

A hand in a dark suit sleeve reaches out from the right side of the frame towards the center. The background is dark and industrial, with a large, textured, blue-grey wall or curtain that has vertical ridges. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the hand and the texture of the background.

A NEW BRAND OF RUSSIAN MOGUL

With his vodka and consumer-credit empire,
Roustam Tariko has broken the mold of the 21st-century Russian entrepreneur.
His vision is simple: a complete rebranding of his country

BY BRETT FORREST



The night launch skips across the Grand Canal, tending toward an island palazzo that's lit red, a dead ringer for a hotel on Boardwalk or Park Place. For this evening's birthday party, the guests come ashore in Renaissance silks and frills and other markers of the masquerade. Collecting on the esplanade, the assembled slip into the mannerisms of courtly patronage, an honorific bow here, a swoon there, champagne fizzing the high titters that ride the breeze. It's that kind of night.

Across the water hangs the algal city, Venice in full. With this crowd, it takes little effort to imagine the oligarchy that ruled here long ago, before the tourist offensive. There's a lot to be said for being born at the right time and place, when forces of society and ancestry collude, conferring special dominion. The man born on this day 45 years ago can attest to the aphorism, for he has exploited upheaval and opportunity to join the great oligarchy of our modern time—Russia's. But he is not so like the rest of that bent bunch, and that makes his story particularly worth the telling.

Roustam Tariko alights from the final water taxi wearing a knee-length burgundy coat of many buttons. Surrounded on all sides by very tall models with very low décolletages, Tariko descends to his guests with a smile that acknowledges everyone but gives away nothing. He appears politely amused on his birthday, and the crowd cleaves to allow him passage, several folks reflexively curtsying. There may even be heard the patter of gloved palms.

The guests make their way through the palace, arriving in a shrub garden. Red guards in Ottoman headdress ring the perimeter, and a slew of entertainers mix with the guests. There is a giggling chambermaid, running from a flirt. A comic in a fright mask gibbers in bombastic Italian. A powder-faced Casanova sniffs the rose cupped in his hand, whispering come-ons to the passing females. Muscled African bodyguards feather-fan a crowned, golden man-lion. The crowd promenades into a vaulted chamber with a pirate's buffet, where Caspian caviar piles high like ordnance.

All this for Tariko, that rarest among his nation's rarefied breed: the totally self-made mogul. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, new power coalesced, based on the compulsory skills of thievery and thuggery. But Tariko has built an empire through founding rather than pilfering. He is the king of Russian vodka, the king of Russian consumer cred-

DRIVING FORCE

Roustam Tariko, now 46, micro-manages his vodka empire from his Maybach in Moscow.



it, a standard-bearer of Russian luxury, his fortune ballooning in the last three years, now totaling between \$3.5 and \$7 billion, depending on who's doing the tally.

Vodka and personal credit, Tariko believes, are vital lubricants. "Each," he often says, "allows you to realize your goals faster." His own aim is to provide Russia's developing middle class with a cornerstone of middle-class life: the ability to finance your aspirations. As he has honed his persona, so Tariko hopes Russia too will mature, evolve. The very name of Tariko's company, Russian Standard, pegs the level of his objective, nothing less than the re-branding of a country. And if Russia is the mark on which he trades, then Tariko may well be Russia's best new homegrown brand.

He has created and now stands atop the consumer-lending market in Russia and runs one of the nation's largest privately owned retail banks. He is the exclusive issuer of American Express cards in Russia. He owns the Miss Russia pageant. He recently paid \$3 million for the domain name vodka.com and hopes to begin dislodging en-

IN THE VAULTED CHAMBER, CASPIAN CAVIAR PILES HIGH LIKE ORDNANCE.



BUON COMPLEANNO!

Above, during a weekend of events in Venice celebrating Tariko's 45th birthday, revelers attend a banquet; left, Tariko makes his entrance to a second party.

trenched foreign brands on U.S. shores. He helped popularize Italy's Sardinia as an international jet-set destination. He would like to buy a couple of Formula One cars, in order to promote brand and country. Tariko calls himself "an aggressive patriot," believing that his company represents a new image for Russia in the world, very distant from the rough stuff that persists in plaguing Russian business and political life.

But is anything ever so clean and clear? Under cockeyed buccaneer hats, a few of Tariko's costumed guests wipe the black fish-egg smear from the corners of their mouths, gliding past belly dancers in motion, trumpeters blowing a salute, and a ballerina with a candelabra affixed to her crown. They enter the disco portion of the evening. Miss Russia and a former Miss Italy pass each other on the dance floor with the sharp eyes of competitive disdain. But

the look that dominates tonight through the many masks is that special kind of glazed yearning that comes in the presence of a lot of money.

In a re-creation of Moscow's biggest nightclub, lasers ping off the black walls, Tariko's \$2.7 million birthday party rolls on into the night.

All hangovers put away, Tariko sits down to lunch a few days later at Venice's Hotel Cipriani. Tariko, a descendant of Genghis Khan's golden horde, takes his first name from the hero of *Shah-nameh*, the great Persian epic. He wears his black hair long and burnished. Now and again, he waggles his head and this dark curtain falls into place, framing his most prominent feature, his cheeks, which are as plump as the two halves of a catcher's mitt. Preparing for the salad before him, he attempts to open a bottle of vinegar and snaps the cork clean off. "Am I too powerful?" he asks, with a laugh.

Could be. Russian Standard Vodka purportedly commands 60 percent of the domestic premium-vodka market; Russian Standard Bank has a 55 percent market share in credit cards and 44 percent in personal loans. In fact, before Tariko came

talent—the ability to anticipate demand—to gather sunlight.

Tariko himself has never been middle class, having shifted almost directly from insolvency to prosperity. He grew up in the town of Menzelinsk in the predominantly Muslim republic of Tatarstan, east of Moscow, spending his weekends on a collective farm where his uncle worked as farm boss. He never knew his father. He came to Moscow in 1979 as a 17-year-old with holes in his shoes. He studied economics and swept the streets for 70 rubles a month.

"I got a job as a waiter," he says, flourishing a napkin across his lap. "One of our regular customers would put all this money into a carafe, and set it on fire. I was watching this burning and thinking about my mother, my family, my friends."

Tariko pushes back from the table. He strides across the dining room, past one of his butlers, Diego Travaglio, the son of an aristocratic Milanese family, and shakes hands with his Italy-based architect, Willem Brouwer, who is of Dutch descent and once taught architecture at Cornell. The two examine blueprints of Tariko's home in Sardinia, which Tariko bought from the wife of Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

Tariko left his restaurant job as Mikhail

the vermouth giant's various offerings were available only to the elite, in hard-currency stores. Tariko and Kosarev began distributing the brand to supermarkets, making it one of the first imported liquors sold for rubles to a mass market. At the time, the state was selling four shipping containers of Martini annually. By 1995, Tariko, selling a thousand containers a year, had become the largest Martini importer in the world.

"It was not alcohol that we sold," Kosarev says. "We sold a Western style of life. The country was gray, and we sold beautiful pictures."

Tariko picked up distribution deals with Johnnie Walker, Veuve Clicquot, and Baileys, coming to control 75 percent of Russia's Western-alcohol market. When he became a millionaire, Tariko merely shrugged, he says, "because I realized that this machine would give me more."

In the arena of armed speculators that was 1990s Russia, Tariko and Kosarev managed to avoid most real conflict, passing themselves off as representatives of overseas companies. Still, they had to look out for themselves. While Tariko worked his foreign contacts, Kosarev says he massaged government officials. And when thugs threatened the head of Tariko's St. Petersburg operation,

TARIKO IS THE IDEAL OF THE UP-FROM-NOWHERE GLOBAL MOGUL, THE WESTERNIZED EASTERNER.

along, there was no Russian premium vodka, nor was there any real consumer credit in a country of roughly 150 million people.

Nor was there demand for either. Those who made money in the new Russia made almost all of the money there was to be made. They didn't need credit, certainly, and their taste in drink ran to names like Pétus or Armagnac, which they enjoyed dropping into conversation as a cover for class. Through the 90s and into this decade, making money in Russia has been strictly an insider's game—as long as you had the right friends, it was little more than intimidating, collecting, and spending. The administrators of the oil and gas and metals empires established their own banks, many of which laundered and concealed, or otherwise capitalized on the shambles of the state. State employees deposited government money into these banks and then conveniently forgot to ask for interest, providing an easy margin for a house in France, a mistress or two, and a new S Class every year.

But when Vladimir Putin took over and began wresting ironclad control from the oligarchy, the money began to spread a little more widely, and a scant middle class began to take shape. This allowed Tariko's

Gorbachev's reforms were beginning to take effect, hoping to provide concierge services to visiting foreigners. He wound up at the offices of an Italian company that provided travel services to Italian businessmen. Tariko charmed the people who ran the 3,000-room Rossiya Hotel and, with a healthy commission, he was soon earning up to \$10,000 a month. (In 1988 Moscow, a car cost \$200; a two-bedroom apartment in the center of town, \$3,000.)

Russian society had begun to change so rapidly that you could see it in motion, the bottom flipping to the top. Tariko was sitting at a stoplight one day, in a new Volvo, when an aged Russian make pulled up next to him. His old restaurant boss was at the wheel, much surprised to see Tariko, in his new car, speed away from the intersection.

"I witnessed four times how Roustam changed jobs to completely different areas where he knew nothing," says Igor Kosarev, a childhood friend who helped build Russian Standard and now serves as its vice president. "And every time, he earned 100 times more money than he was making before."

Soon Tariko transitioned out of the tourism business, eventually landing a contract to import and distribute Martini. In 1991,

all the staffer had to do was tell the crooks to phone a contact in the local precinct. The men never came around again. "What I learned from this," Kosarev says, "is that big criminals know big policemen."

Tariko returns to his lunch, and Diego hands him a printout from *Il Gazzettino*, a Venice newspaper. In recounting the weekend's party, an article states that "Mr. Vodka" regularly travels on his private plane with a retinue of lawyers, secretaries, a majordomo, and "various factotums," including an official taster. Considering Russia's fondness for toxins, this might not be such a bad idea. Tariko lifts a forkful of salmon tartare and chews over the concept. "I am trying to figure out how to structure his bonus," he says with a laugh. "If he lives, he has not done his job."

Tariko's airplane stands against the morning gray at Marco Polo Airport. His \$50 million Boeing Business Jet, a modified 737, is painted in Russian Standard colors, black and gray, with the company symbol splashed on the tail, a bear entwined with an eagle.

Inside the plane, it's all caramel: tan carpeting, tan leather swivel chairs, walnut trim. The two flight attendants, one

from Surrey, one from Portugal, are quick with the pastries. The Norwegian pilots prepare for Tariko's entrance, making the final checkups, shining their shoes, lugging the boss's many bags through the interior. "Ever heard of packing light?" grouses the navigator. Tariko likes to point out that his crew flies more miles than pilots from British Airways. In one three-month period, the aircraft logged more than 100,000 miles, as he monitored liquor-distribution deals among the 60 countries in his company's orbit.

Tariko set his sights on the vodka business in 1995. As he toured the stores that carried his foreign spirits, he realized that there were hundreds of low-end Russian brands priced for the masses. All of the high-end vodka came from someplace else. "I called it the Russian paradox," he says. "How does Russia not have a good vodka?" He hired McKinsey, the consulting firm. He chose the name Russian Standard, which was the official designation for certified vodka under the czar. And he realized the potential beyond moving a few cases of booze. "It was an idea for vodka," he says, "but I understood that I had something bigger: an icon of the Russian nation."

In its first year, Russian Standard sold 26,000 cases, and in the process created a new domestic market, flooded with imitators. Now there are four Russian Standards, designated as Original, Platinum,

Imperia, and Gold, selling two million cases a year worldwide. In 2005, Tariko launched Imperia in America, with a million-dollar party at New York's Liberty Island. He is currently gunning for discerning palates accustomed to Grey Goose, Belvedere, Absolut, Ketel One, and Stolichnaya; and to that end, the company has spent \$25 million this year in the U.S. on marketing alone.

Competitors are rightfully wary and sometimes downright snide. It is said that for some global-brand-liquor execs and international bankers, the practice of consorting with shady distributors and shifty intermediaries is the price of plying one's trade. For Russian moguls, this is an institutionalized reality, as it is for anyone who operates

within the country's system of clan control and laissez-faire state corruption, a network in which cronies control vital resources, and well-protected thugs get away with eliminating opponents.

But today, there is not the slightest hint of shady amid the luxe surroundings. Tariko bounds up the stairs in a jumpsuit of black crushed velvet and takes a seat on one of the airplane's deep couches. Soon, rain pellets are streaking across the windows, then vaporizing, as the plane powers through the clouds and toward the sun. The airplane icon on the cabin's plasma screen drifts over the Dolomites in the direction of Munich.

Russian Standard's managers, some of

is busy with chores in the back bedroom.

"You know, a Boeing executive was trying to sell me this plane," Tariko says. "I invited him to Sardinia, and I spent two days on calculations. Then at dinner I realized, there is no cost-effective reason for me to buy this plane. It is only for my comfort. I apologized for wasting [two days of] his time. I bought the plane." Diego appears briefly, carrying a bundle of what looks like laundry.

When talking about his success, Tariko rarely mentions his wealth, preferring to focus conversation on the interwoven, rising prospects of his company and his country. He can't resist, however, reminiscing over the 2006 *Forbes* listing, his first appearance on the roll as a billionaire. "You have clearance

in the world as a billionaire," he says. "But it's not about me being a rich guy and entertaining myself. It's about bringing affordable luxury to people."

Few Russian oligarchs have just such a luxury, the ability to think so broadly. The majority of these men have had to spend much of their time facing inward toward Russia, toeing the line, solidifying their relationships with Kremlin officials who have demonstrated a willingness to selectively prosecute companies into nonexistence. "From day one, I wanted to be a part of the Western community," he says. "Not only because of business, but also an issue of lifestyle. I would like to be a world citizen, but from Russia. For me, Russia is too small. I would be pretty bored with what's going on."

In the global economy, Tariko is the ideal of the up-from-nowhere global mogul, the Westernized Easterner, one of those who run their corporations on a dream and a Gulfstream (or, in his case, a 737). He's like many other single-minded renegades, from Abu Dhabi or Tel Aviv, New Delhi or Beijing. He is Roustam, fresh out of Tatarstan, the ultimate void, his sights set on nothing less than the whole wide world.

The plane is descending now, above somber Munich, and Diego is finally at rest, landing in a swivel chair. As the engines downshift below the clouds, a walk to the back bedroom reveals Diego's labors: a half-dozen shirts crisply pressed and hanging on a rod; several dozen ties spread out



FEAST YOUR EYES

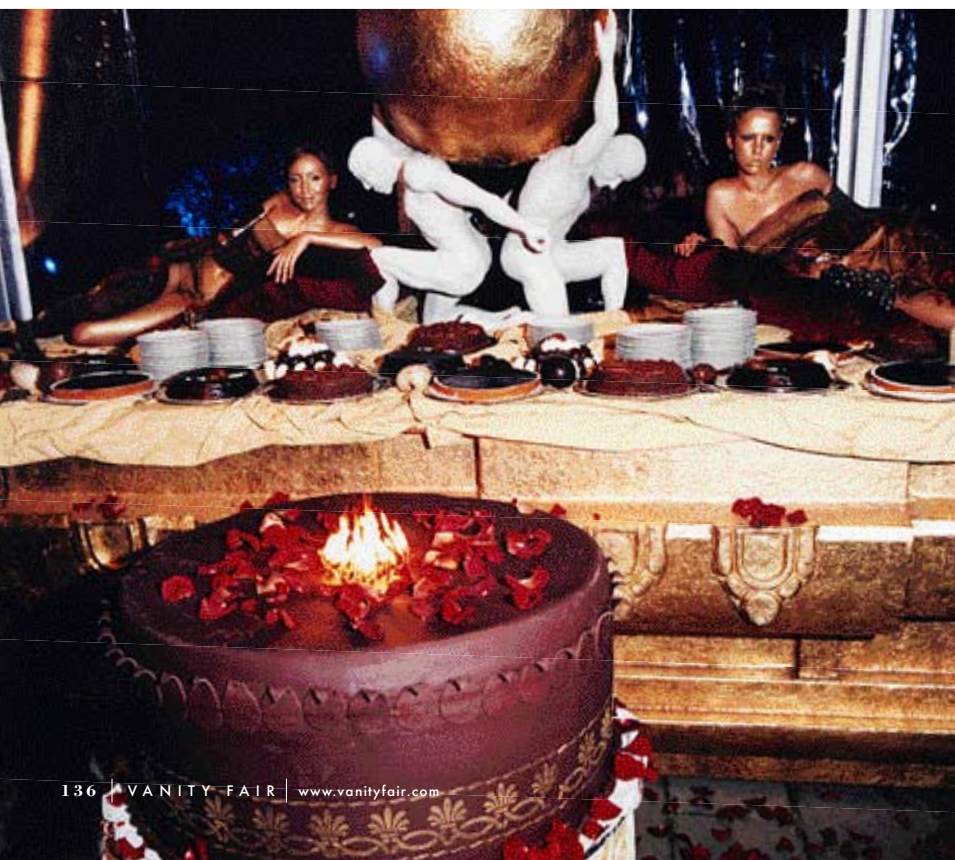
Clockwise from top: guests take in the ornate interior of a palazzo at a Tariko soirée in St. Petersburg; in Venice, a gondola shuttles partygoers to a canal-side gala; women in gold body paint decorate a Venetian dessert table.

on the bed like so many tongues. “Russian products should be in the kitchens of foreigners,” Tariko later insists, reclining in a Mercedes, riding along the precise German roadway. “But I don’t want to be the Procter and Gamble of Russia. . . . I would rather be the American Express of Russia. The Diageo of Russia. The Louis Vuitton of Russia.” He has noted that Russia’s only true global brand is Kalashnikov.

He is in Munich today for a meeting with an ad agency that is producing a TV commercial for his vodka, launched in Germany in 2006. “The people we are selling to are sophisticated,” Tariko says. “I’m not interested in primitive people. All these German guys are dreaming of going to Russia and clubbing. Russia is very hot among them. It’s dangerous. And everybody wants it.”

The car swings into a subur-

VODKA AND PERSONAL CREDIT, ROUSTAM TARIKO BELIEVES, ARE VITAL LUBRICANTS.



ban business park. Several Germans with mercantile grins are waiting to greet Tariko at the entrance of an office building. “In university, I specialized in the economy and structure of railroads,” Tariko says. “I should have gone to the middle of Russia to build railroads. Can you imagine how Gorbachev[’s reforms] helped me?”

In 1998, Russia plunged into economic fallout. Precipitated by the Asian financial crisis and plummeting oil prices, inflation shot to 84 percent. Major banks fell. Boris Yeltsin hired and fired prime ministers. Life savings disappeared. The



LETTER FROM RUSSIA

International Monetary Fund and other international lenders approved a \$22.6 billion bailout, and to all appearances, Russian officials stole as much as \$5 billion of it.

In the middle of the crisis, Eberhard von Löhneysen, a senior partner in McKinsey's Eastern European office, approached Tariko with a single admonition: "Now is the time to start a bank." The start-up costs during the crisis were significantly lower than they would have been under normal circumstances. But deposits were hard to come by, and Tariko had no intention of competing with the oligarchs' personal banks. "The most obvious opportunity in retail banking was consumer lending," says von Löhneysen, who recently served as Russian Standard's C.E.O.

At the time, the only way to get a loan in Russia was by standing in a long line at the state bank, filling out lengthy paperwork, and waiting for weeks. Tariko and von Löhneysen came up with the idea of instant credit, placing kiosk-style "mini-branches" in stores, offering high-interest loans to people who were short a few rubles when buying a TV or a washing machine. Tariko bought ads on trolleybuses that cruised around Moscow: "Don't wait another day:

credit in 15 minutes." He later introduced credit cards, acclimating a cash culture to the idea of revolving credit.

By 2004, the bank was valued at \$600 million, as it became clear that Russia had completely recovered from the 1998 crunch. A Putin supply-side tax-reform plan had boosted retail spending, and institutions such as Citibank and Raiffeisen raced to gain traction in the consumer-credit market. But Tariko was already in place—and suddenly dominant. "Roustam simply decided to give it a whirl," says Charles Ryan, an American who is chairman of Deutsche Bank in Russia and a leader within Moscow's foreign-business community. "He manages to become the one guy who actually understands what the market wants. And he achieves scale very quickly. He becomes the market leader—by a fucking mile."

In 2005, *The Banker* magazine ranked Russian Standard the fourth most profitable bank in the world in return on assets. Today it is still one of the most profitable banks in Russia. Even so, it is not immune to financial crises half a world away. As shock waves ripped through the U.S. economy in September, the *Financial Times* warned that Russian Standard, like many sister institutions, was feeling the pinch and might need to raise tens of millions of dollars in loans to refinance its debt. Responding to such speculation, Dmitry Levin, C.E.O. of the

bank, notes that "borrowing has become costlier and more difficult for every bank in the world, but Russian Standard Bank will continue to grow along with the Russian economy." Political-risk expert Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, agrees that the country's "fundamentals are quite strong and will get the Russian banking system through the global slowdown."

Tariko, less bureaucratically entangled than oligarchs in oil or gas or other natural resources, has been given a wider berth, operating with comparatively moderate official interference. Yet even though he maintains that he has very little contact with the Kremlin, this has changed as his influence has grown. In September, Tariko attended a meeting in the Kremlin with several dozen Russian business leaders and president Dmitry Medvedev, who reassured them about Russia's market liquidity in the context of the global financial crisis.

Not all of Tariko's government encounters have been so chummy. As the first real player in Russian consumer credit, Russian Standard made a practice of charging hefty commissions and fees (the interest rate was about 25 percent but with add-ons the rate could total 60 percent). This allowed the bank to recoup its initial investment in infrastructure and to mitigate the greatest risk of establishing the market: the unpredictability of consumer payback. But as time passed and the bank built an extensive credit database, coming to understand its customers better, it gradually relaxed these aggressive credit terms. Still, by July 2007, these fees remained in place. In response to borrower complaints, and under pressure from the Federal Antimonopoly Service and the Russian Consumer Commission, the Russian prosecutor general's office summoned Tariko for a meeting, during which he was urged to accelerate the process by which the bank was reducing its fees. Within two months, Tariko had eliminated all fees and commissions, the regulatory pressure disappeared, and the government then focused on the rest of the Russian credit carriers in a marketwide sweep.

Consumer protection is a new phenomenon in boom-time Russia. Purchasing power is skyrocketing. Most Russians actually own their homes outright, through post-Soviet privatization, and benefit from a 13 percent flat income-tax rate. The oil-price surge, a strengthening ruble, and an escalating equity market even had some experts predicting that last year's \$1.3 trillion economy would reach \$2 trillion before 2010. (This year's economic downturn in Russia and elsewhere may scale back those estimates.)

But it is hardly a rosy picture for the average Russian, who still ekes out a meager existence. Wealth and power are con-

centrated in very few hands. And Tariko, for his part, thrives off this wealthy, empowered target audience. "It isn't the tail wagging the dog," Ryan says. "As time goes on and Roustam becomes one of the richest men in the world, it's going to be the bank [that does that for him]. He's going to have the resources to do it."

Tariko answers the door to his country house, outside Moscow. He wears faded Brioni jeans, alligator-skin loafers, and a hot-pink cashmere sweater with lime trim. His black hair continues its velvety tumble. He moves through the sunlight that pours in from picture windows. The furniture comes off as set decoration; the walls are white and mostly barren. Two years ago Tariko was widely reported to be the mystery bidder for Picasso's *Dora Maar au Chat*, purchased at Sotheby's for \$95.2 million. Turned out it wasn't him. "I'd rather invest in my freedom," he told *The New Yorker* at the time, "than in my walls."

Tariko walks onto the veranda, takes a seat, and curls his fingers around a glass of white wine. His house is located among the dachas off the Rublevka highway, where Russia's ultra-rich reside, and where many large castles crowd one another. Tariko points a finger at the Tudor home directly opposite.

"You know, one day I was sitting here and I looked at this house and said, 'Why is it so close?' I was uncomfortable. So I called up the owner and I said, 'Maybe you want to sell me your house.' So now this house is mine."

A door opens on the second floor of the neighboring home. A dark-haired, thirty-something beauty steps into the sunshine in a silk robe and exchanges fond greetings. Tatiana Osipova is the mother of Tariko's four-year-old twin daughters, Eva and Anna. She is not married to Tariko, but this is the default arrangement on Rublevka. Another woman, Aliona Gavrilova, gave birth this year to Tariko's third child, a boy, named Roustam Junior. Tariko has set up his mother in the third and last house on the property. (Roustam recently moved to a fourth house a couple of miles away.)

Out on the grass, Tariko's dog, a black retriever mix, is chewing a squeaky toy. Tariko found the dog sniffing around his door a decade ago, and quickly took him in, naming him Dow Jones. He calls him Joe for short, but this dog leads an existence that defies diminutives. A couple of years ago, when Tariko was sunning at his home in Sardinia, he missed old Joe. With a high-priced whistle, he sent his plane to fetch him. "It was a bigger plane than Berlusconi had when he was prime minister," Tariko says. "So when the plane landed in Sardinia, everybody was wondering, Who is this guy?" The airport staff hurried to assemble and extend an official welcome. The plane's door swung

open, and Dow Jones, the only passenger, galloped down the stairs and raced across the airfield. "They could not catch him," Tariko laughs. "They had to stop the flights."

Tariko hands his wineglass to his housekeeper, and heads out to the driveway. Rarely does a Ferrari Spider come off like the family station wagon, but as Tariko's confidants Kosarev and Mendenhall slip into that car and drive off, a more magnificent option remains. Tariko slides into his Bugatti Veyron 16.4. More spaceship than automobile, with 1,001 horsepower and a top speed of 407 kilometers per hour, it is one of the fastest cars ever built for the road. With the pedal down, it will burn through a full tank of gas in about 12 minutes. Tariko paid \$1.4 million for it, and says he paid an extra \$200,000 to jump the waiting list and become the first Russian to buy such a plaything.

Tariko eases the car through his front gate, 16 cylinders rumbling. A team of stern-faced security men guard the perimeter, then pile into a couple of chase cars, trailing Tariko onto a quiet country road. Tariko hires his protectors from the Interior Ministry's special-operations division. He's tried some former Kremlin bodyguards. "But," he says, sizing up the one other car on the road, which lies at some distance, "they're interested in their careers. Not so much fighting."

At that, he punches the gas. This is the kind of power that gets you in the neck,

then in the gut, then in every other part of you, all in an instant. Vision has gone blurry, and Tariko instantly overtakes the vehicle ahead. With the vague shape of a second car approaching in the opposite direction, Tariko throws the Bugatti into a higher gear, steering left, then quickly right. The torque of the Bugatti allows him to take a vicious angle, bending this rocket to his purpose. As he makes his pass, the image through the window is like a movie with many frames plucked out, the world clicking past in shifts. As it happens, the Russian word for rich is *bagati*. Shooting down this country lane, seat-belt-free, feels like it would be an O.K. way to go.

Tariko pulls up to Prichal, a restaurant along the Moscow River. The security men, with their earpieces, kindly open the Bugatti hatches. Tariko pours into Prichal, making his way to a prime table where several guests are already waiting. Even here, at one of Moscow's most affluent spots, a thrill of recognition ripples through the room.

Among his companions is Kamal Boushi, a British national and veteran of American Express and MasterCard, who is the executive director of the bank. He has come here for an afternoon meeting with Tariko, although that will have to wait until the boss lands upon the proper mood. Tariko is at rest today.

He is never fully switched off. As one of

his guests runs at the mouth, Tariko, listening intently, displays his taste for parsing any speech or proposal to its essentials. When the man has quit talking, Tariko says, "O.K., in one sentence, tell me what you want to say." But he does not want to float a feeling of unwelcome. "If you sit at my table," he says solemnly, "it means I trust you."

Trust for Tariko is just the first circle, one of many prerequisites for winning and then holding his attention. Friendship has no practical necessity; acquaintances come and go, but dreams, for Tariko, possess philosophical resonance. "Trust is not the most important thing; aspiration is," he says. "The Brooklyn Bridge. The Taj Mahal. They were built not by need or rational planning, but by aspiration."

Even in Tariko's realm, aspiration goes only so far. "You see this girl over here?" he says quietly, pointing out an attractive blonde who has been eyeing him from across the room. "For two years she has known that I like her. Yet she says no." Tariko then gestures to a bald man at the woman's table. "You see the guy sitting across from her? He is very proud of this."

Osipova arrives at Prichal with Eva and Anna, who proceed to climb all over their father. (Tariko's custom-made, 185-foot yacht, launched this summer in the Mediterranean, is called the *AnnaEva*.) Boushi looks on patiently, although his chances of leaving Prichal at a reasonable hour have just vanished.

A babysitter leads Tariko's daughters down to the river, where they toss bread-crumbs at the fish. Tariko now turns to Boushi. But when the twins return, Tariko breaks off the conversation. "I'm a scary wolf," he yells, tickling his daughters into laughter that deflates Boushi back into his seat.

To work for Tariko is to attend. He is not fond of offices, preferring to do business on his plane, in his cars, in his homes—his work and his play a single continuum. His managers often fly to wherever he may be in the world, returning to Moscow after cornering the boss for a brief discussion. At the home he rents on Star Island, off Miami, Tariko conducts extended meetings in a giant hot tub that his staff calls "the boardroom."

The demands of inhabiting Roustam World can wear on those accustomed to a more orthodox existence. "It's not enough to be professional and friendly," says one former Russian Standard director. "He wants you at his side at all times. You must share his private values. Not only doing it, but enjoying it."

Russian Standard, some insiders say, endures heavy turnover compared to the Western companies Tariko admires, which may partially hang on the boss's distaste

for delegating. He oversees the smallest details of his company, such as the design minutiae of his vodka cases, or the color of the dresses worn by cocktail waitresses at Russian Standard parties. He makes the final decisions on virtually all aspects. Board meetings, insiders say, can resemble genuflection sessions. "He is the king, and everyone else is enjoying the shine they get from the king," says the former director. "That goes against people who are professionally driven."

The most driven of all is Tariko himself, and he places great personal value on an individual's ability to add value to his empire. Few others rate. He has few "friends beyond the corporate world," says an ex-manager of the firm. "And the corporate world is not about friendship. It's about business."

Criticism is easy, achievement is hard, and courting the king is tricky business. Several of Tariko's employees call him Rusty when he is out of earshot. Hanging a nickname on the boss remains the closest they can come to the inner character of the man, which remains inscrutable, if not downright blank. "There is no there there," says one employee. Adds an ex-high-level company official, "What do you stand for, other than making money, consumers, making people consume? I've worked in Western companies, and they're not like that. You work with people. They're not dehumanized. Roustam is. . . I've been to many Russian Standard events, and I've noticed that they're very soulless. Maybe the soullessness is not unintended."

The fact of the matter is that Tariko projects great charm, intoxicating charm, which can be exasperating for those who glimpse in this public largesse the prospect of friendship.

"When he first takes you in, he wants to have you around him all the time," says the former director. "But how many new things can you say? This period lasts one to three months. And then he starts to get bored, and he begins to turn away. It's like a projector. This big light is turning away from you, and you are left in the dark, wilting like a flower. This has shattered some people."

It is April 2007. Shopworn factories—Gillette, Coca-Cola, Wrigley—line the road connecting Pulkovo Airport with the golden palaces of central St. Petersburg. These American stalwarts, though quite successful here, make for a tumbledown scene compared to the next factory in line. The new Russian Standard distillery is all gleaming glass, the bear-and-eagle logo catching the sunlight as it revolves on the roof. Tariko has come to St. Petersburg today to show his new pal how he makes his vodka. Mar-

tha Stewart and Tariko share a U.S. press agency and, more notably, a romance with the spending habits of the middle class.

Stewart is taking an abbreviated tour of Russia. Her then boyfriend, one-time Microsoft developer Charles Simonyi, has global designs not unlike Tariko's, Stewart's, and everyone else's in their tight stratospheric orbit. Simonyi, in fact, is about to become the newest space tourist, firing off to the International Space Station from mission control in Kazakhstan. (He paid \$25 million for the privilege of spending two weeks more than 200 miles above the planet.) Stewart is taking advantage of her visit to shoot several segments for her TV show, about Russian culture, food, and drink. Tariko stands patiently in the entryway to his distillery, waiting for Stewart's car to arrive. "I have great respect for what she has accomplished," he says. "America is no joke."

Tariko and Stewart met the previous January over early-evening drinks at the Four Seasons restaurant, in Manhattan. They quickly found common ground, discussing vodka, Russia, outer space. In the middle of their talk, Sir Martin Sorrell, C.E.O. of marketing giant WPP, stopped by the table to say hello to Stewart. It just so happened that Tariko was meeting with WPP execs later in the day. Everyone enjoyed a pleasant laugh, that feeling of getting along at the top of the world, being in the right altitude with the right people. After the meeting, Stewart left a message on her press manager's voice mail: "Looovoo the entrepreneur."

Tariko, for a while, was hoping for that Manhattan feeling. In 2006, he looked into buying the former ballroom atop the Pierre Hotel, a 16-room triplex penthouse that lists for a New York-record \$70 million. After opening negotiations, he commissioned builders to evaluate renovation plans. Ultimately, he bristled against the hotel's restrictions on renovating the property, and he dropped out. For now, he's ditched the notion of a place in New York.

"He's an appealing character," Stewart says. "And he's becoming more well known faster than you would think. He's a billionaire flying around in a 737."

Stewart breezes in through the revolving door of the Russian Standard distillery. Tariko introduces her to several of his generals, and when she gets to Kosarev, she says, in her cheerful way, "Hi, Igor. Another Igor."

Soon, her cameras are rolling. "I can't believe I'm here in St. Petersburg with my new friend, Roustam Tariko," she says. Stewart and Tariko then make their way into the distillery, walking between stainless-steel pipes and vats and white-coated lab technicians who scrutinize beakers of clear spirit.

Mr. Vodka is after purity—Russian purity. When Imperia launched in the U.S., Stolichnaya took issue with Russian Standard’s claim that it was the one and only premium Russian vodka for sale in America. After an exchange of attorneys’ letters, Russian Standard brought suit in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York against SPI, owner of the Stolichnaya trademark outside Russia, claiming that Stolichnaya was, in fact, not officially Russian.

The international Stolichnaya, as it happens, is distilled in Russia, then exported to Latvia, where it is bottled and distributed worldwide. Russian Standard claims that Stolichnaya undergoes filtering in Latvia and—coupled with the fact that it is bottled and labeled there—questions Stolichnaya’s right to consider itself Russian-made.

Ian Jamieson, president of the Stolichnaya wing of Pernod Ricard, which distributes and markets Stolichnaya globally, refutes the charges. “Stolichnaya, as it is sold outside of Russia, is distilled in Russia. And then it is moved from Russia to Latvia, where it is put into bottles. There is nothing added, nothing taken away, no additions, no subtractions from the product that leaves Russia.

“Stolichnaya is the original, authentic,

Tariko explains how the mineral emits static electricity that soothes his vodka. “Wonderful,” says Stewart.

Time comes to taste, and Stewart lifts a tulip-stemmed glass to her lips. “It has a pleasant little tingle,” she says. “Is that O.K.?” Tariko nods an endorsement, and Stewart finishes the shot.

“It’s up to my standards for vodka,” she says.

“Thanks, Martha,” says Tariko.

Eventually, Stewart’s crew has all the video it needs. Tariko himself is watching the clock, for he has to run from this influential woman to another, Valentina Matvienko, governor of St. Petersburg and a close Putin ally.

While the group makes its circuit of the distillery, Tariko’s subordinates have arranged a midday repast for Stewart. She and her delegation return to the entryway only to confront an expansive ice-sculpture bar, 10 feet high, carved in the shape of a five-domed Russian Orthodox cathedral. Bartenders serve up caviar and blini. A waiter circulates with a serving tray of vodka shots.

Tariko stands off to the side with a manicured smile, pleased with his surprise, his guest, his own escalating stature. And he quietly says to himself, “Pretty cool.” □



“HE’S BECOMING [FAMOUS] FASTER THAN YOU’D THINK. HE’S A BILLIONAIRE FLYING IN A 737.”

genuine Russian vodka brand made with genuine, authentic Russian vodka from Russia. Period. Absolutely no doubt about it.

“I can understand that Roustam Tariko, in the same way as Richard Branson and Virgin when he started out—trying to take potshots at everybody—is going to try and get himself some space by linking his brand to Stolichnaya,” Jamieson says. “To be perfectly honest, we just feel kind of cheesed off, I suppose. He spends millions of dollars throwing great parties for models and celebrities to promote the brand. Fine. Let him carry on doing that. But why try and define his brand by denigrating others?” The case is still pending, and attorneys for Russian Standard estimate that it could go to trial in November 2009.

Stewart, Tariko, and the camera crew have made their way into the filtration room, where the water and the spirits come together to form Russian Standard. Tariko explains the processes as the cameras roll. All the while, Stewart interjects, “Amazing . . . Incredible . . . Beautiful.” Standing over a barrel of quartz, which is used to filter Imperia,

SETTING THE STANDARD

From top: Roustam Tariko shares a Russian repast with new friend Martha Stewart; Tariko’s private plane on the tarmac in Venice; Tariko poses for an Italianate portrait.

