

WORDS | BILL MACKINTOSH

FOR A NEW DRINKS BRAND IT WAS THE ULTIMATE ACCOLADE – the British ambassador in Moscow choosing to serve vodka made in Scotland to guests in Russia celebrating the Queen's Birthday earlier this year.

At the official reception in the British embassy in June, more than 500 dignitaries, Russians and Brits, enjoyed Pincer Vodka, which is made in Broxburn, near Edinburgh, using Scottish mountain water and elderflower and the key ingredient, milk thistle, more of which later.

The ambassador, Glasgow-born Anne Pringle, was keen to inject a Scottish flavour into the celebrations and ordered a case after her press officer – another Scot – spotted an article about the new drink.

She's not alone in her support for the small Scottish company. Other high profile fans include Kate Moss, Tracy Emin, and Nigella Lawson. It's also popular with the rock elite – Snow Patrol have ordered cases, it is stocked backstage at Scotland's National Stadium, and customised bottles were given out to every act on the bill at T in the Park, which this year included Blur, The Killers, Lady Gaga and Lily Allen.

The company's chief executive Jonathan Engels, 33, from Glasgow, launched Pincer in October 2007 with three friends. "I had always thought selling vodka in Russia would be a bit like importing coals to Newcastle," he says. "However, following the order from the embassy we have now started to put out feelers in Russia and the response has been very positive." Pincer now has a sales rep in Russia pushing the brand.

Engels, an architecture graduate, had been taking milk thistle extract for years to combat the effects of a night on the town – made from the seeds of the Mediterranean plant, the extract is believed to improve liver function. He hit upon the idea of making it available behind the bar by developing a high quality spirit infused with its botanical properties. A spoonful of medicine to help the sugar go down, if you like.

He had no background in distilling, but between 2005 and 2007 experimented with different flavourings on his kitchen table in "a typical student flat" in Glasgow. "I had designed a couple of industrial buildings when I started out in architecture, but I really couldn't see myself spending the rest of my life drawing glorified tin huts. As a user of milk thistle, I was aware of its remarkable effects on a hangover, so the idea was born there." ▶

Grasping the thistle vodka

WHEN A YOUNG SCOTTISH ENTREPRENEUR LAUNCHED A NEW VODKA, EVEN HE DIDN'T THINK HE'D BE TAKING IT TO RUSSIA SO SOON

PHOTOGRAPHY | DAVID LEAHY



“Milk thistle has remarkable effects on a hangover”

But it was much longer before Pincer was ready. “We needed approval from the Food Standards Agency because we were putting elderflower and milk thistle in, and that took a gruelling 18 months,” Engels

recalls. There were also delicate negotiations with banks, as the credit crunch was taking hold. Eventually, Pincer vodka was launched for less than £250,000, a miniscule amount when you consider Diageo’s latest Smirnoff vodka had an £11 million ad campaign.

Engels tried 40 different types of milk thistle before settling on one which comes from north Italy, where it grows naturally. The elderflower, which is commercially grown in Hertfordshire, is picked in a two-week window, then shipped north where a company better known for making whisky distils the spirit. It is then left to marry for six months.

That hiatus was accidental, says Engels, because that’s how long it took to get the distinctive Pincer bottles delivered. The dark purple bottle protects the vodka’s natural botanical properties, which can be damaged by exposure to ultra-violet light, and means no artificial antioxidants need to be added that might destroy the drink’s purity.

The vodka is now sold in over 30 bars in London, including Mahiki, a favoured nightclub on Princes William and Harry, and 20 in Glasgow and Edinburgh, including the Black Sparrow, last year voted Scotland’s most stylish bar.

The drink is marketed as “the forgiving vodka” but Engels is keen not to overplay the tagline, aware of the slightly disingenuous message it puts out. “It is hard liquor, distilled to 38%. There’s no doubt about that, and I don’t want to

be irresponsible about the dangers of drinking too much.”

So, what of the actual drink? By itself, milk thistle – which has been used since Greco-Roman times for its restorative effects – conjures up subtle apple leaf flavours. Engels discovered that the natural sweet taste of elderflower complemented the milk thistle, and Pincer vodka’s elegant flavour was born.

Wild, hand-picked elderflower has a light refreshing taste and a long standing history as an ingredient in traditional folk medicine. Combined with the grain and water, the vodka has fresh flint notes on the nose and has a lot of fruit at the start, with damsons, wild berry and floral notes. It is described as having a honey texture with a clean, herbaceous, apple leaf finish. All of which says ‘cheers’ – or, as seems increasingly likely, *na zdrove!* ♥

www.pincervodka.com



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PINCERITO COCKTAIL

as made by Karolis Silkauskas, bar supervisor at Mint Leaf Lounge

GLASS: Boston

INGREDIENTS:

60ml Pincer vodka

3.5cm cucumber

Lemon juice

Sugar solution

METHOD: Mix the lemon juice and sugar equally. Muddle the cucumber and ice (mash at the bottom of the glass, using a ‘muddler’ or wooden pestle). Mix in the vodka and lemon juice solution. Add more ice as required and finally garnish with a strip of cucumber peel. Serves one.

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