

INVERROCHE GIN: TAKING AFRICAN SOPHISTICATION GLOBAL

Albert Wöcke and Danie Petzer wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Founded by Lorna Scott in the Southern Cape fishing village of Still Bay, at the tip of the African continent, Inverroche Distillery (Inverroche) had grown from a small home industry into the largest South African gin brand in just six years. Inverroche's stated vision was "Creating handcrafted luxury products with unique and historically significant ingredients from the Cape Floristic Region, which taste, look and smell awesome." Using the Inverroche brand, products and ingredients, the company sought "to reconnect people to each other and the natural environment."

Scott sold the first batch of gin from her home at the end of 2011 and had since grown Inverroche into the dominant brand in the fast-growing artisanal gin scene in South Africa. She had created a unique gin brand using the indigenous flora called "fynbos" of the Western Cape, which grew nowhere else on the planet. Fynbos had long been used by indigenous people for medicinal and culinary purposes, but was now under threat because of agricultural development and invasive alien plants. Scott felt that one way of preserving fynbos would be to find a commercial use for it and create a global brand that would tell the story of these historically significant plants, which had contributed to the emergence and survival of modern people.

In May 2018, Scott was approached by an American entrepreneur who wanted to take Inverroche gins into the American market, with initial focus on the Southern Californian market. The US craft spirits market was booming in 2018, and Inverroche, with its unique story, was well placed to become a global brand if it could achieve large enough sales in the United States. Should Scott agree to the entrepreneur's proposal?

THE SOUTH AFRICAN GIN INDUSTRY

By 2017, gin was still not widely consumed in South Africa and lagged in popularity behind spirits such as brandy, cognac, and whisky. However, there had been an upsurge in the white spirits market, with vodka and gin enjoying an increase of 10 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively, in sales volumes in 2016.¹ The spirits industry sold approximately 132 million litres of product in 2016 and was dominated by the big-brand houses, including Diageo South Africa (Pty) Ltd. (Diageo South Africa) and the Distell Group Ltd.

¹ Euromonitor International, *Country Report: Spirits in South Africa*, Euromonitor International, June 2017, accessed June 28, 2017, www.euromonitor.com/spirits-in-south-africa/report.

(Distell Group) (see Exhibit 1). The South African gin market could be classified into three main segments: white spirits, cocktail, and artisanal.

The white spirits segment of the market consisted of consumers who perceived gin as just another white spirit that was similar to vodka or cane spirits. These consumers combined white spirits with well-known soft drinks brands and were price sensitive. This segment of the market was dominated by two gin brands, Gordons London Dry Gin and Old Buck Gin. Approximately 1 million bottles of gin were sold per year to this segment of the market. Sales were mostly through liquor stores and discount outlets. The gins retailed for approximately US\$8 per bottle.² Vodka was the main competitor to gin in this market segment, as it was considered a substitute. A total of about 2.4 million bottles of vodka were sold per year.

The cocktail segment was willing to pay more for a bottle of gin than the white spirits segment, but while some of the gins in the cocktail segment could cost as much as an artisanal gin, gins targeted at the cocktail segment were generally not as expensive as gins targeted at the artisanal segment. This segment of the market was dominated by Tanqueray, a gin perceived as being of good quality but also good value for money. Tanqueray was owned and distributed by Diageo South Africa. Other well-known gins targeted at this segment of the market were Hendricks and Bombay Sapphire. Gins targeted at the cocktail segment of the market retailed between \$12 and \$30 per bottle.

The third segment was known as the artisanal or “craft gin” segment of the market. Artisanal gins were typically produced in small batches and were characterized by unique flavours infused into the gin during the redistillation process. The flavours were typically derived from fruits, flora, and spices. The artisanal segment of the market had seen the fastest growth in sales in the South African liquor market since 2014. Gins targeted at the artisanal segment of the market were significantly more expensive than gins targeted at the other two segments (white spirits and cocktail), with prices starting at \$25 per bottle. The artisanal segment of the market was known to experiment with the way the gins were consumed. These consumers often combined the gins with an array of artisanal tonics, fruits, and berries. The growth in this segment of the market had attracted many new entrants, and the number of competitors had grown from only two locally produced gins in 2012 to around 135 artisanal gins competing for market share at the start of 2018. No less than 80 of these gins were fynbos-infused. Inverroche was the market leader in the artisanal segment of the South African gin market and had led the market since 2012. Inverroche had doubled its sales every year since the first fynbos gin was sold in 2011 for R200³ a bottle. Inverroche’s main competitors in South Africa were artisanal gins imported by big-brand houses, such as Diageo South Africa and the Distell Group, and other local craft gin producers. Diageo South Africa and the Distell Group imported artisanal gins such as The Botanist, Monkey 47, Whitley Neil, Gin Mare, and Malfy (see Exhibit 2). Large marketing budgets and well-developed distribution channels supported these artisanal gins. Inverroche faced increased competition from other local fynbos-infused craft gins and from gins that offered other innovative elements, such as different colours, including blue and pink, in their products. Since 2017, the artisanal market had grown by more than 154 per cent, and by 2018, the market was worth approximately R87 million. In 2018, Inverroche held a market share of more than 50 per cent of the artisanal gin market.

ORIGINS OF INVERROCHE

It was not all just moonshine and roses.
Lorna Scott

Inverroche was based in the small holiday town of Still Bay on the Southern coast of South Africa. Still Bay was a picturesque town, and while it was home to many financially secure pensioners, it was also home to an

² All dollar amounts are US dollars.

³ R = ZAR = South African rand; R1 = US\$0.787 on May 31, 2018.

impoverished local community, which had been living in the area for many centuries. Still Bay was primarily a holiday destination, expanding from a population of about 6,000 to one of about 70,000 during the December holiday period every year. Scott first identified the possibility of utilizing the local fynbos when she was deputy mayor of the town in 2008. She wanted to develop an industry that would stimulate the local economy and create awareness of the significance of the southern coast of Africa. The area had been identified as the possible cradle of creativity, where the close link between humans and this unique environment may have given rise to the emergence of modern thinking humans in a previous ice age.⁴

Scott managed to secure funding in 2008 from the Western Cape Provincial Department of Agriculture and the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) to develop industries or economic ventures for the impoverished local community. Some of the women in the local communities had been allocated unproductive, arid parcels of land in an attempt to make them economically active. Despite these efforts, however, the women had received little support or seed capital to kick-start their farming activities. Complicating matters were the facts that Still Bay was too remote for manufacturing and that the tourism season lasted for only two months of the year.

Scott began to explore the possibility of using the indigenous flora in the region (fynbos) to develop a range of products. She also explored the potential of planting vineyards in the area, with the aim of producing wine. The Southern Cape had a Mediterranean climate, and the soil was suitable for viticulture. During this exploration period, Scott met a retired botanist and his wife, a horticulturist, who had settled in Still Bay. This couple supported Scott's idea of finding new ways of using the fynbos from the area. Together they explored new uses for the local fynbos that could be commercialized.

Initially, Scott experimented with a fynbos-based jam, which resulted in a successful home industry venture where local women would harvest the fynbos on their land and produce preserves for two local farm stalls. Scott also explored the idea of using fynbos to create perfumes, but because of the high input costs, lack of local expertise, and lead time required to establish commercial nurseries for essential oils, Scott ultimately decided against the idea.

Scott then established a pilot project to test grape cultivars for wine production on her farm; she secured a second mortgage on the farm to set up a small winery in her garage after harvesting a promising crop the first year. However, Scott suffered a setback in the second year, when flocks of birds invaded the vineyard just as the grapes began to ripen. The entire harvest was decimated overnight. Scott realized that growing grapes in that part of the country would be extremely challenging and costly and that, in any event, any wine that was produced would have to compete in a very competitive and mature industry. Scott had to consider alternative uses for her new winery.

The idea to create a world-class spirit was born when Scott unpacked a mini pot still she had been keeping in her loft. She had bought the pot still while on holiday in Italy many years before, as it reminded her of her mother's illicit practice of distilling home-brewed pineapple beer in her pressure cooker when Scott was growing up. She then thought, "Why not convert the winery into a distillery?"

Scott felt that distilling gin was the best option because the product did not require lengthy maturation, like brandy did. Gin was also the only spirit that obtained its flavour from the many botanicals added during redistillation. The botanicals offered gins their unique flavours, and any combination of botanicals could be used as long as they were combined with juniper berries. Scott believed she could have a product on the shelves within a month of making it if she could secure a supplier for the base alcohol and if she was able to create a uniquely South African gin infused with unique ingredients that nobody had used before. Best

⁴ Christopher S. Henshilwood, Francesco D'errico, Curtis W. Marean, Richard G. Milo, and Royden Yates, "An Early Bone Tool Industry from the Middle Stone Age at Blombos Cave, South Africa: Implications for the Origins of Modern Human Behaviour, Symbolism and Language," *Journal of Human Evolution* 41, no. 6 (2001): 631–678.

of all, she would have a luxury product to tell the story of a unique environment in Southern Africa and the origins of human creativity. Scott reflected:

We were absolutely inspired and in awe of the historical significance of this place. We believed that the story of man's development as chronicled through the discoveries at Blombos Caves and other archaeological sites along this coastline told a simple and powerful story of man and the environment—both flora and fauna—coexisting in a sustainable manner; and it was a story that needed telling. We were using the same ingredients that [had] sustained our forefathers for millennia, and by using it in a modern way, we ensured that people continued to use and retain the ancient heritage of this region of Africa.

The 1.5-litre mini pot still from Italy, nicknamed “Mini Meg,” had sat on Scott's kitchen table for three years while she experimented with and eventually developed her gin recipes. During this time, Scott had developed her business plan, brand identity, and packaging. She registered a third mortgage on her farm, and converted the winery into a distillery. Scott also bought a 1,000-litre copper pot still and named it “Magnanimous Meg.”

Scott eventually settled on three fynbos-infused gins that she felt captured the complexity and finely layered fragrances and flavours of the fynbos. The three gins were Inverroche Classic, Inverroche Verdante, and Inverroche Amber, and they reflected the sources of the different fynbos varieties. Inverroche was a name that Scott had invented to celebrate her Scottish and French roots. The name consisted of the Gaelic word *inver*, which meant a confluence of water, and *roche*, the French word for stone. Scott took inspiration from other luxury brands such as Chanel and Dior for the label and logo, to signal luxury and sophistication. The Inverroche colours were simple, and the logo symbolized the cycle of life and the interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Scott felt that the packaging reflected the diversity of modern South Africa and that the ingredients connected all of humankind to that place.

INVERROCHE'S TAKEOFF

By December 2011, Scott had perfected the production process and the fynbos-infused flavour profiles. She made one batch of each of the three fynbos-infused gins and decided to enter the market in the New Year. Although artisanal gins were virtually unknown in South Africa at that time, Scott believed that her unique gins would be a success. The packaging that Scott had ordered for the bottles arrived just before Christmas in 2011, an awkward time to launch a new product in South Africa. Scott's neighbour, who ran a restaurant, persuaded Scott to “just do it now” and not to wait for the New Year to start marketing her gins. The neighbour sent customers from his restaurant across the road to her farm to taste the gin. When the first customers tried the gin, they immediately wanted to buy several bottles. Scott had not really thought about the pricing or positioning of the product before then, and on the spur of the moment, decided to sell her gin for about \$15 a bottle. Over that festive period, Scott ran daily gin-tasting sessions at her farm; she sold out her entire stock by the second week of January.

Scott attributed her initial success to word of mouth and to the captive holiday market that visited Still Bay every Christmas. Throughout 2012, Scott continued to rely on word of mouth and did not engage in any promotional activities outside of Still Bay. Despite this, Inverroche sales doubled every year. According to Scott, “The visitors to Still Bay were our ambassadors and took their bottles of gin home to Gauteng, Cape Town, London, or Singapore and shared their newfound discovery of an original, authentic, and delicious South African product with their friends.” Inverroche started to take on a life of its own when Scott started receiving calls from bars and retailers, and six months after she had launched her gin, the *Cape Times* (a Cape Town-based newspaper) and *Sawubona* (South African Airways' inflight magazine) approached Scott to run a full feature on her gin and brand story.

THE GROWTH OF INVERROCHE'S DOMESTIC PRESENCE

By the end of 2016, Inverroche had produced 165,863 bottles (from 76,347 bottles in 2015) and employed 25 permanent staff; a further 10 part-time employees assisted during the holiday seasons (see Exhibit 3). Initially, Scott had contracted a small distributor to manage distribution to liquor stores and wholesalers in South Africa. This distributor was replaced when retailers and wholesalers complained that the distributor did not stock their shelves on time and that the boxes used to package the bottles would often arrive dirty or damaged. The second distributor was also soon replaced after Scott began receiving complaints from retailers and warehouses. A large wholesaler that stocked Inverroche gins suggested that Scott meet with a new craft beer distributor. Scott agreed. She described their first meeting:

We just got on and made a deal. The relationship has been key to everything. The terms were great—I only have one invoice, we had a 30-day payment agreement and we were paid dead on time. They [the distributor] had representatives who took orders and did tastings at restaurants, events and clubs, and we trained them to understand the perfect serves and to know everything about the product and brand.

The new distributor assisted with promotions at clubs and restaurants, and soon Inverroche became the distributor's largest revenue earner. Scott felt that working with the new distributor was one of the main reasons behind Inverroche's success.

The success of Inverroche did not escape the attention of the large, big-brand houses, and Scott was approached by one of them in mid-2014 about investing in Inverroche. According to Scott, the big-brand house "told me that I would have to change my branding to an African-sounding brand name and add lots of flowers on the label. I refused to let them do this to my brand. I was so annoyed that it just made me even more determined to do it on my own. I knew that I was right." Scott maintained control over Inverroche through strict cost containment, and she did not invest heavily in marketing, instead focusing on using her existing capacity. Inverroche's costs, which were passed on to customers, increased by an average of 6 per cent per year from 2014. This kept the Inverroche margins stable and predictable. In 2017, Inverroche did, however, increase its workforce modestly by hiring a few part-time workers during peak-demand months.

INVERROCHE AND INTERNATIONAL EXPOSURE

By early 2018, Inverroche gins were sold in 18 countries, but export volumes were low. Production and sales had consistently been limited by the supply of fynbos. Scott decided to service the local market first and keep a very low profile abroad. In early 2017, Scott invested in an indigenous fynbos nursery to grow and harvest fynbos in order to improve the alignment between the demand for her products and her ability to meet that demand.

By 2018, approximately 12 per cent of production found its way abroad, but this was not because of any formal decision by Scott and her team to develop markets abroad. Rather, the exports were mainly through unsolicited orders. People visited South Africa, were exposed to the gin, and ended up contacting Inverroche to find out where they could buy the gin in their own countries. According to Scott,

Right from our first batch in 2011, people would arrive and take bottles with them. They would email us wanting to know how to get our gin. We saw an astonishing number of Americans asking for our gin, and when approached by a small South African wine distributor based on the East Coast of America [a South African who emigrated to the United States] we agreed to start the FDA [United States Food and Drug Administration] approval process so that they [the distributor] could import our gins.

The first pallet of 600 bottles was delivered to the US distributor in September 2017, but due to a limited distribution network and no marketing and sales support, Inverroche's presence in the United States remained at that level. Despite limited success in the United States, Inverroche was having mixed success with exports, mainly into Europe. Inverroche managed to export 12,156 bottles in 2016 but this dropped down to less than 5,000 in 2017 (including the 600 bottles to the United States). In 2018 Inverroche had managed to increase exports to about 40,000 bottles, mainly into Europe. Inverroche felt that the drop in sales was due to competitor responses to Inverroche's presence in the markets. However, during 2018 European consumers, primarily in Germany were beginning to demand new types and gins and Inverroche was well positioned to benefit from this (see Exhibit 3).

Scott had a similar arrangement with a distributor in Canada, where similar small volumes were sold. Scott later discovered that the Canadian distributor had entered Inverroche gins into an international spirit competition, where it won "best in class" and first prize for the "gin classic." The US distributor also entered Inverroche gins into an international competition, and the gins scored above 90 per cent. Scott, however, remained reluctant to take part in competitions, as she believed that

the product and brand was so unique that it needed to be experienced personally and this [entering international competitions] was too much like a beauty competition. These judges had a particular pallet and a view of what a gin should taste like. It was always subjective. Inverroche's success had been through word of mouth and through people who experienced it on a personal level.

By June 2018, Inverroche gins had been sold in 19 different countries including Austria, Australia, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

THE DECISION

In 2018, an American entrepreneur who wanted to distribute the three Inverroche gins in the United States approached Scott. His idea was to distribute the gins in on-consumption outlets such as bars, clubs, and restaurants and to select retailers on the West Coast to distribute the products. He had connections with high-profile club and restaurant owners who could launch the brand. Furthermore, the entrepreneur would manage all legal requirements and costs of importing and distributing the gins into the United States. Scott was, however, loyal to her small distributors and preferred to foster relationships of co-operation rather than competition between agents. But Scott had also not entered into any exclusivity agreements, as she felt that these had the potential to create conflicts of interest in the future that could harm the Inverroche brand. In any event, Scott felt that the United States was large enough for her to have more than one agent.

Scott was excited about the prospect of taking a sophisticated African luxury product to the United States and telling the story of Africa's unique heritage. But she had some concerns about managing the brand story in the United States. Would she lose the unique story behind Inverroche? Scott explained:

My ultimate objective with Inverroche was to have people talking about our common origins in Africa, . . . rediscover the original herbs and preserve it. By going to the [United States], I could recreate the story in gin. I could support the story with a blog, YouTube videos, and social media. This was authentic. However, you couldn't make the product anywhere else than on the Southern coast of Africa. We could possibly export the concentrate, which was 87 per cent alcohol by volume, and dilute it before bottling it. Alternatively, we could make another uniquely American gin from the local flora that grew in the various states. It was entirely possible to set up a micro-distillery in the [United States] in partnership with a local investor, but this could not be an Inverroche brand.

THE INTERNATIONAL CRAFT SPIRITS INDUSTRY

In 2017 and 2018, the global craft spirits industry was the fastest growing segment of the world alcohol industry. Tequila, gin, and whiskies were the fastest growing products in this category. Craft spirits were benefiting from global trends in hip, urban subcultures, which valued products perceived as authentic and original with a unique story to tell. This sort of story typically appealed to consumers' desire for ethical living and good moral values; supporting small-scale local businesses was often seen as preferable to supporting a multinational corporation. Craft spirits were identified by the following differentiators: (1) small-scale production that was exclusive and positioned as premium or higher quality; (2) a story around the brand that was grounded in a specific geography; (3) ingredients that originated from that specific locality, to add to the sense of exclusivity; (4) ingredients that were natural and carefully selected rather than industrial scale; (5) a distillery that was autonomous, without any corporate investment and run by a few people; and (6) a flavour that was unique and that emphasized quality and diversity.⁵

The craft spirits industry in the United States was growing faster than any other segment, and although it was dominated by bourbon, vodka, and brandy, in 2018, gin sales had begun to grow more recently. Craft and artisanal brands made up 2.6 per cent of the total sales of spirits, and the United States had seen the growth of micro-distillers, including Fifth Generation Inc., Copperworks Distilling, Tattersall Distilling, and Corsair Distillery.⁶ The craft distilling industry had grown by 25 per cent in 2016 and comprised about 1,600 distilleries; California was home to about 10 per cent of these distilleries, followed by New York and Washington State. The distilleries had grown in number by about 20 per cent since 2016, and they were expected to double their volume by the end of 2018. Distillery and tasting-room sales made up about 34 per cent of total sales (see Exhibit 4).⁷

THE CHALLENGES

Scott sat on a quiet beach in Still Bay and pondered the offer: should she agree to the entrepreneur's proposal? If so, what would the relationship and arrangement look like? How should she support marketing and brand awareness in the United States to ensure the brand story and personal experiences, which defined Inverroche, were communicated effectively to an unknown market in that country?

Was the United States the best choice as her primary export market in a global context? What about China, Europe, or the rest of Africa? Where would the brand story resonate best and grow both revenue and brand equity, establishing Inverroche as a truly global brand? Should she continue with her current arrangement with the East Coast agent or broker a deal between that agent and the entrepreneur, whereby each would get exclusivity in certain states or where they would collaborate in some way? What would marketing and brand support look like in that scenario? Should she set up a bottling facility in the United States and export the gin in bulk? Alternatively, should Scott create a new brand in the United States using that country's local flora? Should she just focus her attention on growing the local South African markets, where she had direct control of the brand story, product quality, and customer service?

The authors wish to acknowledge Maxine Jaffit for facilitating the interaction with Inverroche.

⁵ Euromonitor International, *Alcoholic Drinks: Craft Spirits: Distilling the Facts Behind the Buzz*, Euromonitor International, June 2017, accessed June 28, 2017, www.euromonitor.com/craft-spirits-distilling-the-facts-behind-the-buzz/report.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ American Craft Spirits Association, "Craft Spirits Producers Sold Nearly 6 Million Cases Last Year Alone," American Craft Spirits Association, October 24, 2017, accessed July 1, 2018, <https://americancraftspirits.org/craft-spirits-producers-sold-nearly-6-million-cases-last-year-alone/>.

EXHIBIT 1: COMPANY SHARES OF TOTAL SPIRITS MARKET (126,752,000 LITRES) IN SOUTH AFRICA, 2016

Company	%
Diageo South Africa (Pty) Ltd.	35.0
Distell Group Ltd.	34.8
Edward Snell & Co.	6.8
Pernod Ricard South Africa	6.2
The Really Great Brand Co.	3.7
KWV International (Pty) Ltd.	2.0
DGB (Pty) Ltd.	1.3
ABV Brands	0.3
Others	9.9

Source: Euromonitor International, *Country Report: Spirits in South Africa*, Euromonitor International, June 2017, accessed June 28, 2017, www.euromonitor.com/spirits-in-south-africa/report.

EXHIBIT 2: INVERROCHE MARKET SHARE IN PREMIUM GIN SOUTH AFRICA, 2018 (%)

	Moving Annual Total to March 2017	Moving Annual Total to March 2018	Growth in Moving Annual Total 2017 to 2018
Inverroche	51.2	42.2	109.1
Hendricks	17.2	17.7	162.3
Musgrave	3.9	10.5	589.5
Tanqueray T10	6.3	5.2	110.5
Malfy	2.8	4.0	262.2
Widerer Fynbos	5.0	3.7	85.6
Triple Three	4.9	3.2	67.7
ClemenGold	0.0	2.0	
The Botanist Islay	3.5	2.3	61.4
Bulldog London	2.0	2.2	175.5
Blind Tiger	0.0	1.0	

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 3: INVERROCHE GIN SALES (BOTTLES PER CATEGORY)

Period	Cellar Door	Export	Distributors	Wholesale	Total
2014	6,878	9,786	12,394	10,619	39,677
2015	8,736	9,780	45,324	12,507	76,347
2016	9,727	12,156	141,480	2,500	165,863
2017	8,297	4,635	270,086	13,953	296,971
2018 (5 Months)	2,899	40,053	81,024	6,254	130,230
Total	36,537	76,410	550,308	45,833	709,088

Note: Cellar door sales were bottles sold at the distillery in Still Bay, South Africa. Distributors sold on to retailers, restaurants, and hotels. Wholesale sales were to large supermarket groups. Since 2014, Inverroche had also sold about 100 bottles of rum and 100 bottles of a fynbos liqueur per month. These were primarily sold through cellar door or directly to wholesalers upon request.

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 4: SOUTH AFRICAN AND US WHITE SPIRITS ALCOHOL MARKET COMPARISON

	South Africa	United States
Total Volume of White Spirits	126 million litres	30,416 million litres
Year-on-Year Compound Growth 2003–2022	3.5%	0.1%
White Spirits Sales	36,454,000 litres	1,998 million litres
Off-Trade versus On-Trade*	70.9% off-trade	76.6% off-trade
Craft Spirits Market	1.9 million litres	52 million litres

Note:*Off-trade included grocery stores and independent retailers. On-trade included bars, clubs, hotels and restaurants.

Source: Euromonitor International, *Country Report: Spirits in South Africa*, Euromonitor International, June, 2017, accessed June 28, 2017, www.euromonitor.com/spirits-in-south-africa/report; Euromonitor International, *Country Report: Spirits in the US*, Euromonitor International, June 2017, accessed June 28, 2017, www.euromonitor.com/spirits-in-the-us/report.