

funkin

the drinks business

Warrillow says the reason his Fever Tree has done so well in taste tests is because of its lack of saccharine, an ingredient present in all the brand's competitors, led by Schweppes. However, the fact remains that people are relatively forgiving of additives in soft drinks. Carlton at Funkin puts this

down to the fact that most producers have no choice: fruit juices have a short shelf-life and have to be transported in cold chillers. His way round this is a range of purees, including white peach and raspberry, that last for 12 months. They are listed in All Bar One, Whitbread's Country Pub Dining and the Frandek group of pubs such as The Ebury in London. "Take on a £500 Italian-made Magrini machine to make smoothies with ice and one of our purees – it's a hundred times better than a home Kenwood."



PRODUCT NAME: Funkin Water

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Responding to an increasing demand for alternatives in the functional drinks category, Funkin has launched three fruit waters, infused with botanicals and herbs. The Irish spring water contains real fruit flavours, designed to address the consumer demand for healthier drinks. The three flavours are Cranberry and Echinacea, Lemon and Siberian Ginseng and Tangerine and Ginkgo Biloba. The waters provide a healthy alternative to carbonated soft drinks, and are targeted at the on-trade, but they are also available at some speciality retailers (RRP £1.30). The product is being marketed as cool, unisex, upmarket and healthy. Before this launch, Funkin had already established itself as a supplier of premium purées in the UK on-trade.

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FEELING THE SQUEEZE

With smoking bans, binge drinking and obesity in the headlines, it seems the time is ripe for local boozers to be expanding and promoting their range of soft drinks, says *James Aufenast*

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Alex Carlton of soft drinks company Funkin says there are other reasons why the smoothie brand failed: "When Innocent tried to hit the on-trade, the company provided its own fridges to gain listings, but it didn't work because the staff were drinking all their products." Bar workers liked the taste and though the cost price of Innocent was high, just tucked in.

The answer, according to Carlton, are purées – and it's surprising how many top London bars use his white peach purée rather than fresh fruit to make Bellinis. Carlton supplies Milk and Honey, Sketch and Soho House with a range of fruit mixes. Ultimately he wants to tackle what he sees as a big gap in the market – pubs. "We're suggesting they make simple drinks – a bit of fruit, spirit and a mixer – and what a great gross profit they can get as a result." Even if he doesn't succeed (and it seems unlikely that the average boozier will offer a Mai Tai within the next 10 years) Carlton is suggesting they make smoothies from his purées as well.

Or the alternative is to squeeze your own. Smiths of Smithfield in the capital has an unusual range of home-produced mixed fresh juices. And Sabor, a restaurant and cocktail bar in London's Islington, mixes fruit squeezed on the premises with pineapple, guava and passion fruit bought in bulk from trendy new Colombian supplier Fruto del Espirito. Bar manager Esnayder Cuartas is Colombian, and is used to a very different approach: "Back home everyone has a liquidiser. It's like you have a kettle here. The big brands are everywhere, but every bar has a choice of six different juices, too."

"It's too messy and time-consuming for most barmen," reckons Carlton of the mashing and squeezing of fresh fruit that has more of a history in the US than the UK. If he's right, then that's fortunate for the large producers of soft drinks brands, but that doesn't mean they can sit around doing nothing. Britvic's new majority shareholder AXA has recently waved through a product with limited shelf-life and a relatively high production cost – orange or apple juice in a 275ml glass bottle. That shows which way the market is moving. **db**

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BUSINESS APPOINTMENTS

Funkin, suppliers of fruit juices and purees to the on-trade, announces three senior-level appointments: **Jaye Stahlhut** joins as brand development manager; **Greg Akoka** as export manager; and **Sue Henney** as business development manager for new venture fk:one which deals with bar and waitstaff recruitment and training.

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ON-TRADE INTERVIEW

FRESH PRINCE

Alex Carlton started with a smoothie round in LA – now he delivers fruit purees to London's top bars and restaurants. He can also sort you out with a professional bar, karaoke session or casino at home, says Robyn Lewis



WE'VE WRITTEN a fair amount in these pages about the cocktail revival. We've asked the spirit brand managers for their opinions, quizzed mixologists, met the bar owners and chewed the fat with King Cocktail himself, Dale de Groff, but we've never really considered the other beneficiaries of the movement. The equipment guys, I guess, and the glass manufacturers, you could say, and what about the mixer brands? With all those cocktail ingredients being mashed, muddled and puréed for Daiquiris, Margaritas, Caipirinhas and Slings in the capital's style bars, have any ancillary brands benefited from this? Well, yes, actually – funk in for one.

Funkin is a West London-based supplier of various fruit purees in funky silver packaging to the trade. Founded and run by a young entrepreneur, Alex Carlton, the product has slowly but surely developed a solid following among the bars of London and now nationwide, creating a fully-fledged brand that has grown from strength to strength over the last five years, culminating in off-trade supermarket listings so that consumers can join in the fun(kin) too.

"It all started really from the 10 years I

FUNKIN AT HOME

A new element of the Funkin empire is the "Funkin at home" concept. This is a bespoke party service, where you can bring mixologists and a fully stocked bar into your home along with karaoke and/or a casino should you wish.

"Basically we already have a share in an events company, so it was a logical step for us," explains Carlton. "We already knew about mobile bars and had the mixologist contacts. The idea is, say 50 people, couple of hours, your home and £1,500 tops and we will bring everything. The glassware, the barmen, the mixers, the straws, the napkins, you name it and then you have an a-list bar in you living room or garden or wherever you want it with some of the best barmen from the best bars in London making the best drinks. It's a lot of fun."

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spent in LA," says Carlton. "I was working as all sorts and at one point my flatmate and I were living just off Melrose, where there are lots of shops and we used to go round them all everyday selling smoothies. We made some money but it was bloody hard work and eventually it fizzled out. When I moved back to England I saw the smoothie market really growing and thought I'd try the same thing in London, and that's how funk in started. I had a little Smart car with a fridge in the back and I'd go around all the offices in Soho selling smoothies, and that was bloody hard work too but we did well and had a regular round and stuff.

Long-life juice

"At that time we were based out of Wembley and we had this orange juice machine, which was capable of producing thousands of litres a day and we were using it for just a few hours a morning to produce a bit of juice for the smoothies. So we started selling juice to the Café Med group, which was one of our first on-trade clients and it grew from there and the smoothies stopped. Innocent and P&Js went into the supermarkets and funk in went into the restaurants with juice.

"After a while they started to ask if we did lemon or lime juice as well, so we did and got good volumes on that, got some good distribution, and it was going well until after a bit we started to lose some business. It seemed there was another company selling juice but also purées as well, so we developed the purées. High, high quality, a little bit of sugar and great packaging but the real beauty of them was that we managed to process them so that they didn't have to be kept chilled. They've got a 12-month shelf-life and then 10 days in the fridge once open."

At this point my face must drop. Having mixologist after brand manager after cocktail guru extol the necessity of fresh fruit in good drinks, the idea of chemical-ridden, sugar-loaded, purées being added to the nation's – often rather expensive – cocktails is somewhat alarming.

"No, no additives, nothing like that," Carlton reassures me. "We've simply



CONTINUITY IS
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come up with a way of gently pasteurising them and the packaging is airtight and that's the secret – no air. It's all about the way you keep the fruit from the moment it is picked. If it is chilled it gets a longer life anyway, and the quality of the fruit you use is also important. In fact, the quality, believe it or not, is better for cocktails than fresh fruit."

By now I am incredulous.

"Now let me qualify that, as it seems a rather brash statement to make," he says. "Let's take a Bellini, for example. You might be thinking what could be better than taking a fresh peach? But the barman has to select a peach, spend time preparing it – skinning it, mashing it, puréeing, liquidising, whatever, then putting them into the glass and topping it up with prosecco or Champagne. You're going to have bits floating, there's not going to be any continuity or consistency about it; they aren't going to get the flavour right every time; the drink isn't going to taste consistent. As someone once told me, if you are going to launch a Bloody Mary mix, even if it were, say, too spicy, keep it that way because people will get to know it and go back to it. If you start to change it, they won't come back to it and that's what I mean about continuity, it's important – the drink has to taste the same every time.

Word of mouth

"I mean, let's take a large chain like Pitcher & Piano. People go in after work one day and order, let's say a Bellini again for simplicity's sake. It's the summer when peaches are in season and it tastes fantastic. Then they go in six months later and order one and it isn't so good. The peaches have been flown in from France, they've been air-conditioned, chilled; it isn't what they are used to. It doesn't work, plus the time and preparation and staff – at those big chains there's often quite high staff turnover I would imagine; it's difficult to keep up with training. But they can open up the funk in and have the same product every time."

It isn't just fruit purées that funk in produces now, there's also a revisit to the ▶

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ON-TRADE INTERVIEW



roots of the company with Pure Pour lemon and lime juice and there's butterscotch and chocolate as well. This has meant it isn't just barmen buying into the brand, there's a decent chef following as well. "That's stemmed from people just talking to one another in the trade, really," explains Carlton. "And that's how we've grown the business and built the brand. The on-trade is a very difficult place to build a brand because it is fragmented and price sensitive and generally the trade just wants a product, no one sees the packaging really, the consumer just gets a drink in a glass.

"It's price that's key in this environment; price and distribution," says Carlton. "Having said that, we've been treated really well by the trade and they've all responded well to the brand and really looked after us. It sounds really like I'm taking all the credit but I'm not. It's the trade that have built us up, we've built it together – the bar guys, the chefs. They talk to one another and recommend us, I know because I am there when we get the phone calls through: 'So and so said to give you a call.' It's their brand, really."

Carlton has also been keen to build alliances with the spirit brands that work well in the on-trade. He works closely with some of the Diageo brands, Ketel One from InSpirit, Appleton Rum, Pernod Ricard and Bacardi. "We work with the

WE'RE ABOUT TO EMBARK ON SOME GUERRILLA-TYPE MARKETING HERE IN THE UK TO PUSH SALES

FUNKIN AT A GLANCE

- Funkin was born in 1999 and the range now comprises 25 flavours including the revolutionary Pure Pour lemon and lime juice
- Funkin is available in Harvey Nichols, Selfridges and Waitrose
- Funkin at home, newly launched in June 2005, is a fully mobile bespoke cocktail service offering the personal services of internationally acclaimed bartenders Dimitri Lezinska, global ambassador for Grey Goose vodka, and Colin Appiah of Jamie Oliver's Fifteen
- Funkin at home is launching funklin karaoke and funklin casino party packages
- Funkin has also just appointed young, up and coming London chef, Andy Lassetter, as consultant chef – he has produced some creative, gourmet recipes to bring funklin to the kitchen!

on-trade brand managers, who like working with funklin because it enhances their product. Take a vodka brand manager of any given vodka. He wants to sell his brand and to do that he needs to increase the ways people drink it, increase the mixers people use, not just tonic. I don't want to say they need to use people like us, but they want to and we help push each other. You've got to remember we aren't a single-serve product, we are a mixer, so we need to build those alliances."

Cracking the US

The next step for the brand is to crack the lucrative US market. Carlton has employed someone in New York and is busy establishing similar brand alliances over there. There's also good business in Stockholm, Paris, Germany, Sweden, Slovakia and Russia (in the off-trade). "It's definitely a period of expansion for us right now. We are about to embark on some consumer, guerrilla-type marketing here in the UK to push sales – you've got to keep pushing forward. I mean, we've got the listings now. We are in the bars, we have a good reputation, new products and flavours are coming out all the time and we've a fabulous, loyal client base and we've got to build on that. Strike while the iron's hot, as it were."

And the ultimate aim for the brand? "What I'm really working towards is a global brand that will diversify, so maybe not just food stuffs. The funklin brand I'd like to see as something like the Virgin brand. I would just like to create funklin as a fun, go play, enjoyable brand whether that be fashion, holidays, who knows – cars? It doesn't matter as long as it sticks to the core values of fun, quality and interesting."

And on that note I left, clutching a silver pouch of peach purée, which I duly opened when I got home, poured into three glasses, topped with prosecco as instructed and sat down with my flatmates. And, do you know, it wasn't half bad and we drank rather a lot of them, which resulted in a very fun evening all round. Thank you very much Mr Carlton and funklin. **db**