charcoal mellowed, Green Brier Distillery uses the original recipe that made the brand so popular more than 100 years ago. It is single-distilled to retain the full flavored characteristics needed for barrel aging.

At its peak, the Charles Nelson Green Brier Distillery produced more than 30 brands of whiskey — in addition to brief forays into fruit brandy and gin. The brothers hope to attain something of a similar scale one day, and intend to brand their own creations with the ancient distillery's original labels.

"We want to be more than just a craft or micro distillery," Andy says, "because that's never who we were. We want to bring the name back to worldwide recognition."