



WORKING LIFE

## Vodka is a rags to riches tale for a one-man brand

After moving to London in his twenties, a Kosovo-born barman worked his way up to take on the multinationals

James Hurley, Enterprise Editor

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Pleurat Shabani made a virtue of simplicity, learning the drinks industry from ground up to create a bespoke vodka named after a Polish horse

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Pleurat Shabani says that it has taken him more than 20 years to fill the bottle of vodka that sits in front of him. “Every drop,” he contends, “has a story.”

Mr Shabani started Konik’s Tail, a niche premium spirit brand, in 2011, but the road that led him to supplying some of the world’s most exclusive bars began long before that, when the Kosovo-born entrepreneur left war-torn Croatia for London in 1994 with about £164 in Deutsche marks in his pocket. “That was a lot of money back home. I thought I was a rich man. By day two, I had £14 left.”

These days, Mr Shabani works unsociable hours to tend to his award-winning vodka’s listings in 1,500 bars, including London’s Dukes Hotel, Claridge’s and Chiltern Firehouse, as well as 50 Waitrose stores, Harrods, Harvey Nicholls and 35 independent shops including Gerry’s in Soho. It’s a labour of love, unlike when Mr Shabani was struggling to make ends meet in the 1990s.

He recalls working as a kitchen porter and toilet cleaner from 9am to 11.30pm at a branch of Angus Steakhouse, then going on to a job as a night security guard at a members’ club until 5am. He was sacked from both jobs in 1996 and, unable to pay his rent, found himself on the streets for six weeks.

Mr Shabani, 46, says that the “coldness and silence” of homelessness took a huge toll on his mental health. “You are thinking of ending everything. I came to the point where I thought, ‘What’s the point of living?’ I’ve been at zero, it’s aged me inside. Life starts bullying you because you don’t have an exit. I was rejected by everyone. It makes you feel worthless.”

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He found resolve in his desire not to let his parents down. His father twice offered to pay his fare home, but Mr Shabani refused. “That became a symbol to me. I’d survived a war, a communist regime where I’d queued for the bare necessities in life. I thought, ‘London will not beat me.’ ”

He borrowed a suit and shoes from a charity shop and begged for a job at the Atlantic Bar & Grill in west London. “I said to the manager, ‘I’ll do anything.’ And I was given a second chance in life.”

He worked his way up from pot man to bartender. “I wanted to know everything: how the beer was made, what’s the difference between a dark spirit and a light one, what goes through a bartender’s mind when they make a cocktail, how they balance the flavours.”

He eventually became a spirits expert who created recipes for distilleries, was a UK director of Nemiroff, the vodka brand, and was asked to judge international spirits competitions. And he combined this knowledge with his Polish roots to launch Konik’s Tail. By 2013 it had been voted the “most loved” vodka brand by the world’s 50 leading bars.

Mr Shabani’s response was a mixture of bemusement and delight. “I’m not even in a lot of [the bars] so I’m quite surprised,” he said of his win at the time. “My rivals are all multimillion-pound brands. My business is just me.”

Other awards have followed. The tiny company’s relative prominence is remarkable, given that it has been built on a shoestring. Having been turned down by countless investors, Mr

Shabani used funding from friends and family to make his first batch and, in stark contrast with pretty much all of his rivals, he doesn't spend any money on marketing.

He remains a one-man spirits brand to this day. He spends his days and evenings painstakingly building relationships with London's leading bartenders and independent spirits retailers, and weekends doing in-store tastings and admin. "It's four hours' sleep, seven days a week. I used to have Sundays off, but now I use that to do all the buying and invoicing. I don't see it as hard work. Every night I go to bed thinking, 'What can I do better tomorrow?'"



Harry Styles, the singer, is a fan of the vodka

JAMES D  
MORGAN/WIFEIMAGE/GETTY  
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He regularly travels to Poland to help out with the harvest and distillation, drives many of the bottles back to Britain and even sticks the labels on. "From farm to bottle, I oversee the whole thing."

The romance of his tale has attracted some high-profile fans, with Harry Styles, left, the former One Direction singer, said to be one. "He came into Selfridges when I was doing tastings. I didn't know who he was, I thought he might be Mick Jagger's son. He asked me, 'Do you want me to sign a bottle?' I said, 'Why would you sign it, I make it.'"

Despite Konik's Tail's status as an unusually successful cottage industry, the company has attracted lucrative buyout offers, but they have been rebuffed.

"Why put the anchor down now? I'm happy slowly sailing on," Mr Shabani says.

### **Nothing beats the personal touch**

Alessandro Palazzi, the veteran bar manager at Dukes, the Mayfair hotel, wonders if Konik's Tail's refusal to engage in any marketing or social media at times goes a little too far. "I've been trying to teach him how to use Instagram," he says of Pleurat Shabani,

founder of the vodka brand.

However, with Konik’s Tail going head-to-head with brands willing to spend many millions of pounds on getting their name out, Mr Palazzi says that the slow and steady, relationship-based approach employed by Mr Shabani is also a breath of fresh air.

“He’s a traditional salesman. He comes in for a drink and a chat. The whole team knows him and his story and he gets to know the customers. They love to know the producer. It’s something the big brands cannot hope to do.”

Mr Shabani says that he wants to be associated with a savoured martini rather than nights of debauchery: “I don’t touch the nightclubs and never will.

“I don’t want the 20-year-old rich kid whose mummy and daddy is bankrolling them drinking it with a sparkler on top of the bottle and mixing it with Red Bull. That’s sacrilege. I want Martini, Martini, Martini.”

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