



## holds on tight

There has got to be something very special about the only non-alcoholic drink ever to win *db's* coveted Company of the Year award. Patrick Schmitt finds out what sets Fever Tree apart from its competitors

**FOR THE** first time in *the drinks business'* history, Company of the Year was awarded to an operation that doesn't make a single alcoholic substance. The result was not a reflection of *db's* change of direction, but how much one particular operation had impressed the judges. As announced at the London International Wine Fair in May, the winner had not only created a new category – upmarket mixers – but also enhanced the spirits

drinking experience for all. That company was Fever Tree.

Currently, the business contains a 10-strong range of mixers – that is after the launch in late July of a cloudy lemon variant in Spain, a market which craves the taste of citrus with white spirits. However, it was tonic that was the inspiration for the operation's inception. Co-founders Charles Rolls and Tim Warrillow couldn't find an example of this classic mixer that was good

enough to complement the high-quality gins proliferating at the turn of the century. Rolls' frustration was particularly understandable – he had managed Plymouth Gin from 1997 to 2001 – while Warrillow, who was trained in food marketing, had developed a taste for exotic ingredients from his start-up, the East India tea and coffee company.

The two pooled expertise and launched Fever Tree in May 2005. Even the name was focused on their desire to reinvent the tonic category: Fever Tree is another descriptor for *Cinchona ledgeriana*, the source of the tonic's flavour-giving quinine – a substance well known for its anti-inflammatory and malaria-treating properties.

However, the aim of the pair's new product wasn't to create a tonic with a taste that would obscure the subtleties of the gin it would be served with. "What's the point of buying into fantastic premium gins if you mix it with an overpowering tonic?" asks Rolls, stressing the Fever Tree aim is to enhance, not mask the base spirit.

## brand builder

The new company also planned to take the mixer category into a more premium sphere, not just through price and packaging, but the use of entirely natural ingredients. Warrillow explains: "The category was dominated by one brand globally and there was no NPD, just trimming of costs to fight against own-label." This had precipitated the introduction of lesser-quality flavourants and in particular the use of artificial sweetener saccharine in the brand-leading tonic. Warrillow even wonders whether it wasn't the ersatz taste of the mainstream tonics that was damaging the sales and reputation of gin.

Hence, there was a welcome reception when Fever Tree tonic was introduced with eight entirely natural botanically sourced flavours, such as bitter orange from Tanzania, as well as, crucially, the

Then there were the bartenders who were "bemoaning the quality of mixers", as well as the brand owners, "because premium spirits wanted to work with a premium mixer", explains Rolls.

The off-trade also embraced the product. Rolls lists upmarket UK supermarket Waitrose in particular. "They told us that they had been waiting for someone to do a premium tonic... and we've helped them grow their share of the mixer market from 6 to 8.5%."

International sales also flourished, with the US and Spain leading after the UK, although Rolls points out the current growth in Australia, the company's fourth largest export market. "In six years we've grown to £12 million in turnover and sell in 30 countries, although we are actively working in 28."

So, with this success, surely Fever Tree is a takeover target? Would they consider selling up?

It seems not, that is at the moment. Fever Tree's rate of growth is 60% and Rolls and Warrillow are focused on expanding markets such as Canada, Japan and Germany, where "we should be doing far more". They are also still seemingly full of ideas for range extensions, and, as Warrillow jokes, "there are

countries we want an excuse to source ingredients from".

On a more serious note, Rolls adds: "We want to extend our lead, and this is very exciting."

Unfortunately, neither Rolls nor Warrillow would say what new products Fever Tree is working on. So far, the company's creations since the introduction of the tonic include a naturally light low-calorie range extension using fruit sugar instead of cane (fruit sugar is sweeter allowing Fever Tree to use less, reducing the calorie content), as well as a soda water, ginger ale, ginger beer, bitter lemon and, more

### Fever Tree: key facts

- ▶ Co-founders: Charles Rolls and Tim Warrillow
- ▶ Concept formed for upmarket mixers in 2003
- ▶ Fever Tree launched in May 2005 with a 200ml Tonic
- ▶ It's first consumer advertising campaign was summertime 2010
- ▶ Fever Tree was awarded Drinks Company of the Year by *the drinks business* in May 2011
- ▶ In 2010 Fever Tree sold over four million cases
- ▶ The company's current turnover is £12 million
- ▶ UK sales mix: 65% on-trade, with over 600 accounts, including Claridges and The Ritz
- ▶ UK mixer market worth £350m
- ▶ Fever Tree is made at Brothers Drinks in Somerset

recently, Mediterranean tonic. The latter is "more floral in flavour", designed for mixing with vodka, and contains rosemary as well as lemon thyme from Provence. Explaining the inspiration behind this latter launch, Warrillow says: "The vodka category is lacking a good quality and straight forward mixer," and, he adds:

"Belvedere is interested in doing a global campaign with us."

Speaking further of this new product and the future, Rolls continues: "The second phase of this journey will be more creative and innovative." This suggests yet more esoteric additions to the seemingly underexploited mixer category, worth as much as £350 million in the UK alone. But what about a cola? Rolls smiles and says: "People have asked about that and we are thinking hard about it." **db**



### CHEFS, WHO SPEND A LOT OF TIME STUDYING INGREDIENTS, WERE EARLY ADOPTERS

purest quinine Rolls and Warrillow could lay their intrepid hands on – a product from the notoriously dangerous Rwanda Congo border.

Recalling the early days, Rolls says: "We launched with the intention of having a range of mixers but knew that the tonic would be the starting point because if we could get that right, the others could follow."

"The trade was quick to support us," adds Warrillow, in particular restaurants. "Chefs, who spend a lot of time studying ingredients, were early adopters," he says, pointing out that Ferran Adria even incorporated the new brand onto his menu with "Sopa de Fever-Tree tonica".