



COMPETITIONS

BATTLE *of the* BRANDS

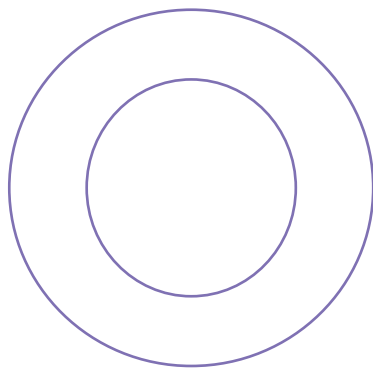
INSIDE THE HEADLINING EVENT OF THE
WINE & SPIRITS WHOLESALERS OF AMERICA
77TH ANNUAL CONVENTION & EXPOSITION



PHOTOS: MICHAEL BENNETT KRESS PHOTOGRAPHY

Boukman Botanical Rhum co-founders Adrian Keough and Josette Buffaret Thomas make their pitch at last year's Brand Battle to judges Chris Underwood of Young's Market Company, Steve Slater of Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, Sam Rubenstein of Horizon Beverage Group, TV personality/restaurateur Bill Rancic, Charlie Merinoff of Breakthru Beverage Group, and Marc Sachs of Republic National Distributing (Merinoff and Sachs not pictured).

London Essence Company Senior Vice President Steve Smith gives his spiel at the 2019 Brand Battle.



ften referred to as the *Shark Tank* of the wine and spirits world, Brand Battle is one of the marquee events of the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America (WSWA) Annual Convention & Exposition. It gives representatives of both burgeoning brands and established companies with expansion plans the chance to pitch new products to a panel of six judges—comprised of five top distributors and one retailer—as well as an audience of some 400 industry professionals.

Just making it onstage is a win in itself. This year, more than 250 entrants will submit sizzle reels to a qualifying committee, which will narrow down the pool to five finalists. As exciting and rewarding as it is to be on the stage, it can also be extremely daunting. So we caught up with last year's winners and runner-up to ask about their experiences at Brand Battle and the advice they might have for future presenters.

One of 2019 victors was Seaside Grown, a family-owned South Carolina company that bottles its field-to-glass Bloody Mary mix on the same farm where it grows its beefsteak tomatoes. "All of a sudden you have instant credibility," says President Ross Taylor, "and that was a crazy thing to understand and appreciate for a company that was as young as we were" (they bottled their first batch in 2017). "We flew by the seat of our pants," he admits, adding with the same candor that he'd watched previous



President Ross Taylor of Seaside Grown, which tied for first place at the 2019 Brand Battle.



Bokman Botanical Rhum co-founders Adrian Keough and Josette Buffaret Thomas were the other first-place winners of the 2019 Brand Battle.

Brand Battles on YouTube to deduce which presentation elements worked best. But perhaps most beneficial to Taylor was that he knew his brand's story well—after all, his family has owned the aforementioned farm for 115 years—and, just as important, knew how to tell it.

Last year's other first-place winner was Bokman Botanical Rhum, a four-year-old brand that's distilled in Haiti from fresh cane juice infused with ingredients such as native wood and bark, bitter orange peel, clove, and vanilla. "Brand Battle and our exhibit booth [at WSWA] helped us clinch a couple of distribution deals that were already in discussion," says co-founder Adrian Keough, noting that although presenting at the event "won't land a deal on its own, it does get [companies] in front of decision-makers for a first meeting." Indeed, one of the 2019 judges was so impressed by Bokman

that his company began distributing it.

Brand Battle 2019 runner-up London Essence Company makes cocktail mixers from distilled botanicals. Senior Vice President Steve Smith says that "the connections [made] with a number of the panel [members] have been instrumental in building our distribution"; in fact, it has grown since the competition from seven U.S. states to 15.

And as much as it is a business builder, Brand Battle can also be a learning experience—one that contributes to more productive pitches in the future. For instance, Smith learned from the four-minute time constraint placed on his presentation that concision is paramount, so he advises fellow contestants to "focus on no more than three key attributes. Too many can be too much." (It's the old "less is more" strategy.) He also recommends that they "be clear and confident on [those] key messages and points of difference.



Prepare and anticipate the questions you may be asked."

In short, with enough preparation and persuasive storytelling, your company just might walk away victorious from Brand Battle 2020, which will be held at WSWA's 77th Convention & Exposition at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, April 20–23. For more information, visit wswaconvention.org. ■■

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—ROSS TAYLOR, PRESIDENT OF SEASIDE GROWN



The 2019 winners display their trophies alongside host Marsh Mokhtari, whose Gray Whale Gin won Brand Battle 2018.

ENTER YOUR BRAND

To enter your brand into the 2020 Brand Battle Competition, visit wswa-convention.org and select the Brand Battle tab to complete and return the entry form. All entrants are required to submit a brief video. For more information, contact WSWA's Cindy Nachman-Senders at cindy@wswa.org. The deadline for submissions is Friday, March 20.

To check out the WSWA Convention YouTube Channel with past Brand Battle pitches and other convention content, visit wswaconvention.org and click on the Media tab.



A BUZZWORTHY BRAND

Given Skrewball's high profile, it may come as a surprise that 2019 marked the peanut butter whiskey brand's WSWA debut. Though not yet a year old at the time, it created such a buzz at the convention that it took home the Hot New Now Media Award (an accolade that all trade and mainstream media members—and influencers—are welcome to vote on via the WSWA Convention app).

Since then, Skrewball has seen a meteoric rise. Co-founder Steve Yeng says that the networking opportunities the WSWA Convention gave him and his wife—business partner Brittany Merrill Yeng led to partnerships that “quickly and successfully positioned [Skrewball] in all 50 states.” If you haven't seen a Skrewball bottle on a backbar or a shelf at, say, Publix or Vons, then you've likely at least heard about it, as the word first generated at the WSWA Convention & Exposition continues to travel from coast to coast.

Skrewball Whiskey co-founders Steve Yeng and Brittany Merrill Yeng took home the Hot New Now Media Award in 2019.