

Opinion

‘The fusion of heritage, culture and history in the spirits industry is more than a trend’



Photo courtesy: Sophie Knight

Welcome change is taking place throughout the spirits sector, writes Lorraine Copes, founder and CEO of Be Inclusive Hospitality

As someone of Caribbean heritage, I am fascinated by the intersection of culture, history, the products that resonate with consumers – and the reasons behind their appeal.

During my two-decade career buying beverages for restaurants, I have witnessed a slow evolution in the spirits industry. This evolution is driven by the increasing number of drinks founders from diverse backgrounds, supporting innovation while broadening the appeal of spirits.

The world of spirits is following in the footsteps of the food industry in many ways, where global ingredients are accessible and celebrated. I hope this exciting shift opens new avenues for category growth and consumer engagement.

These brands are not only about taste; they tell compelling stories that connect with the essence of various cultures and histories.

Take Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey in the US, for instance. This brand is a testament to reclaiming and honouring untold histories. Nathan ‘Nearest’ Green, an enslaved African American, was recognised as the first-known African-American master distiller, who went on to teach Jack Daniel how to distil whiskey. Fawn Weaver launched Uncle Nearest to celebrate Green’s crucial contributions to

whiskey making. This brand is a powerful example of how spirits can honour historical figures and reshape industry narratives.

In Nigeria, Pedro’s Premium Ògógóro offers a fascinating example of heritage-driven innovation. Palm Wine has been a staple in West African culture for generations, and is a key component of ceremonies and social gatherings. Pedro’s, founded by Lola Pedro and Chibu Akukwe, aimed to elevate this traditional spirit into a premium product, challenging perceptions and celebrating its rich cultural significance.

Scotland’s Matugga Rum represents a fusion of heritage and innovation. Founded by Paul and Jacine Rutasikwa, Matugga Rum pays homage to Paul’s Ugandan heritage and Jacine’s Caribbean roots. Named after a town in Uganda, this rum blends African traditions with Caribbean influences. Using African sugarcane molasses, and incorporating botanicals reflective of African flavours, including a unique Masala Chai rum, Matugga encapsulates the traditions of two heritages.

Closer to home, Manchester’s Tarsier Gin embodies the essence of Southeast Asia. Founded by Sherwin Acebuche and Tim Driver, Tarsier Gin blends traditional gin botanicals with regional Southeast Asian ingredients.

‘Tarsier’ refers to a small primate native to the Philippines, symbolising the gin’s connection to its cultural roots. Ingredients such as calamansi, Thai sweet basil, and galangal are some of the ingredients used to reflect the flavours and spirit of Southeast Asia.

Lastly, Ukiyo Rice Vodka is crafted from a base of traditional Japanese Awamori rice spirit, the oldest distilled alcoholic beverage in Japan. This product is then triple-distilled and purified to create a unique vodka. By marrying age-old methods with contemporary spirit production, Ukiyo encapsulates the balance between tradition and modernity.

Even Beyoncé’s recent foray into American whiskey, with the launch of SirDavis, is a tribute to her paternal great-grandfather Davis Hogue, a farmer and moonshiner, again highlighting how heritage can influence the industry.

The fusion of heritage, culture and history in the spirits industry is more than a trend; it’s a movement that enriches our understanding and appreciation of these products. It is an opportunity to resonate with customers like never before, with products crafted with skill, and steeped in meaningful stories and traditions. sb