

THE NEXT BIG BRAND?

You've probably never heard about Gray Whale Gin. More than a few industry experts are betting that very soon, you will. At last month's Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America (WSWA) Convention, the new California gin took home the "Hot New Now Media Award" and was also the victor of the *Shark Tank*-like competition, "Brand Battle."

Produced by Golden State Distillery, Gray Whale Gin was inspired by "my love of California," described its creator, the chef and TV personality Marsh Mokhtari. The logo features the California coastline and the London dry-style gin is flavored with the unique botanicals that line the gray whale's migratory path from Baja and north along 800 miles of the California coast.

Every ingredient is hand-foraged from the wild (Mokhtari pulls the sea kelp from the ocean floor himself) or sourced from small organic farmers (limes from Baja, juniper berries from Big Sur, almonds from a little farm near Sonoma). A portion of Gray Whale Gin's proceeds go to Oceana, an organization dedicated to ocean preservation.

Sure, Gray Whale Gin checks all the boxes—distinctive oceanic blue package, delicious taste profile, craft spirit appeal—but so do a lot of new products. What makes it truly compelling, said Charlie Merinoff, Co-Chairman of Breakthru Beverage Group and a Brand Battle judge, is that it has "a truly great story" behind it, and the creator's "passion really comes through and it's bigger than just you" he told Mokhtari.

"My generation wants to know how it's made; but my kids' generation wants to know if it's sustainable, non-GMO, organic, locally-sourced," Merinoff continued. In a market flooded with new and traditional wine and spirit offerings—there are roughly 100,000 SKUs available for purchase in the New York market alone—it is the brand that understands and speaks to today's consumer in an authentic way that has real "reason for being" the judges agreed.

Of course, a study of which new brands take off reveals more magic than science, but I'll be keeping an eye on Gray Whale Gin. Read more of our Convention coverage on page 18.



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WHAT WE'RE UP TO

Jason Glasser, Beverage Media, with former New York Met Todd Zeile and Mr. Met himself at the Treasury Wine Estates full distributor Kickoff meeting at CitiField. / Beverage Media's Kristen Bieler with Carlos Pulenta, Founder of Bodega Vistalba / Ben Jordan or Early Mountain Vineyards with W. R. Tish, Beverage Media / Diddy with Beverage Media's Marlena Hoffman at Ciroc VS debut.

KRISTEN BIELER PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW KIST



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# A NEW DAY FOR WSWA

## THE NEED FOR EVOLUTION AND A COMMITMENT TO ‘STAND OUT’ HIGHLIGHT THE ANNUAL WINE & SPIRITS WHOLESALER CONVENTION

BY KRISTEN BIELER

This year was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America convention. Held in Las Vegas from April 30<sup>th</sup> through May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the convention also marks the last year of WSWA President and CEO Craig Wolf’s leadership after 18 years with the organization. Among his parting words of advice: “A unified membership has been the key to our success.”

General session attendees heard from former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Sidney Frank Innovation Award Winner Rob Sands (CEO Constellation Brands) and Lifetime Leadership Award winner Robert Harmelin (EVP, Allied Beverage Group), among others.

The relentless pace of change in the industry was a theme echoed in many speeches. “I think everyone knows that the great brands of today are entirely different than the great brands of yesterday,”

said Sands, stressing how critical it is to understand what consumers want.

Yet the most dynamic call to action came from incoming WSWA president Barkley Stuart, EVP and Director of Government Affairs, Southern Glazer’s Wine & Spirits, who declared the focus of his year at the helm will be diversity. The recruitment and advancement of women and minorities is long overdue in the wine and spirits industry, and it’s hurting business, he explained: “If we do not ensure that diverse ideas get heard, then we are not doing our jobs as leaders. It’s the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.” (See our interview with Stuart).

As an important first step in this direction, Major Brands CEO Sue McCollum has joined the WSWA Board as the first female officer. McCollum was also awarded the WSWA Women’s Leadership Council’s first-ever Icon Award.

Six new products were selected to compete in the first-ever “Brand Battle,” pitching their brands before a team of judges including Charlie Merinoff, Co-Chairman of Breakthru Beverage Group. A California-based small-batch gin brand, Gray Whale, took home the trophy. “Brand Battle is essential for new suppliers to learn what’s important as they’re looking for their niche in the marketplace,” said Wolf. ■

1. Craig Wolf in conversation with Madeleine K. Albright, former Secretary of State (1997-2001)
2. Craig Wolf, WSWA President & CEO and Bobby Harmelin, EVP, Allied Beverage Group
3. Constellation Brands CEO Rob Sands, recipient of the Sidney Frank Innovation Award
4. Sue McCollum, Chairman & CEO, Missouri’s Major Brands and recipient of Women Leadership Council’s Icon Award
5. 2018 Brand Battle winner, Marsh Mokhtari, Co-Founder & Master Distiller of Gray Whale Gin (center, with trophy), poses with judges Charlie Merinoff, Meredith May, Bill Rancic, Tobin Ellis, Syd Ross, Marc Sachs and Steve Slater

