

STIRRED OR SHAKEN

Former Heublein Execs Make Spirited Case For Absinthe

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Today

Once banned for nearly a century for its purported dangerous hallucinogen effects, absinthe is now making a comeback in the United States with the help of two former Heublein executives.

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Steven Raye and Jeff Grindrod, managing partners of Avon-based Brand Action Team, toast with their newly introduced Mata Hari Absinthe product. A decade after Heublein Inc., a liquor company with century-old ties to Hartford, moved out of the city, Jeff Grindrod and Steven Raye, formerly the marketing director and marketing manager of Heublein, are making a spirited case for the 120-proof anise-flavored liquor.

Grindrod and Raye, through their Avon-based marketing company Brand Action Team that specializes in alcoholic beverage promotions, are touting the benefits of absinthe, which is often referred to as the green fairy for its natural color.

The U.S. ban on absinthe was lifted last year. Since July, Grindrod and Raye have been busy introducing a new type of absinthe from Austria.

Their journey began in Vienna, Austria, in February where they met a fifth-generation distiller by chance while on a sightseeing tour. Although they had headed to Austria to conduct business with another alcohol maker, they decided to go on a 48-hour tour before the meeting. While visiting the Altweiner Schnaps Museum, they met Austrian distiller Gerry Fisher, who showed off his family's private formula of absinthe.

"It was totally by chance because we told him, 'We're looking for an absinthe,'" Grindrod said. "And he told us that he was coming to the States in two weeks to try to find a distributor."

Fisher's desire to break into the U.S. market fit nicely with the main thrust of Brand Action Team's business, which is to help foreign alcohol makers bring their products to the United States.

Fast Track

With Fisher's absinthe — branded Mata Hari Absinthe — the Brand Action team moved forward with getting the liquor and label approved the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Next, they found it a distributor, Dallas-based Glazers, to get the product on the shelves within four months.

"It's very rare in our industry to get a product moved along that quickly," Grindrod said. "But we're now in 30 markets and growing every day."

While the pent up demand for absinthe has helped Mata Hari's early success, Raye believes the secret of its success is primarily because Mata Hari is different from traditional absinthe.

Raye explained that most traditional absinthes are considered "French" and are noted for their strong flavor of licorice. While remaining just as potent at 120 proof, Mata Hari has a less rigid taste because it is a Bohemian absinthe, ideal for mixed cocktails, Raye explained.

"The United States is a cocktail culture, and the important part was to show that this alcohol can be used in cocktails," Raye said.

To that end, Brand Action Team has put up a series of videos on the Web site YouTube demonstrating how to make drinks with Mata Hari. They also have reached out to various bloggers, such as Lance Mayhew, bartender and president of the Oregon Bartender's Guild, and drink connoisseur Web sites.

Mayhew has become a fan of Mata Hari, and he maintains it has the potential to become a bar staple, similar to that of Bacardi rum, within the next three to five years.

“The absinthe market in America is quickly growing crowded as a number of distillers rush products to the market,” Mayhew said. “Mata Hari, in conjunction with Brand Action Team, has in my opinion the strongest strategy in the marketplace today.”

Mayhew liked the strategy of positioning Mata Hari as a mixer because he doesn't see absinthe catching on by itself. “Absinthe, as a cocktail ingredient, is essential to achieve balance and complexity in a drink,” he said.

Virtual Marketing

Getting positive reviews by bloggers and taking advantage of the Web as well as executing social media marketing strategies helps Mata Hari stand out from the competition.

“We've found that there are more than 300 bloggers in the blogosphere focusing on cocktails,” Grindrod said. “And with e-commerce, it's legal to sell alcohol online in Connecticut's another avenue to sell the product.”

And if there's a recession-proof industry, it's the alcohol industry, Grindrod claims.

“[People] might skip an appetizer or dessert, but the drinks are the last to go,” Grindrod said. “It's recession proof because you drink to celebrate when times are good and you still drink in bad times.”