



# FEVER TREE

We don't normally write about soft drinks in Class, but such are the lengths that Fever Tree's founders go to in order to create quality mixers to complement premium spirits, and so different do their products taste compared to more established brands, that we thought its classic David versus Goliath story well worth telling (family doubt the Count Negroni story).

Words: Ian Cameron



**T**he first roadblock was just a bit of string stretched across the road, but the gunmen stood at each side were a rather persuasive reason to stop the car. After an anxious and terse conversation, Fever Tree co-founder Tim Warrillow's driver hands over some money before being allowed to continue down the road.

The second roadblock was somewhat more persuasive. This time, a plank of wood was slid out in the road, six-inch nails hammered right through it, standing upright. With no choice but to stop, the driver hits the brakes and they come to a stop in a cloud of dust. When it clears, they face a gang of child soldiers, armed with AK47s. And a rocket launcher. Welcome to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Central Africa is not high on many people's lists of places to visit, and the Congo is still clearly struggling after decades of civil war and ethnic strife. But the country is also considered to have huge natural resources, and if Tim and Fever's Tree's involvement with this ravaged state offers even the smallest contribution to its development, then that can only be a good thing, for here is obtained the finest quinine in the world.

The volatility of the region means running a business here is simply not attractive for larger corporations, many of which withdrew years ago. But for a small company like Fever Tree, its quest for quality ingredients knows no bounds, and such intrepid missions as Tim's to the Congo in January this year clearly illustrate the lengths the company will go to, to ensure the continued supply of bark from the particular cinchona trees that grow here: it's the bark from which quinine, the essential ingredient in tonic water, is made.

"I look back now and realise that I didn't quite appreciate what we were driving into," says Tim, in something of an understatement.

Safely back in England, that a premium mixer market exists at all – and that it has such enormous worldwide growth potential – is arguably a direct result of Tim's chance meeting with Charles Rolls, former managing director of Plymouth Gin, back in 2004.

During his tenure at Plymouth, Charles had been perpetually frustrated by the fact that bartenders and journalists could never taste the nuances of his gin once tonic water had been added. In fact, about ten years ago he had conducted a tasting of all the available tonic waters in the UK, from Schweppes to supermarkets' own brands, and reached a sad conclusion. "What was the point in going to these lengths to assure the quality of our gin, when the tonic would undermine the whole thing? We couldn't find a single tonic that didn't mask our gin." Incidentally, at the time he concluded that Waitrose's was the best. "That's not to say it was good, it was just better than anything else on the market."

He also conducted a similar taste test across the Atlantic. The results here were even worse, he says. "They were absolutely disgusting. Americans seem to have a love affair with grapefruit and most tasted of grapefruit."

So just what was the trouble with tonic? Artificial flavourings, sweeteners and



preservatives; poor quality quinine, and not much of it at that; hard water. There were tonics that were too sweet; tonics with lazy, fat bubbles; tonics with ingredients such as hydrolysed corn syrup and saccharine, stabilisers and colourants. Flavourings called things like decanal aldehyde. In short, it all left a rather a nasty aftertaste.

Meanwhile, Tim, then an advertising executive looking for his next career move, had been researching the idea of a premium mixer category. “Practically everyone I talked to in the industry said I should talk to Charles. When we finally met in 2004 there was a complete marriage of minds.”

By this time Plymouth Gin had been sold to Sweden’s Vin & Sprit and Charles had been having some time off. Now, he invested in the new venture, bankrolling Tim, and both enjoying the freedom of creating a product with a completely clean sheet, deliberately without thought to budget or limitations.

Tim began researching the ideal recipe for tonic water. He would spend his days in the British Library, looking up the annals of the East India Company for references to quinine and its role in combating malaria, identifying recipes that went back to 1620.

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All signs pointed to central Africa and the cinchona ledgeriana species of tree, considered the purest strain of quinine, and they found a plantation run by second generation German settlers. Remarkably, it had not been abandoned during the years of unrest and that in fact practised strict husbandry and reforestation – remarkable when most of the other crops around had been abandoned.

“We tried to call them, but could never get through,” says Tim. “We wrote, but nothing came back. Then one day, six weeks after we had originally contacted them, we finally got an email.”

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With a source of quinine sorted, a similar pattern of investigations and chance conversations with rare plant ‘hunters’ yielded other key botanicals for their recipe, including bitter oranges from Tanzania, which are cold-pressed by hand to extract the essential oils; marigold oil; and soft water that’s low in minerals sourced from the Buxton hills – of course the duo are tight-lipped about the exact formula of eight botanicals.

Some five iterations later, trying and discarding certain botanicals such as cloves (“a complete no-no,” says Charles, “we were trying to enhance the gin, not overwhelm it”), they were happy with the result and in 2005, Fever Tree Indian Tonic Water was born, intended to complement all good gins (not just Plymouth). Incidentally, inspiration for the company name came from a book, *The Miraculous Fever Tree: Malaria, Medicine and the Cure that Changed the World*. (Charles and Tim met the author recently, who told of how pleased she had been to receive some Fever Tree tonic water in her Christmas stocking.) Since 2005, Fever Tree has averaged around two new products per year – each taking a similarly intrepid attitude to sourcing quality botanicals. “We are completely unique in going to the lengths that we do,” says Charles.

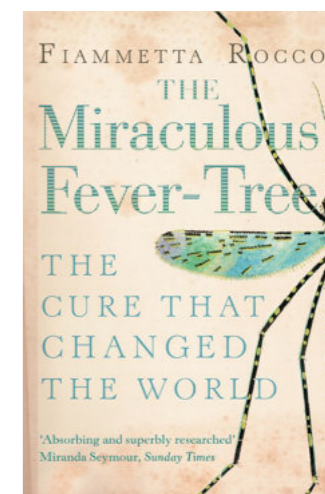
Their Bitter Lemon uses quinine too but also sfumatrice lemon essence from Sicily – an extract previously the preserve of the perfume industry. (Bitter lemon is marketed as Lemon Tonic for the retail market – a move which prompted an instant 17 per cent hike in sales, says Charles).

Fever Tree Ginger Ale uses ginger oils from Cochin in India, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast – but not Jamaican ginger, which they found too ‘one-dimensional’. In the Ivory Coast, the farm there has some 40 hectares planted exclusively to supply Fever Tree. “And we know that it goes from the farm to be processed in less than a day...” says Tim.

The addition of soda water to the range next might have looked somewhat cynical – it’s just water and carbonation, after all – but Tim and Charles say it was simply a response to on-trade fans who said once they had succeeded in up-selling customers for tonic, it simply looked wrong to sell them a ‘standard’ soda. Lemonade became product number five, using more of that Sicilian lemon extract, then a low calorie tonic water.

Initially nervous at introducing what has become their ‘Naturally Light’ tonic, Charles and Tim feared compromising on taste, as so many ‘diet’ products do compared to their ‘full fat’ versions. “Every light tonic tasted revolting,” says Charles. But rather than turning to hydrolysed corn starch or saccharine instead of sugar – God forbid – they were pleased with the effect of using natural fruit sugar and how it the mixer retained some viscosity otherwise absent with artificial sweeteners.

Ginger beer followed, with Tim and Charles insisted on actually brewing root ginger. Surprisingly, not all major producers do this but it brings out some real fiery notes. They won’t divulge the sources for the ginger they use in the beer, but they will admit to having banned artificial clouding agents. A naturally





light ginger beer followed the same approach as their low-calorie tonic. Their most recent product, Mediterranean Tonic Water, is designed to capitalise on the premium vodka market, rather than gin. It still contains quinine, though not as much as the Indian variant. It's a particularly floral mixer – they played with lavender at first but it was rather too 'soapy' – with seven botanicals including thyme linalool, geranium and rosemary.

"We hope this will demonstrate that while we've done the classics really well, now we're taking you on another journey," says Tim.

A quick taste test of all the Fever Tree products quickly reveals that all that sleuthing for botanicals is worth the effort. Clean, vigorous and balanced, with authentic flavours and Champagne-style carbonation – "like pebbledashing your face," says Charles, though perhaps he should think up a nicer sounding analogy.

All blending, brewing and bottling occurs at the Brothers Drinks plant in Somerset, where Fever Tree is now one of its biggest customers. And even in bottling Fever Tree products demand something different to the mass market: because of the higher levels of carbonation they insist on, they need to use a slightly thicker glass bottle and thicker crown caps to prevent them simply popping off – a necessity that places them at odds with the rest of the drinks industry, which tends to be using fewer raw materials in bottling.

Fever Tree's turnover is already £8m, not bad for a company that started just five years ago, which has doubled turnover last year and is set to double turnover in the year ahead. It has been profitable for the past two years. In terms of bottles, that's 18 million in 2010, up from 10 million in 2009.

"We've opened people's eyes," says Tim. "The speed of growth suggests this market has been overlooked for so long. People just sleep walked down the mixer aisle."

"And people's awareness levels are still only 30 per cent within gin drinkers," adds Charles. Indeed, the UK mixer market is worth £350m across the core tonic, ginger ale, soda and bitter lemon segments. As to whether they are seriously challenging Schweppes, well, they admit they're not even close. In fact, feedback they've heard from Schweppes is that their sales are not declining, suggesting Fever Tree has simply stimulated the category.

Whereas five years ago Charles and Tim would be taking samples around on, respectively, their motorbike and bicycle, Fever Tree is now carried by more than 30 UK wholesalers, selling in more than 600 bars and restaurants, and is listed in all major supermarkets – Waitrose was early to stock it and it is now listed in all the major supermarkets. Sales are split 65 per cent on-trade, 35 per cent off-trade. Internationally, it is sold in some 22 countries: the 'big three' being the US, the UK and Spain, and is listed in seven out of the top ten restaurants in the world, according to Restaurant magazine's rankings.

In fact, it's in Spain (where the preferred G&T serve is a large balloon glass on a long stem, served over ice and with a lemon twist as a digestif) that Fever

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Tree has received perhaps its biggest endorsement, from El Bulli, the restaurant consistently voted number one in the world.

"We got a call from its sommelier, but we said we couldn't ship to them as Spanish importers just weren't interested," says Tim. "So they actually helped us find an importer, and six months later we were given an invite to the restaurant by Ferran Adrià himself."

Awaiting them was not just a free meal, but another surprise too. Course number 26 out of a 36-course tasting menu was a frozen *sopa de tonica* – Fever Tree had been made into a sorbet using liquid nitrogen, served with cubes of orange peel and rose petals. Praise indeed.

With all this success, 2010 has already brought forth several suitors for the company. So far Charles and Tim have refused all offers. They say they've several new products in the pipeline, but are obviously tight-lipped about what they will be. You sense they don't want to go down the 'quirky', 'English' route of so many of their competitors such as Fentimans, and they admit to thinking long and hard about a cola, yet who has really ever challenged Coca Cola successfully?

Having clearly reached tipping point, and with the company now taking deliveries of quinine from the plantation in Congo in shipments of one tonne at a time, Tim and Charles decided they should probably meet their quinine suppliers face-to-face for the first time, to discuss how to progress their burgeoning relationship – prompting Tim's journey in January this year. The plantation remains exceedingly remote. Tim flew first to Nairobi, then took a plane to Kigali, Rwanda, at which point he faced an eight-hour cab journey, crossing borders into The Democratic Republic of The Congo and facing those arbitrary roadblocks.

"It was all so completely alien to me," admits Tim. "Once we crossed the border it made Rwanda look like the south of France, there were so many people walking around fully armed. I checked a few websites the night before I left: they basically said 'Do NOT travel to this area'."

Risking life and limb for a decent G&T? Now that's an ethos we can definitely sign up to.

