



ALLIN good spirits

When it comes to sustainability, there is no danger of spirits brands jumping on the bandwagon to score points with consumers. Brands, bars and producers are putting a compassionate philosophy at the heart of their businesses, *Sarah Neish* discovers

THE WORD ‘sustainability’ has been so well used lately that every time another global brand mentions it, a tiny rewilded fairy flies into the trunk of a reforested tree somewhere and karks it.

Increased demand for sustainable goods, coupled with investor pressure and government environmental targets, has resulted in businesses clamouring to sing their sustainability milestones from the solar-panelled rooftops. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in nearly half (40%) of online cases, the green credentials of companies have been over-embellished to the point where in June 2021 The Competition and Markets Authority felt it necessary to tighten up its guidelines to prevent ‘conscious consumers’ from being duped by misleading marketing.

But for every organisation that tries to fudge its eco heroism, there are many

Despite accounting for just 8.2% of the global drinks industry, the spirits world is leading from the front when it comes to ethical production

more tirelessly innovating to action real change. Nowhere is this more true than in the spirits arena. Despite accounting for just 8.2% of the global drinks industry, according to Euromonitor, the spirits world is leading from the front when it comes to ethical production.

Not content with simply amassing sustainability certifications like frenzied stamp collectors, brands and bartenders are seeking ever more creative ways to support the communities at the heart of the spirits sector, putting people, not profit, at the forefront of operations.

Take the Beam Suntory-owned Hornito’s Tequila, for instance. In May 2021, the

brand joined forces with the League of United Latin American Citizens to boost the number of Covid-19 vaccinations taken up by the Latino community in the US, a slice of society that has suffered disproportionately from the disease.

VIVID MURALS

The team behind the 100% blue agave Tequila came up with a plan to cut through the white noise surrounding the vaccine, swiftly commissioning two local Latinx artists to paint vivid murals on the streets of Latino neighbourhoods in Chicago and Los Angeles. Each bright mural featured a QR code to drive people directly to an online toolkit where they could learn more about the vaccine.

“With misinformation being one of the leading causes of vaccine hesitancy, and nearly six in 10 Hispanic adults saying they did not know enough about the vaccine or where to receive it, we wanted to pique the interest of passers-by and deliver this potentially life-saving resource in a way that didn’t feel intimidating or inaccessible,” says Rashidi Hodari, managing director of Tequila at Beam Suntory, who helped launch the Vacúnate Hoy programme.

It’s not the first time Hornito’s has been a source of strength for the Hispanic community. In 2020, the Tequila brand’s team piled into a gleaming silver Airstream bus and rumbled off on a road trip across the US, dispensing advice and essential materials to immigrants seeking American citizenship. Part of a multi-year initiative called A Fair Shot, the tour underlined the brand’s commitment to helping others build a better life, as well as honouring the company’s roots. “In 1873, the founding family behind Hornito’s Tequila crossed the border from Mexico to the United States to become the first people to bring Tequila to the US market,” says Hodari. “As a brand, we consider it our purpose to inspire, celebrate and enable

Feature findings

- > Despite accounting for just 8.2% of the global drinks industry, the spirits world is leading from the front when it comes to ethical production.
- > Hornito’s Tequila joined forces with the League of United Latin American Citizens to boost the number of Covid-19 vaccinations taken up by the Latino community in the United States.
- > Small-batch mezcal brand Sin Gusano became 100% carbon neutral and works with local agave growers to help protect their livelihood.
- > Bartenders are playing their part in sustainability, recycling ingredients and prioritising green spirits .
- > Big hitters such as Belvedere Vodka and Bombay Sapphire are meeting the thirst for sustainable beverages by modifying their portfolios.

those who are pursuing their own shots in life. We’re looking forward to expanding this initiative in new cities and in new ways throughout 2021.”

Hornito’s, of course, has the backing of billion-dollar company Beam Suntory to fuel its good deeds, while others, such as Jon Darby, founder of small-batch mezcal purveyor Sin Gusano, have had to dig deep into their own pockets to give back. In May, Darby’s venture became the first ‘100% carbon neutral’ mezcal brand in the UK, fully offsetting the business’s carbon emissions for 2020.

It’s an illustrious tale. Rather than creating an own-brand mezcal with one single producer, Darby wanted Sin Gusano to work directly with artisan producers from all over Mexico so that he could explore different regional varieties from lesser-known agave plants. These very small batches of distillates from Oaxaca, Puebla, Michoacán, Jalisco and beyond are rarely enjoyed outside of the small towns in which they are made, and

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ethical spirits



Discarded: gives new life to 'unwanted' ingredients

before Sin Gusano's emergence were as likely to be seen strutting their stuff on the global stage as a fluorescent dodo.

Unearthing these varieties, however, inevitably racks up an unholy heap of air miles; something Darby makes no bones about. "It was clear from the research we did that the bulk of emissions come from my own air travel, and the shipping of our product across the Atlantic," he admits. "I spend a lot of time in Mexico, travelling more miles over mountain ranges and across state lines than pretty much any other brand, as we have so

many local producers. It feels right to analyse any negative impact we're having, and build in policy to reduce that as we grow."

Darby enlisted carbon footprint-reduction platform MyCarbon to carry out analysis on Sin Gusano's supply chain, then set about offsetting the firm's 2020 emissions with gusto by purchasing and retiring carbon credits. Further still, Sin Gusano donates 10% of its profits to worthy causes in Mexico, many of which come about by word of mouth.

"A few of the producers I met when I first started driving into remote communities and knocking on doors have gone on to become long-term suppliers who I talk to regularly about what's going on in the community and any potential issues that they might be having," Darby says.

One such producer happened to mention that there was a local shortage of a particular type of agave (Tobala), as out-of-state buyers had been showing up and

paying a premium for under-ripe plants; one of the many issues caused by the recent agave boom, which has seen the mezcal market expected to grow by 8.8% by 2025, according to IWSR.

"I knew someone in the US who was working on an agave seed cultivation programme and had lots of baby Tobala to sell. So, we're in the process of gifting that producer 500 one-year-old Tobala plants as part of our giving-back programme," says Darby. "The rainy season has come late this year so we're still waiting for the transplant to happen, but that will be a good day."

THE BEST CHANCE

Jon Darby, it seems, is the Jerry Springer of agave spirits, eschewing outbursts of "Show me the money!" for the warm glow of building a start-up on meaningful connections. "I didn't get into this business to engage in a race to the bottom in terms of quality and standards. I did it because the artisan, community-specific nature of agave spirits appealed to me as an anti-consumerist product," he says.

"The more people who understand mezcal and the complex modern-day issues that this ancient drink faces, the deeper thinkers we will collectively become. And that's the best chance we have not to destroy ourselves."

Destruction and waste are hot topics in the drinks world right now, with bars and bartenders playing a pivotal role in the war against waste. There is only so much that individual brands can do to operate sustainably if those who are pouring their products aren't themselves sustainably-minded.

"Even though the number of bars fully committed to the zero-waste philosophy remains small at the moment, it is gaining traction," says Eduardo Beasley, global marketing director for Diplomático, who

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Adverts



Cutting edge: mezcal brands such as Sin Guzano have been helping local communities

sees the symbiosis between brand and bartender as being the key to unlocking real change in the industry.

The super-premium Venezuelan rum brand recently launched the UK leg of its global mixology competition, themed this year around “sustainable cocktails”. Contenders taking part in the challenge must concoct a creative serve using either homemade or local ingredients, and with sustainable practices applied throughout. The winner, announced this autumn, will join finalists from 18 other countries in Venezuela next year to battle it out for the Mixed Consciously crown.

“It has become extremely important for us to expand our commitment to sustainability beyond our production process to incorporate our bartender partners,” says Beasley. “The competition is the perfect platform for us to reach out

to the international cocktail scene on zero waste solutions.”

The sustainable cocktail revolution continues over at London’s The Savoy this month, with its launch of The Co-Naissance; the first cocktail to reduce its own carbon footprint. The concoction will be served at The Beaufort Bar for £25 a pop, and for every drink purchased, the hotel will plant one native tree in Borneo’s endangered Kalimantan rainforest. The self-sufficient sip, developed in partnership with ecoSPIRITS, is made up of just three components: Re-carbonated Champagne leftover from the hotel’s bars and restaurants; locally foraged elderflower and fig leaves, and Portobello Road Gin, which has undergone the ecoSPIRITS treatment. This is a crafty distribution system that eliminates more than 90% of carbon emissions caused by packaging and transport in the spirits supply chain.

“We know this is just the first step, but it’s a significant one,” says Jan-Peer Lehfeltdt, executive assistant manager of food and beverage at The Savoy.

The idea of ‘conscientious creativity’ has become a potent buzz phrase in mixology circles in recent years, and is something of a *raison d’être* for Rich Woods,

co-owner of London bar Scout. A longtime champion of ‘closed-loop’ cocktails – the liquid equivalent of nose-to-tail cuisine – Woods says we’ve come a long way since the “squeeze-and-go” approach of the early noughties when “bar waste was astronomical”.

TRANSFORMATION TIME

Call in at Scout and you’ll likely find Woods transforming flat Prosecco into home-made vermouth, magicking old citrus husks into lemon cordial or whipping up a quick banana ‘oleo’ from old banana peel; all of which can be funnelled back into still more cocktails. Woods says change is afoot, and consumers had better be ready. For starters, the days of the single-use garnish are numbered, with specialised spray oils and foams set to take its place.

He cites charred lemon oil and frozen grapes as examples, and says bartenders will increasingly lean towards a new generation of spirits that offer “a whole range of flavours that we wouldn’t usually get the chance to work with”.

These new-era spirits are often the result of distillers rescuing produce destined for the rubbish bin and, with a swish of brand wizardry, reimagining them into shiny new, sustainable products.

“When it comes to one of our spirits, it’s less a question of ‘what’s in it?’ as it is a question of ‘what’s not in it?’” says Sam Trevethyen, global ambassador for Discarded Spirits Co, which has built its sustainable empire on doing just this. Launched in 2018 by William Grant & Sons, and spearheaded by Joe Petch of Monkey Shoulder, the Discarded team pioneered the “trash to treasure” ethos, conjuring up bold products like its Discarded Grape Skin Vodka, which launches this month. Not only is its packaging 100% recyclable, from its glass and cork down to its label, the clever drop is made using “all the parts of the winemaking process that are normally discarded: the skins, stems,

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the seeds – otherwise known as the pomace,” explains Trevethyen. Packed with tropical notes of guava, pear and starfruit, Woods reckons it makes a belter of a vodka Martini.

It’s in good company too, with other premium players such as Foxhole Spirits’ Hyke Gin repurposing more than 6.3 million surplus grapes left over from the supermarket supply chain and the winemaking industry to make its original Hyke Gin, and new Hyke Gin Very Special. What’s more, the grapes are English-grown, making the brand’s carbon footprint even smaller.

“Both types of grapes contain flavour, texture and quality that’s just too good to be thrown away,” says James Oag-Cooper, co-founder of Foxhole Spirits.

MORE THAN FASHION

But with so many brands taking up the green baton, Woods is wary about sustainability becoming too fashionable: “The idea of zero-waste drinks shouldn’t be a trend. It shouldn’t even be a ‘movement’. It should be a conscious decision from the top down.”

Beasley agrees, and is passionate about bringing consumers along for the ride: “The next challenge for the drinks industry is to call upon customers to do their part too. At Diplomático, we see our next step as a joint commitment between ourselves and our customers, who we want to see actively participating.”

He could be onto something there, as the pull of consumer power is not

‘Zero-waste drinks shouldn’t be a trend. It shouldn’t even be a movement. It should be a conscious decision from the top down’



Take a Hyke: the gin brand has repurposed surplus grapes

something to be underestimated. Prestigious brands such as Belvedere Vodka and Bombay Sapphire are responding to a growing thirst for sustainable beverages by modifying their portfolios accordingly.

Belvedere’s Organic Infusions line, which launched in May, marked the brand’s first foray into the organic category; something that Rodney Williams, president and CEO of Belvedere called “a sign of the times”.

It’s a sentiment echoed by Belvedere’s global ambassador Mike Foster, who says: “The movement towards consumers wanting more ethical white spirits looks set to grow exponentially. We’re seeing

more high-quality vodkas with natural ingredients, crafted in ways that are more environmentally sound.”

Belvedere’s 111-year-old distillery has already begun the transition to organic farming, with a view to becoming 100% organic-certified from 2023. A big chunk of its budget is being ploughed into nourishing the Polish terroir where the rye for its vodka is grown.

Bombay Sapphire, meanwhile, is going great guns in its mission to obtain sustainable certification for all 10 of its botanical ingredients by this year. Suppliers of eight of the Bacardi-owned brand’s botanicals, including juniper from Tuscany, coriander from Morocco and lemon peel from Spain have already made the cut. The remaining two – paradise and liquorice, hailing from Ghana and China respectively – are expected to complete the line-up, reassuring consumers that suppliers are “acting responsibly in every respect,” says Ivan Tonutti, master of botanicals at Bombay Sapphire, who has been leading the charge.

Such shifts in brand behaviour can surely only nod to a brighter future. One that Greta Thunberg might not quite dance a jig over, but one that might warrant a wan smile in between UN speeches. Now if we can only find a new word for ‘sustainability’, then maybe we can save a few of those fairies. db