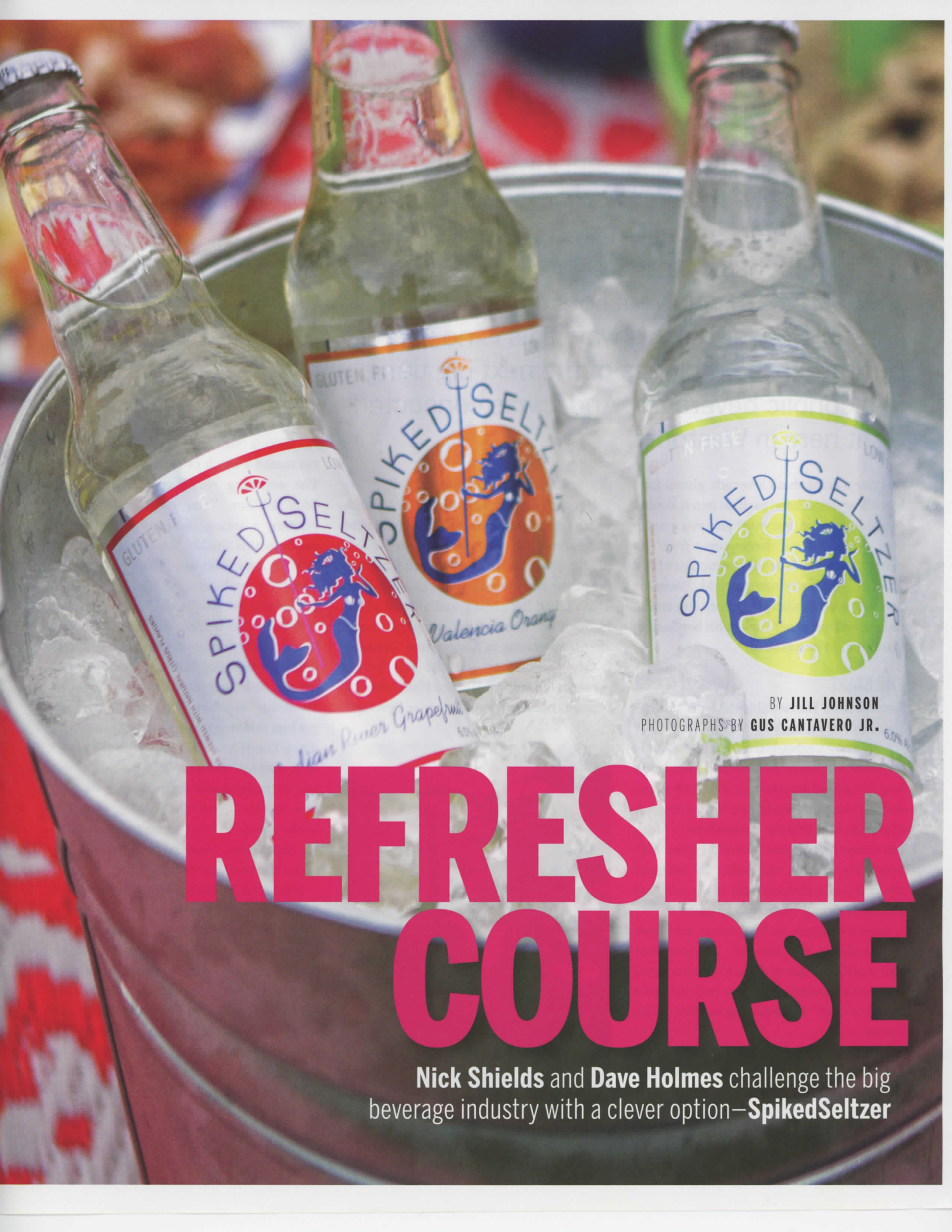


The company Boathouse Beverage was named by business partners (and oarsmen) Dave Holmes and Nick Shields—here at the Inn at Longshore enjoying their drink, SpikedSeltzer





GLUTEN FREE  
SPIKED SELTZER  
Valencia Orange  
6.0% Alc/Vol

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BY JILL JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUS CANTAVERO JR.

# REFRESHER COURSE

Nick Shields and Dave Holmes challenge the big beverage industry with a clever option—**SpikedSeltzer**

**A** Mermaid, a Master Brewer and a Seltzer Lover Walk into a Bar... Well, actually they mingle near the banks of the Saugatuck River, but there are bars involved. Lots of bars, if the Master Brewer has his way. This is no joke but rather the makings of the next big thing in alcoholic beverages. And it was concocted right here in Westport.

Imagine a drink that's low-carb, gluten-free, less filling than a beer, packs as much alcohol as a glass of wine, but won't give you a hangover. Sounds like a dream come true? It's certainly that for Boathouse Beverage's Nick Shields, the forty-one-year-old Westport resident whose mission to create something unique and tasty goes back to his boyhood in Hamilton, Massachusetts.

## THE START

Excerpt from Harriet Shields' Journal, 1983 (her son Nick is ten)

*Like many weeknights, Nick settles down in the warm kitchen to do homework. But before long he's picked up a knife to dice fresh ginger and, his own random addition, slice up a couple of pears to bake with the chicken breasts. Meals are always a little more interesting when Nick prowls the counters and probes the refrigerator. How about caraway seeds in the coleslaw? Orange peels and whole cloves for tea?*

*Immersed again in his science workbook, Nick looks up and asks me, "Do you know that a pin-prick size of the sun's plasma would instantly incinerate this house and the entire neighborhood?" It's something to think about, I guess.*

Nick's mom must chuckle reading that entry now, knowing that her inquisitive gastronome ultimately would earn a master's

degree in food science from Cornell.

Her son's urge to experiment in the kitchen isn't surprising. Mrs. Shields, née Harriet Haffenreffer, loves to cook and garden, and her forebears had been mixing and concocting at the Haffenreffer Brewery since 1870. That's when her great-grandfather Rudolph Haffenreffer founded the company, shortly after immigrating to Boston from Germany.

"My grandfather was the last brewer owner at the original Jamaica Plain brewery," recounts Shields from Boathouse Beverage's



airy office overlooking the river in SoNo. "He had brewing in his blood, clearly. He talked about it all of the time when we were kids: 'You brew a batch starting with malt in the mash and hops in the kettle,' he'd say. We had no idea what he was talking about."

The lessons sunk in, though, and simmered to the surface right about when Nick, a Yale graduate, was working in medical research and contemplating med school. Something was not quite right—both with his career path and...Odwalla juice.

## SETTLE IN

In 1996 a virulent strain of e-coli contaminated a batch of Odwalla's apple juice. The resulting recall cost the company \$6.5 million. "The guys at Nantucket Nectars, a young company then, freaked out," explains Shields. "I was tapped to come in from a microbiology standpoint to make sure their products were safe. That was my bridge into the food world."

Shields also helped out with the family brand, Haffenreffer Private Stock, a malt liquor product that had been licensed to his cousins at Narragansett Brewing Company, but it was his job at Nantucket Nectars that got him thinking seriously about brewing up a new family label. He thrived in the setting of a nascent venture. "Nantucket Nectars was entrepreneurial right down to its core," says Shields. "Even the founders were new to the game. They relied on people to think for themselves. I learned to think creatively about the best way to do my job."

Nantucket Nectars sold to Ocean Spray in 1999, and Shields went to work at Wolffer Estate Winery in Bridgehampton under the guidance of Roman Roth, "a great winemaker and Hamptons celebrity," says Shields. He learned the art of winemaking and the risk of doing it where a hurricane, like Floyd, may hit. "It was a crazy year. Watching the grapes swinging in the vineyard—Roth was petrified!" They got through it and Shields even made the wine for his wedding, to

Left to Right: Nick Shields, Lindsay Potter, Danielle Holmes, Khaki Wennstrom, Dave Holmes, Leila Shields



fellow Yale graduate Leila Jones, in 2001.

Shields then headed to Cornell. “Food science is microbiology and chemistry, with an emphasis on food issues: toxicology, the study of food-borne pathogens, epidemiology. It’s the foundation for understanding not only the interaction of food ingredients but also the dangers that are out there. We have to be more and more careful these days because of the monocultures we create.”

After graduating, Nick landed a job at Pepsi. “You learn certain disciplines at a big corporation that you don’t in a young company,” he says, “but you are more pigeonholed. At Pepsi, I spent a couple of years sleuthing out why sediment developed. It would only happen in certain instances, like crossing the Alps, and only at certain times of the year. But, at the same time,

Pepsi introduced me to making flavor concentrates. Comparing 150 formulations put me in a unique position to experiment on my own.”

### MAKE A MOVE

Drawn by the water and the Saugatuck Rowing Club (Nick rowed at Yale), Nick and Leila moved to Westport in 2005. He was at Pepsi; she was working at Conde Nast. A baby boy arrived on moving day. Nick was contemplating his legacy, or maybe just following that familial urge to brew, concocting beverages in the family’s garage on Imperial Avenue.

“Nick always wanted to make a new product,” comments Leila, who now teaches English at the Montessori Middle School in Norwalk and chases after three boys. “I

tested out all sorts of drinks for years, many made from hops grown in our garden.”

Nick says, “I noticed Leila filling up the fridge with seltzer, and I started to notice that women mainly drink vodka soda, with a splash of lime or cranberry. Coming from the brewing industry, you have a natural competition with wine and spirits. I wanted to combine the techniques in brewing and winemaking to make a crossover product. The push was to make something as clean and light and low-carb as possible.”

The result—after 88 trial batches—was a crisp, refreshing beverage with 6% alcohol and 140 calories (only 20 of them from fructose). “There’s no malt in this product. That’s what makes it very different,” says Nick. “It contains pure Adirondack water, only 5 grams of fructose and natural citrus flavor.”



The crew makes a day of it, complete with flowers, picnic food and, of course, bottles of SpikedSeltzer

Leila comments, “I love that it is so clean. I like to wake up and swim or jog, which is more fun without added sugar and sulfites dragging me down. I also love its versatility. It’s like a little black dress; you can amp it up with other spirits or tone it down with juice and a citrus wedge.”

### POWER ACROSS THE LINE

During the development of SpikedSeltzer, Dave Holmes, whose wife, Danielle, grew up with Leila in Greenwich, estimates he sampled seventy batches. He was so sure his buddy had a winner that he was willing to bet his career on it. “I had to prove to Nick

that I was more than a passionate supporter, that I really wanted to be part of the business,” says Holmes, who started working on Wall Street at the age of twenty and has an MBA from Columbia.

In 2012 Holmes, who has three kids and lives in Rowayton, left the hedge fund world and joined Shields in founding Boathouse Beverage—a fitting name for a company run by two rowers (Holmes and Shields also are both pilots). As they were brainstorming on a logo, legend has it that the duo was rowing up the Saugatuck River and noticed the sculpture of a mermaid in a backyard. Bingo! She’s streamlined and nautical, and

“could be whispering the formula for this new drink,” says Shields, “light and sleek.”

Shields had been making five- or ten-gallon batches of SpikedSeltzer in his garage. “It’s a leap of faith from that to 15,000 gallons,” the size of a batch now produced in Utica, New York, on equipment that runs 900 bottles per minute. When Anheuser-Busch distributor Dichello picked up SpikedSeltzer, Nick and Dave knew they had successfully made that leap.

Geoffrey Acampora, director of marketing at Dichello, comments, “Nick Shields looked outside the box to find a way to capitalize on the growing demand for unique offerings. The result is a great tasting product line that fits many social occasions and demographics.”

At the Spotted Horse in Westport, customers are asking for gluten-free drinks, and, until now, there weren’t many options for them. Owner George O’Connell says, “Feedback from the West Indies Lime has been extraordinary.”

The twelve-ounce bottles come in three flavors (named, like wine, after their origin): Valencia Orange, West Indies Lime and Indian River Grapefruit. Under each cap is a quote or saying, such as “You can’t control the wind, but you can adjust the sail” (customers can submit their own at [spikedseltzer.com](http://spikedseltzer.com)). On the bottom of each six-pack (\$8.99), are “Mer-mosa,” “Siren” and “Belle-ini” recipes.

If those names aren’t tempting enough, consider this testimonial from Rob Pepin, owner of Lauren Moffatt in Greenwich: “I love my India Pale Ale, but after tasting SpikedSeltzer, I decided to take the SpikedSeltzer challenge and stop drinking beer for a month. By doing away with the calories and the wheat, I lost thirteen pounds!”

SpikedSeltzer is available locally at Ninety 9 Bottles, Bottle Rocket, Whole Foods, Greens Farms Liquors and Wine Cellar, and it’s hitting beach towns from Boston to Montauk this summer. **W**