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## Maven Cocktails' Stephenie Harris is in the Business of High Spirits

by Winnie McCroy  
EDGE Editor  
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Stephenie Harris spent nearly 20 years working for some of the world's top wine and spirits brands, including many in the Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) portfolio. So when she decided to branch out on her own, she took those years of customer feedback into consideration to create **Maven Cocktails** -- a low-calorie, low-sugar, gluten free, ready-to-drink cocktail line that fuses wine and vodka, with a lower alcohol content and a reclosable bottle created especially with female drinkers in mind.

"Maven is a super premium, ready-to-drink collection of cocktails that taste like a great glass of wine, but have the spirit of a classic cocktail," said Harris. "I wanted our cocktails to be

low calorie, low in carbs and also low in sugar. With so many of us striving to live healthier lifestyles, I challenged myself to create a healthier option than traditional cocktails. And because the cocktails are so sophisticated, I wanted our bottle to reflect that sophistication. So I came up with a sleek, frosted glass bottle with an intricate art-deco design. It's something of a conversation starter and people really seem to love it."

Harris spent two years developing her ready-to-drink cocktail line, but it took two decades in the industry to inspire it. And it wasn't easy for her to begin. She recalled attending a training seminar at a big chain restaurant she worked at during her college days. When she asked how she could break into the field, the rep shut her down, saying, "It's not going to happen for you. Just stay in school."

The rejection burned, but it spurred her to work harder. She moved to New York, and applied for a job as a wine rep.

"Luckily, the owner of Monsieur Touton Selection saw something in me and decided to give me a shot," said Harris. "Within a year, I had completed both the Sommelier Society of America's Captains Course and The International Wine Center's six-month training course. I read everything I could get my hands on and went to lots of tastings. Over the years, I was truly able to see the power of 'the brand' for myself, and that is where the inspiration to create my own brand began."

### With Women in Mind

The result is Maven, made with all-natural ingredients and premium wines from the Central Coast of California infused into the highest quality, gluten-free vodka, distilled six times. They currently have two varietals, a Chardonnay blend and a Pinot Noir blend. And unlike your average mixed drink, which is about 200 calories, a bottle of Maven is 171 calories.

"I've always been health conscious and interested in staying fit. And I like to know that what I'm putting into my body is both natural and the best quality," said Harris. "I think a lot of people feel that way. And truthfully, I was always disappointed by what was available and I knew I could do better."

She set out to debunk the myth that you can't mix different kinds of alcohol, or that "wine before liquor, will make you sicker." Harris says that drinking too quickly on an empty stomach without pacing yourself and rehydrating that will do you in.

This is especially true for the typical woman, who will absorb about 30 percent more alcohol into her bloodstream than a man of the same weight and will stay intoxicated longer, according to data from the New England Journal of Medicine, as reported by **Time Magazine**.



Stephenie Harris

has a similar alcohol content to the average glass of wine, as opposed to say 27.3 percent in Cosmo or 33.3 percent in a Margarita," said Harris. "I did this not only for women, but because I think while we all want to enjoy an evening out with friends, there is a growing desire for moderation."

Harris also had women's safety in mind when she designed the reclosable bottle lid, adding a small measure of security of "being able to close it up and set your drink down on the bar without having to worry about someone messing with it, or having the option of taking it with you on the dance floor and not spilling it." She hopes it will spur a conversation in the spirit industry among other brands that want to protect their customers.

You could say that finding a place for women in the spirits industry is Harris' passion. When she first started, she had to carve her own niche in what was largely a male-dominated

industry. But the landscape is changing, she said.



Maven Cocktails

### A Changing Industry

"We are seeing more and more female-owned spirits brands launching and thriving. There are also women achieving visibility in key positions in the field," said Harris, naming pioneer Stella David, CEO of William Grant & Sons, which produces Hendrick's Gin and Glenfiddich Scotch.

She noted how Deirdre Mahlan has been instrumental in growing Diageo into the world's largest spirits producer over the past fourteen or so years. And she also celebrates Claire Smith-Warner, the head of spirit creation and mixology at Belvedere Vodka, who played a vital part in advancing the traditionally Scotch and Cognac-focused portfolio of LVMH into the world of white spirits, starting from the humble role of brand ambassador.

Although some brands still use women as "eye candy" to hawk their samples, others understand that consumers are more likely to have a meaningful experience with your brand if they are meeting someone who's truly knowledgeable.

"I admire women who blaze their own trails, but I also love collaborating with other women," said Harris. "On my journey to launch Maven, I have been extremely lucky to meet so many people who have genuinely wanted to support me. But what was surprising was the level of solidarity I have received from other women. Women are having great success in every industry and are finding ways to support other women."

Being openly gay hasn't caused any roadblocks either, said Harris, who said, "We live in an amazing time and I have been so incredibly moved by the strides we have made as a community and a society this year."

She's been working in New York City's LGBT community to spread the word about Maven Cocktails, and has recently partnered with the party [Hot Rabbit](#). It's all part of growing her brand.

"We successfully launched into some of the top nightlife venues in New York and are in the process of expanding our footprint both in the U.S. and internationally," said Harris. "We are having such a great response to our Chardonnay and Pinot Noir cocktails, so I am really focused on getting the word out about Maven before developing any new varietals. But the sky's the limit!"



Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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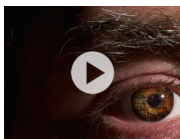
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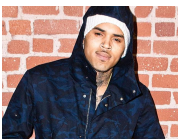
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