

LIQUID LUXURY RISES FROM THE EAST

Suntory launches Hibiki 12 Year-Old Whisky and Yamazaki 1984 in the U.S.

The Japanese consumer market stands tall as one of the most discerning in the world when it comes to luxury products. Suntory, producer of the Yamazaki Whisky line, understands that establishing common ground with upscale American connoisseur consumers and businesses that serve them is essential.

With the wide U.S. release of **Hibiki 12 Year-Old Whisky** (one of Bill Murray's co-stars in the feature film **Lost In Translation**) and \$750 limited-edition **Yamazaki 1984**, the way the distiller established that connection was through a series of tastings that literally broke Hibiki down to its essentials and took retailers, restaurateurs and collectors on a journey through time via Yamazaki's 12-, 18- and ultra-high-end 1984 limited edition release.

Unlike other spirits tastings that lead guests from entry-level to top-shelf, Yamazaki structured its sessions (including one at the downtown L.A. Morton's Steakhouse) through each component of Hibiki, to better understand what made this whisky bigger than the sum of its parts. To help attendees understand what made Yamazaki 1984 so special, the hosts via a detailed projected Powerpoint presentation pretty much told the story of everything else related to the distillery's specialness, from the unique aspects of Japan's four seasons, to the exhaustive search for perfect aging barrels in Spain, to the portfolio's many awards.

James Bruton, Director of the whisky portfolio at Skyy Spirits, points out that what has been most rewarding about the recent duel campaign has been all the a-ha moments of discovery that have taken place across the country at the tasting events as well as off-premise.

"There is a real thirst for whisky knowledge, and definitely a big resurgence in brown spirits and whiskies in general,"

observes Bruton. "Yamazaki is well-positioned to ride that wave of bartender and consumer enthusiasm. Within the single malt world, we see those discerning consumers as repertoire drinkers, in that they like to (experience) many brands. In the single malt (trade) world, we joke that we promote promiscuity. Although consumers may be married to one brand, we recommend they have affairs with lots of others. Yamazaki fits that philosophy extremely well, and now we're finding a group of single malt drinkers who used to stick to Scotch now interested in what Yamazaki's single malt portfolio and Hibiki have to offer."

Bruton stresses that the education process for both trade accounts and consumers is very important, as even some of the best-educated connoisseurs still believe the top single malts only come out of Scotland. For this reason, Yamazaki's creative team set out to develop events and marketing materials to make the experience of trying a fine single malt from Japan a "true eye opener." Bolstering these efforts is the enduring impact of the *Lost In Translation* Hibiki placement, years after its theatrical run. Brand Ambassador Gardner Dunn, meanwhile, has played a key role in training mixologists and waitstaff the fine points of the whiskies' production process and cocktails that showcase the spirits' special assets.

"We are, in effect, creating a new shelf set within the worlds of single malts and specialty whiskies," he affirms. "With the introduction of the Yamazaki 1984 and the long-awaited U.S. release of Hibiki 12 Year-Old, we're now creating the Japanese Whisky section in the marketplace, on and off premise. Off premise, we have also produced detailed shelf-talkers that explain the taste and unique production process of Yamazaki's portfolio to help consumers understand what they are buying. Our intimate tastings, meanwhile, have been successful because the

one-on-one time with single malt drinkers reveal they are very interested in learning about the unique production processes of these unique spirits."

Bruton concludes that while the Yamazaki 1984 will be available in a very small and exclusive number of accounts, its presence drives interest in the rest of the portfolio, especially with a diversity of consumers in California that plays to the portfolio's strengths.

"What we're most excited about is showing Americans that Japan doesn't just produce sake," concludes Bruton. "The appeal of the brand transcends beyond Asian accounts and Sushi restaurants to the point where we've seen a lot of demand from a variety of high end accounts that want to offer their customers a compelling variety of high quality whiskies." ■

