

Embracing the dark side



With the ongoing domination of vodka **Tom Sandham** asks if dark spirits are doing all they can to take back their share of the market

Some people are afraid of heights; others get the jitters around spiders and some have a bowel movement if they go anywhere near flutes. Seriously, it's called aulophobia. Yep, life can be a scary thing, so it comes as no surprise to hear bartenders suggesting that dark spirits frighten consumers.

It's largely due to education of course, the fear of the unknown (xenophobia) or the fear of looking a bit simple if you ask for something and don't like it (couldn't find a definition for that one).

Additionally, there's the old chestnut of familiarity – white spirits have ruled the roost for so long now that requesting vodka over, say, an aged rum is almost habitual these days.

The industry is well versed – many will sip an aged rum or tequila, but even in the top end of the bar world white spirits continue to market themselves.

Only last week I attended a Bacardi seminar where global brand ambassador David Cordoba compared Bacardi Superior to gin, emphasising the complexity in the product and associating it with elegance and cocktail heritage.

White spirits are not resting on their laurels, then, and that makes the struggle for a dark domination all the more challenging. In more recent years the success of golden rum has at least got dark spirits on the playing field, particularly in the UK, and is perceived as a bit of a breakthrough.

"Rum is the easiest category to move people from white to dark spirits," says Rikki Brodrick a rum specialist and the man behind Trailer Happiness in London.

"There is no other category that gives you that option. But dark spirits are not viewed as old-fashioned any more and the knowledge that consumers are seeking and gaining within the category means they easily migrate from white to gold."



Which all sounds very positive and it's a trend that's backed up by other bartenders, not least Mal Evans who runs the Mojo bars in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester, and who has a rum room in the Leeds venue.

"Things are changing gradually as people become more educated," says Evans. "We see evidence of this across all the bars and with Mojo Leeds – which has been open for 14 years – we have an older crowd that has grown up with us, who treat darker spirits, such as rums, as the norm. This even rubs off on the younger customers as the Leeds scene has been moulded and has witnessed more consumer tastings and staff trainings.

"I'll be interested to see how those True Rum events shape the trade. We are hosting one in Manchester in November. Well-informed, educational promotion is the way forward if we are ever going to drink sensibly."

Marketing push

The True Rum campaign is a pan-European marketing initiative from the West Indies Rum and Spirits Producers' Association and is part of a huge injection of cash that has helped raise awareness of authentic Caribbean rums.

Among those benefiting from such activity is Elements 8, a rum brand that has launched a white and an aged product onto the market. It has received plenty of recognition for both, and co-creator Carl Stephenson has an interesting take on the white versus aged rum battle because of that.

"We actually position our white rum (Elements 8 Platinum) as a gold rum without the colour, due to ageing

and colour removal with filtration. It confuses some consumers, as aged gold rums have generally followed a niche in their packaging and taste profile – short, dumpy bottle, with a plantation or Caribbean image; the taste is usually powerful and heavily wood aged. But this hasn't helped move younger white spirits consumers towards the rum category. Clean, white rums offer greater versatility and a real alternative to vodka, something that aged rums might struggle to match with."

It's a great talking point and anything that can spark debate is good for spirits as a whole. Certainly Gosling's rum has confidence in this contest, so much so it created a drink with dark in the name.

"I feel consumers can easily be converted to dark spirits, which naturally possess more flavour than white spirits," says Gosling's brand ambassador Andrew Holmes. "Consumers get bored with the same old bland cocktails and as their palates become more sophisticated they find themselves looking for more complexity in spirits, which dark spirits offer."

While aged rums look to be gaining ground, at the other end of the "cool" scale of the darks you have brandy and cognacs, which seem to have a tougher task. This category is possibly where the consumer develops some of the fearful generalisations – darks are stuffy, potent and expensive.

Cognac brands, in particular, are working to break down these barriers, Courvoisier has been driving a marketing campaign that touts the liquid as cutting edge and there has been a serious commitment to bartender training, particularly in using cognac ►

Mixologist and consultant Ben Reed (left) is one of the sector's most enthusiastic rum ambassadors; Gosling's (above) is confident consumers can be converted to dark rum