

# Tom Jago

THE MAN WHO CHANGED THE FACE OF SPIRITS



*Tom Jago is the most extraordinary spirit marketer. He is often described as the man who changed the face of British drinking. Tom has an essential skill all executives need: a sense of humour!*

**I**t was the early 90s when I first met Tom Jago. He was a part of James Espey's scotch and cognac team at Seagram. My immediate reaction was – "Here is a man gifted in product development and marketing but he is also jovial. I am not sure if he is really British!"

Over the years he taught me a great deal about the spirits business. He also taught me the most important thing: how to choose and enjoy good Claret (Bordeaux).

Tom along with Dr Espey and Peter Fleck are the pillars at Last Drop Distillers Ltd. Here's how their website describes Tom:

*From a village school in the remote countryside, via a scholarship to Oxford and service in the Royal Navy during WWII, Tom Jago found his niche in the wine and spirits trade. He led the team that developed new ideas on old themes, like Croft Original Pale Cream Sherry and Le Piat D'Or brands, which revolutionised British drinking habits forever. He cooperated with the 'gang of three' in the invention of Bailey's Irish Cream and Malibu.*

But wait, there's more to this innovator. Tom was instrumental (the driving force) in brands like Johnnie Walker Blue Label, Hennessy, Chivas Regal 18 YO,

Martell, The Classic Malts among others. In fact, Tom helped in creating Imperial Blue and Royal Stag at Seagram. They are now well-known components of Pernod India.

#### **Tom's 'accidental' career**

After the war, Tom 'accidentally slipped into advertising'. He applied for a photographer's job but was mistaken for someone else and hired as a copywriter! Later he became an account director at an advertising agency that became Ogilvy & Mather. Among his accounts was a small company called Gilbeys. After a round of mergers and acquisitions,

Gilbeys became Diageo. With a four-year stint at Moët-Hennessy, followed by United Distillers (with James) and later Seagram, Tom became the most sought after marketer.

Throughout his career, his area of focus was innovation and new products. As Tom puts it: "At Gilbeys, I was not very good at being a marketing director. So they gave me a small budget, an office, and a secretary, and said 'try and think of some new drinks we can sell profitably'. And then began the string of success.

### **His philosophy on product development**

Tom's focus over the years has been simple and straightforward. "First step is to make the drink agreeable to the palate, the eyes, and the nose. Baileys and Malibu are good examples of this," he says.

The other principle, according

to Tom, is to develop products that persuade drinkers that they are worth drinking and make them appreciate quality. Interestingly, it's the same set of motivations: palate, eyes and nose; but they are applied to whisky, cognac and even tequila!

But above all, Tom believes patience is the powerful virtue that leads to acceptance and growth of a brand.

"It is clear to me that the motivation to drink alcohol is very deeply buried in the human subconscious, therefore, attempts to market distilled spirits must be subtle too. A spirits brand is bound to grow slowly. The promotions must be long, steady and consistent."

Tom believes new products and brands often fail because the companies behind them, particularly the global ones, lack the fortitude to see them through to fruition. That's why the successes in the U.S. (e.g.,



Arthur Shapiro

Grey Goose and Patron) have come from entrepreneurs.

Another interesting fact: He does not let drinker research get in the way. "It is useful, but in case of alcoholic drinks it cannot be relied on. The reason: the essential illogical responses of people to alcohol," says Tom. He adds, "No one will tell you the truth about their feelings regarding drinks –because they don't know what they are!"

Consumer research is like a lamp post, some people lean on it while others are illuminated by it.

### **The love for whisky**

Despite inventing light, sweet and palatable drinks, Tom is an unabashed devotee of malts.

His focus on whisky over the years has been extraordinary. Johnnie Walker: Blue Label was created in 1987 to reassert the perceived value of the Johnnie Walker brand in Asia, where grey market discounting had damaged it. He also developed Classic Malts, a collection of outstanding products from individual malt distilleries, which became brands.

At his current venture, Last Drop Distillers Ltd, he and his partners are using 70 single malts in their blend. Some are from distilleries long since closed. It's truly an amazing venture. You can check it out online on: [www.lastdropdistillers.com](http://www.lastdropdistillers.com).

Throughout his career, Tom has re-defined product quality. For example, at Hennessy, he learned about the sophisticated use of oak in spirit maturation. No one in the scotch business knew about this at

## **TOM ON VODKA**

Change began in 1949 when a Mr. Kunett, a Russian émigré in the USA, sold his tiny Smirnoff distillery to Heublein. At the time he was making about 5,000 cases a year. He and Heublein began promoting vodka as the spirit with negligible taste. So vodka drinking spread to the civilized world (in Russia it was sold in non-closable bottles!)

I was closely involved in this period of change. From 1957, I was helping an old drinks' merchant called Gilbeys with their advertising. Gilbeys had been smart enough to get the rights to Smirnoff vodka for a large part of the world. So we were engaged in promoting vodka – which was entirely unknown in Britain. We began to understand the revolution that was taking place. Research produced some unexpected results: we used an ad showing young men in their digs preparing for a party. One of them was cleaning his teeth; the advertisement was badly understood. After a few enquiries it emerged that only 12 per cent of young English men owned a toothbrush!

And when we claimed that Smirnoff did not give a hangover, we got the response: "What's the point of having a drink if you don't get a hangover?" Binge drinking is nothing new, it seems.



that time. Imagine the battles that ensued between this young upstart and the tough and crusty old timers who ran the whisky production. Perhaps based on these battles or just plain good common sense, Tom taught me to be wary of production managers.

“A word of caution concerning those splendid fellows. Don’t let them ruin a great luxury brand by economy measures unrelated to the essential perceived value of the pack. I have seen a production man try to save less than a penny by spoiling the closure of Johnnie Walker: Blue Label – a brand that sells for £100.”

## TOM ON GILBEYS

Gilbeys was a fun place to work. They owned a beautiful chateau in the Medoc (Chateau Loudenne), which I used as a place to plot things with co-workers. And board meetings were a delightful occasion! Walter Gilbey said one day, “Tom, I just got a lift back on Hennessy’s little jet. Do you think we might get one?” I told him that it was unlikely but I would still search and report back. Next week I said “We can’t afford it; costs £2m and that’s about our overdraft. And anyway, you would have two pilots to feed and clothe.”

“Oh,” said young Walter, “Couldn’t Hawkins learn to drive it?”

The joy of this was that Hawkins, a 56-year-old serious drunk family retainer, only worked one day in a year when he drove the Gilbeys to Royal Ascot race meeting in a coach!

## PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN FILMS

James Bond was supposed to be my baby! I was with Gilbeys in the ’60s and they had the franchise for Smirnoff in the British Empire. When Cubby Broccoli (Albert Broccoli, producer of Bond films) was rounding up funds for Dr. No, he approached Gilbeys with a small secret; they were broke! One of the producers accidentally told me and I persuaded them to let me give them two cases (one Blue Label and one Red Label). I told them I hoped they could include both in the film and they agreed.

This is the scene where Bond rejects Red Label and makes his martini with the stronger vodka. When they asked for a few more cases, for their wind-up party, I refused! We lost the chance to be in all the Bond films. No money changed hands. How times change, huh!




Tom with another veteran, James Espey

## The Indian voyage

In the late’90s, while at Seagram, Tom was called to Seagram India to help with new product development. One of the chemists had the idea of making a good admix whisky by using both imported scotch malt and local grain spirit. The resulting products, Royal Stag and Imperial Blue, were successful and have stood the test

of time. As Tom puts it: “a number of factors accounted for our success – branding, packaging, price (above the competition) and the unique use of TV advertising outside of India.”

He still keeps his hand in the Indian spirits market with some consultancy projects including one on behalf of Sainov Spirits Pvt Ltd. 

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