

The Tasting Panel

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*Spinning a Tale With*  
**DUKE SPIRITS**

**THE BRAND LAUNCHES ITS GRAND CRU  
TEQUILA TO BENEFIT THE JOHN WAYNE  
CANCER FOUNDATION**

Chris Radomski is the  
founder of Duke Spirits.





Story by  
**AMANDA M. FAISON**  
photos by  
**RAFAEL PETERSON**

When Chris Radomski answered his phone on the morning of October 8, his earnest, soft-spoken Canadian lilt sounded a bit gravelly. As he distractedly said *thank you* and *see you soon* to those around him, Radomski explained that he was saying goodbye to the country trio Runaway June, who had played a benefit concert for 250 people in Newport Beach, California, the night before. The bash had been a wild success, marking not only the official launch of Duke Spirits Commemorative Grand Cru tequilas but also the announcement of the brand's \$50,000 donation to the [John Wayne Cancer Foundation](#).

This is the essence of Radomski: He's always got his hands in one compelling project or another. After obtaining degrees in biochemistry and law in Canada and working in the business world, he made a name for himself when he followed his true passion and co-founded an exclusive Napa Valley winery with a friend in the 1990s; then came the more affordable Layer Cake brand. What unites all his endeavors, he says, is "authenticity and value at all price levels."

The same has applied as Radomski has turned his astute eye toward spirits. In addition to Duke, he has a whole portfolio of wines and spirits that have grabbed headlines and 94-plus point ratings, as with his La Adelita Tequila, for which he recently collaborated with California Caviar Company on a proprietary label of caviar that can replace the traditional salt and lime accompanying a shot of tequila—especially when it's served as a "bump" placed between the thumb and forefinger.

### UNCOVERING A STORY

For Radomski, great stories born of life experiences lead to the creation of great brands, whether based on childhood memories or close friendships. And when Radomski first met Ethan Wayne, the youngest son of late Hollywood legend John Wayne, in California, he discovered a true American story waiting to be told via Duke Spirits.

Much of Ethan's childhood was spent traveling with his dad or spending time with him on movie sets, even acting in a film or two before ultimately joining the entertainment industry himself. Before Wayne died of stomach cancer in 1979, he told then-17-year-old Ethan and other family members that they should use his name and legacy to fight cancer. The John Wayne Cancer Foundation was established a few years later and has since become one of the country's leading centers for cancer research.

When Radomski and Ethan met, the reins of the foundation and control of his father's name, image, and likeness had recently been handed to Ethan. As part of the transition, he reunited with his father's belongings, which had been collected, cataloged, and sealed for decades. When Ethan stepped inside the vault, it was like a time capsule, complete with costumes, boots, hats, guns, and an Academy Award for *True Grit*, not to mention banker's boxes full of letters, notes, and other mementos.

And then there was Wayne's liquor collection, including bottles of bourbon, tequila, and more from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. As Ethan showed Radomski the memorabilia, he told him he'd discovered that Wayne had been working on his own bourbon and tequila recipes. Could they bring his passion for spirits back to life?

Radomski's first reaction, naturally, was: There's a great story here. "We began distilling as we found a collection of old barrels [we could use to] reverse-engineer [Wayne's] recipe" from 1962, he explains. "We used our skill set from the wine industry and blended that into our expressions." It took seven years and a lot of, yes, grit to get the brand—which they named Duke Spirits after Wayne's childhood nickname—to market, and Radomski is adamant that its sense of authenticity forbids it from becoming just another celebrity label. "It's an American story: John Wayne, how much more



Duke Spirits recently donated \$50,000 to the John Wayne Cancer Foundation.

American does it get? It's an homage to a time when things were done differently," he says.

As Radomski continued to develop Duke Spirits, he began thinking about the finishing process and how they could, in his words, "elevate" it by utilizing "the finest single-use French oak barrels from California wineries and introduce that to aged high-proof whiskey." Thus Duke's Grand Cru Bourbon Founder's Reserve—a nine-year-old Kentucky straight bourbon aged in barrels that housed cult single-vineyard California Cabernet Sauvignon—was born. Showing notes of stone fruit and butterscotch and earning a 97-point score from *The Tasting Panel*, it joined the caramelized Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey (96 points) and vanilla- and almond-tinged Double Barrel Rye Founder's Reserve (98 points) in the Duke portfolio.

## MAKING A STATEMENT

Wayne was also a connoisseur of tequila—perhaps even more so than whiskey, according to Ethan—and had a love for Mexico and its people that got the duo's wheels turning as they perused his liquor collection. As Radomski already had an established relationship in Jalisco and access to "great juice," he was eager to use the same barrel trick on tequila that had enhanced Duke's whiskey. As part of a calculated risk, he sent ten former wine barrels that had also aged Duke 100 Proof Bourbon to Mexico, where he finished a reposado and an extra añejo, and then waited for the results of the

"experiment." Radomski adds, "I had a gut feeling that it would be a really great experience based on the quality of all the components."

Radomski flew down to the distillery multiple times to taste the expressions. He was beyond impressed, but it wasn't until a master distiller declared it the best tequila he'd ever had that Radomski knew they had nailed it. Still, true to form, he wasn't finished, opting to turn the endeavor into a philanthropic effort benefitting the John Wayne Cancer Foundation. "[Tequila] makes sense in the brand, there's a story, it's an extension of Duke Grand Cru line," Radomski says. "But how do we make this different and not just get into tequila? [By taking] the opportunity to pay homage to [not only] John Wayne's love of Mexico [but also] his wish to use his name to help cure cancer."

Which brings us to the Runaway June concert this past October. The band, which has toured nationally with country singer Luke Bryan, has a familial connection to Wayne: His granddaughter, Ethan's niece Jennifer, is one of the three vocalists. So, with live music secured and a cause to champion, Radomski and the foundation opened up the event to some 250 people, offering free admission, the promise of good tunes, an opportunity to give, and, of course, a chance to be the first in the nation to taste and purchase Duke Spirits' Grand Cru tequilas.

In addition, Radomski pledged to donate all the profits in advance from the sale of Duke 6 Year Extra Añejo Tequila Founder's Limited Edition, a

six-year-old expression of which only 1,000 bottles were made, to the foundation. "Along the way, we've contributed to the foundation and supported it at benefits, but I wanted to make a larger impact," Radomski says. The spirit, which is aged in third-use French wine barrels, features deep notes of cherry and oak that complement the agave flavor rather than overpower it. The line also includes a dark and oaky Extra Añejo Founder's Reserve and a Grand Cru Reposado Founder's Reserve with flavors of wood and red cherry, a percentage of whose sales also go the foundation. Many partygoers bought bottles, whose SRPs range from \$65 to \$250, through online retailers after sampling them; on-premise, Southern Wine & Spirits is allocating the portfolio quickly across three states for starters (California, Arizona, and Texas).

The evening reached a crescendo when Radomski joined Ethan onstage to present the \$50,000 check. "Chris has always been super-philanthropic way before even partnering with us," says Stacy Mulder, vice president of the John Wayne Cancer Foundation. "And when he wanted to launch the tequila just for the foundation, what liquor company does that? He wants to do such good."

This is hardly the first time Radomski has dabbled in philanthropy. At the onset of the pandemic shutdown, he launched an initiative called the Ultimate Tip, challenging bartenders to make a cocktail using Duke Spirits; he'd then tip them \$200. "A friend told me I was crazy and that I'd go bankrupt," Radomski says with a laugh, noting that his company was among the first to step up when it came to industry support. He ultimately capped the program to 250 people, tipping upwards of \$50,000 via Venmo and Zelle.

As with all stories he has a hand in, Radomski insists on spreading credit to "a great team." But he has the last word when explaining the driving force behind Duke Spirits' growth: "The goal was to have purpose and connection when expanding the brand. Ethan was wanting us to create a tequila, but it had to be for the right reasons. He had fond memories aside his father in Mexico, and [we felt we could] recreated some of those and make a difference... by simply telling the story of a great man and a great American. Then the time was right to give back to the foundation."