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## Spanish taste for premium gin gives duo a profit tonic

### Alcohol

High-quality mixers go down well with consumers of tasty tipples, as market grows, says **Victor Mallet**

**A**sk for a gin and tonic in Spain, and the barman invariably asks you what sort of gin – and gives you a wide choice.

On a March evening in Barcelona's Bar San Telmo, Charles Rolls and Marc Calabuig are comparing a Hendrick's gin flavoured with cucumber and a Whitley Neill ("with nine botanicals, inspired by Africa, made in England") from which protrudes a twig of liquorice. It may seem counter-intuitive in the midst of an economic crisis, but the premium gin market has been growing rapidly in Spain.

Mr Rolls and Mr Calabuig are riding the wave, supplying the country's premium gin drinkers with premium mixers to match from Fever-Tree, the UK company founded six years ago by Mr Rolls and his partner Tim Warrillow.

Fever-Tree – with the UK and the US as its other big markets so far – had a serendipitous entry to Spain when the artist Richard Hamilton brought some of its Indian tonic water from Waitrose, the UK supermarket, and introduced it to Ferran Adrià, the renowned chef at the El Bulli restaurant near Roses, two hours north of Barcelona.

Mr Adrià does not merely serve the tonic with his gins. He even made a soup out of it, and suggested Mr Calabuig of International Cooking Concepts as a distributor.

"The connection is with the chefs. We started with the restaurants and then we moved into the bars and then into supermarkets," says Mr Calabuig. "Catalonia and therefore Barcelona

have always been the entry gate for foreign products in Spain."

Fever-Tree's marketing pitch is that there is no point drinking an expensive, delicately flavoured gin if you are going to smother it with an indifferent tonic.

The idea seems to have caught on, and the company has branched out into other mixers, including Lemon Tonic (Bitter Lemon is the subtitle, but that term was seen as old-fashioned by young consumers), Ginger Ale, Lemonade and Ginger Beer.

It sources and blends high-quality, natural ingredients – including quinine produced by a German family on the Congo-Rwanda border and fresh green ginger from the Ivory Coast – for its bottling plant at Shepton Mallet in Somerset, England.

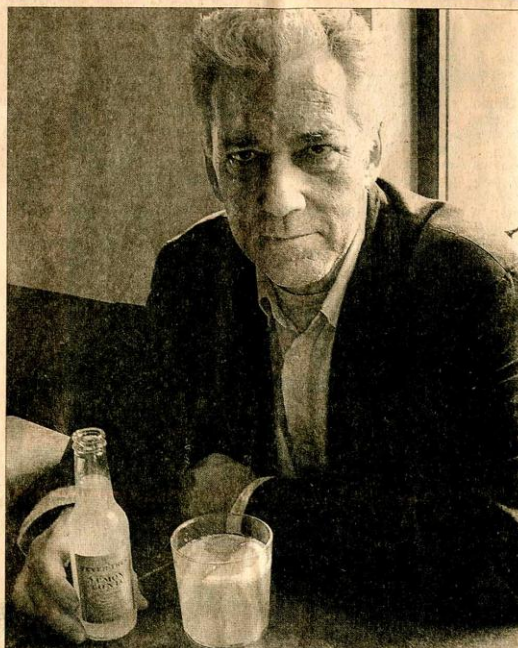
For its Indian tonic, the launch product, the company says the quinine was "blended with spring water and eight botanical flavours, including rare ingredients such as marigold extracts and a bitter orange from Tanzania". That is the kind of recipe designed to appeal to premium drinkers, and it costs twice as much as ordinary tonic.

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ning Plymouth Gin, says Fever-Tree's sales rose from £4.3m in 2009 to £6.7m last year, and continue to accelerate. "We're growing faster than we grew last year. We're 87 per cent up on last year in the first two months in terms of sales," he says. "We haven't even touched places such as South America yet.

"People are drinking less, but they



Charles Rolls: 'People are drinking less but ... better quality'

Victor Mallet

are drinking better quality and we are doing nothing more than following the trend," he says.

With Spain accounting for nearly a third of sales – the same as the US, and slightly less than the UK – and with the premium gin market continuing to expand, Mr Rolls has rented an apartment in Barcelona and is planning further growth on the Iberian Peninsula, from Lisbon to hotels in the Balearic Islands.

Mr Rolls compares the "traditional hard work" of marketing the product in the competitive British and North American markets with the good fortune of Fever-Tree's arrival in Spain at the end of 2006.

"Over here, we had the stars aligned. We landed with just the right product at just the right time," he says. "And it was Ferran Adrià who helped us find Marc." Officially, the premium gin market in Spain has been growing at 18 per cent a year, but the real growth in consumption of brands such as Hendrick's is "a lot faster".

Spain even has a historical connection with quinine, the crucial ingredient for tonic originally known as "Jesuit's powder" or "Jesuit's bark" when

it was exported from South America by Spanish colonists.

The cinchona or quinine tree – the fever-tree of the mixer brand – was named after the countess Ana del Chinchón, wife of the viceroy to Peru who was reputedly cured of malaria by the product in the 17th century. There is no connection with the African fever tree, so called because it grows near water and is therefore found in malarial areas.

Mr Rolls continues to explore the Spanish market from Barcelona and to study Spanish drinking habits.

"It's time for us to seize the moment. I spend time in Madrid, Alicante, Malaga, San Sebastián and I start to get a feeling for what's really happening," he says, acknowledging the risk that the premium gin craze will fade as quickly as it arrived. "We have not finished. We've had a fantastic start but there's still a lot to do."

Among the surprises for newcomers to Spain is the discovery that Spaniards usually drink gin and tonic after dinner as a digestif, not before a meal like the English. "It's very refreshing," says Mr Rolls. "It's sort of like having a sorbet."