

WINES AND SPIRITS

Highclere Castle gin blends aristocratic history with modern technology in US launch

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Highclere Castle gin uses botanicals from the Highclere Castle garden to create a unique flavor. Image courtesy of Highclere Castle Gin

By DIANNA DILWORTH

British stately homes such as Highclere Castle have a legacy of hospitality, entertaining royalty, aristocrats, celebrities and leaders. Now, the iconic country home better known to television audiences as Downton Abbey is using this heritage to promote a new brand of gin to affluent consumers.

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Highclere Castle gin was the brainchild of Adam von Gootkin, who has a deep family history of distilling within the spirits industry in the United States. He approached George Herbert, the 8th Earl of Carnarvon, who lives at Highclere Castle, about creating a gin that uses ingredients grown on the property.

"I wanted to create a brand that had such a level of history and a real beautiful stage and was very authentic and very genuine," said Adam von Gootkin, CEO of Highclere Castle Spirits, Essex, CT.

"These days so many companies are creating brands in boardrooms and they are just not real and they do not have the history and the irreplaceable pedigrees behind them," he said.

"I was inspired by Highclere Castle and I learned more about it and what Lord Carnarvon was doing to maintain the castle and the reality of life around there and the traditions around that and it seemed like the perfect fit."

It was an extraordinary coming together of two spirits in all senses of the word, Lord Carnarvon said.

"I tend to wander around Highclere and especially around our Earl's garden and the Victorian garden with the tropical fruits and wonderful flowers that survive our often-cold winters and I often wondered what we could do with the flowers that survive there, especially with the oranges and the lemons and the lavender in the summer," the Earl said.

"This all came together when we had to start creating the dry botanicals for the flavor of the gin, [and] after many many iterations, it came together," he said.



Highclere Castle is a country estate rich in history and the inspiration for a new brand called Highclere Castle Gin. Image courtesy of Highclere Castle Gin

Rich history

Highclere first appears in written records in 749 when an Anglo-Saxon King granted the estate to the Bishops of Winchester.

Bishop William of Wykeham built a medieval palace and gardens in the park. In 1679, the palace was rebuilt as Highclere Place House and purchased by Sir Robert Sawyer, the direct ancestor of the current Earl of Carnarvon.

In 1842, Sir Charles Barry, who also designed the Houses of Parliament, transformed Highclere House into the present day Highclere Castle. Over the years, the country house has hosted royalty and world leaders, and entertained a rich colorful cast of characters.

During the First World War, the castle was converted into a hospital for wounded soldiers run by the 5th Countess of Carnarvon. During the Second World War, Highclere Castle was home to children evacuated from London.

Most recently, the castle is best known as the location of the popular historical drama TV series, *Downton Abbey*.

The gin brand has been banking on this rich history to promote itself as a heritage brand.

The gin uses botanicals from the gardens and oats which were originally intended as feed for performance horses. They found the oats added a smoothness to the taste of the gin.

"We knew the gin had to be one of the best gins on the market," Mr. von Gootkin said. "It had to be flavorful, it had to be delicate, it had to work well with cocktails. It had to be award winning, it had to be the best, and it took us a year to get the recipe right."

The company created 25 iterations before the recipe was finalized.

The brand also spent some time developing the bottle. The company sent a creative brief to its design agency, Ignite Beverage Branding, and asked for 10 iterations. The agency sent 10 beautiful examples but then offered an 11th that went outside of the brief, but it became the classic purple bottle shape inspired by the castle's tower.

"It harks back to the time when this extraordinary place was run alone by the bishops of Winchester with all of their purple robes and the famous William of Wickham," Lord Carnarvon said. "There is a very long tradition here."

There is more to it.

"We wanted the light to refract through it almost like a gemstone," Mr. Von Gootkin said.

"Depending on what time of day it is or where you are with the bottle, it looks different," he said. "Sometimes it is more purple and sometimes it is more blue."



Highclere Castle gin was made to be drunk alone or in cocktails. Image courtesy of Highclere Castle Gin

U.S. launch

The company first launched in the U.S. last August and was lined up to debut in spring, just in time for the gin and tonic season. The company partnered with Ritz-Carlton and Viking Cruise lines to make sure its gins were available in the hospitality sector.

Then COVID-19 hit.

When the brand first arrived in the U.S., it hosted events at British consul general's private residence to do tastings in key cities around the country when the U.K. had a diplomatic outpost. But the brand had to be agile and adapt its strategy.

What was meant to be live events with influential mixologists around the country turned into Zoom virtual cocktail parties live from the Highclere Castle. The brand used recipes found from the butler in the 1920s.

Digital has proven a great way to engage influencers and the spirits company cross-pollinates posts with the castle's social media accounts to help boost awareness.

Additionally, the company has been tapping influential mixologists to suggest cocktail recipes.

In the U.K. the brand sells the gin online through Waitrose and Amazon, but had more challenges doing so in the U.S. because of varying laws in each state.

The brand has created an ecommerce site working with tech company Thirstie to help overcome these issues. The rollout is currently available in about a dozen U.S. states, but will likely be available in about 40 states in the coming weeks.

"We had to do things out of the box when COVID hit," Mr. von Gootkin said.

"We had to be quick on our feet and innovative and that meant pivoting to digital," he said.

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