

# Tito's Handmade Vodka looks to the Irish on-trade

*Pat Nolan* talks to John McDonnell, Managing Director of Tito's Handmade Vodka International, about his plans for the Irish on-trade.

**T**ito's Handmade Vodka intends to remain doing what it does best, making high quality vodka, so no brand extensions - even for the booming Hard Seltzer market.

It's not joking.

In a cheeky marketing move it's offering US consumers an empty refillable 'limited edition' Hard Seltzer can for \$20 (with a charity angle) as the brand's "innovative answer" to the "never-ending flood of seltzers and canned cocktails" being introduced to the market.

Hard Seltzer-lovers can add Tito's and soda and Lime "... and whatever" themselves.

John McDonnell, the Managing Director of Tito's Handmade Vodka International, is over in Ireland for a brief visit to finalise plans for Tito's to take a larger slice of the vodka market here.

This is John's 39th year in the beverage alcohol business having started out working for the Seagram Liquor Company. Subsequently he began his own sales and marketing company where he first met Tito Beveridge at a time when he'd another client, Patron Tequila. Eventually he went on to run the Patron Tequila Company before deciding to work with Tito full-time.

We meet in Dublin's Hyatt Centric where he fills me in on Tito Beveridge, the Texan founder/owner of Tito's Handmade Vodka.

"He isn't exactly your average distiller," John tells me, "Following college he spent some considerable time on the oil rigs of Venezuela.

"When he came home to Texas for a bit of R&R from it all, he found making flavoured vodkas an enjoyable hobby.

"Eventually, he got tired of life in the oil business and moved back to Texas to make vodka full-time.

"To prepare for this he visited a number of different retailers, all of whom advised him against making flavoured vodka - and so he went ahead with it."

Tito's first 'distillery' was a one-roomed shack, still there to this day.



**"The world is learning that it's not just the Russians and Polish who can make a high quality vodka, so can the US - with Tito's." - John McDonnell.**

Since then, however, things have changed considerably. This year marks its 25th Anniversary - initially Tito went around the Star State himself marketing his product and running tastings and donating a lot of product to charities to use at events - he's still doing that.

To this day, Tito Beveridge still tastes every batch, says John.

Apart from listings with the US retail trade Tito's now has contracts with a number of airlines too.

Unlike most column-distilled vodkas Tito's is made in a pot still from 100% American corn where some other vodkas use a combination of grains.

"Corn tastes different from Rye or Wheat etc," explains John.

Distilled six times, it shows in the creamy texture on the mouth which gives it a nice mouthfeel.

## For export

For many years Tito's enjoyed domestic sales in the US & Canadian markets only.

Today, John's over here to scope

out the Irish market.

That's hardly surprising with the amount of Americans and Irish travelling back and forth from here to the States.

He noted the connections and made Hi-Spirits his first importer in Ireland. When this was sold to Sazerac Tito's moved to Comans, says John who points out that Ireland boasts the fourth-largest vodka market in Europe.

The first establishment to take Tito's was Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel followed by nearby Shanahan's Steakhouse, places where Americans frequent.

"Now we're ensuring that we penetrate the local market," he says.

## Tito's marketing strategy here

This year Tito's will be spending a lot of money on social media to raise consumer awareness here.

"We're also going to be participating in all the local shows and even have a Brand Ambassador in Evan Hales who's working to educate the on-trade," says John.

And Tito's has just signed a five-year deal with the Professional Golfers Association to become the official vodka of the PGA.

"The thinking is that if we can build a good footprint here, we can show the rest of Europe that it's not 'just another American product'.

"The world is learning that it's not just the Russians and Polish who can make a high quality vodka, so can the US - with Tito's." ■

