

## SA brand Rhino Whisky finding success abroad

South African liquor brand Rhino Whisky, launched two years ago by local entrepreneurs and friends Gerrit Wagener and Brin Kushner, is benefitting from growing sales in North America.



Brin Kushner and Gerrit Wagener, Rhino Whisky founders. Source: Supplied

Successfully entrenched in the local market, the brand has a growing presence globally, and Canada and America now account for 30% of Rhino's sales, while Europe is catching up. The business is also currently establishing a presence in Europe.

Wagener and Kushner decided to create a whisky that would not only highlight the plight of the rhino, but also give back to rhino conservation.

Twenty percent of Rhino Whisky profits are pledged to the rehabilitation of baby rhinos orphaned due to their mothers being killed for their horns. The partnership with the Rhino Orphanage, a non-profit organisation based in Limpopo, the world's first rhino orphanage has seen the business donate in excess of R50,000 in the last year - without further lockdown restrictions, this is set to increase for the next donation date.



Source: Supplied

## Launch plans derailed

It hasn't been smooth sailing for the entrepreneurial duo, however, whose plans to initially launch the brand abroad (instead of SA) prior to 2020 came to a grinding halt. They initially set their sites on launching in China as they had existing whisky business relations in that country and the long-term business plans included producing and selling it from there.

Rhino Whisky is distilled in Scotland, and as the first shipment was about to ship out in December 2019, the Chinese buyers informed Wagener and Kushner about a new concern called the 'corona virus' and advised that they would need to stall their order slightly. The Rhino Whisky team thought it would be a three-month delay while the pandemic blew over so they promptly shipped all stock to South Africa to manage warehousing costs, as shipping was still relatively affordable at that stage.

Wagener explains: "As the severity of the pandemic increased we had to adjust our whole business model and try to find alternative markets for the brand. It was never our intention to have Rhino in South Africa but we were keen to start monetising the stock so we slowly started rolling it out locally.

"This was of course also a very difficult time for the liquor industry in SA as lockdown restrictions made it very hard for retailers to take on new brands but we knew we had a good product so we persevered and reached out to our network."

Fortunately, Rhino Whisky built a loyal community in a short period of time, and positive reviews of the single-malt whisky started coming in. "We then started shipping from South Africa to open some new markets and we are now established in Canada and America and we are also currently taking on Europe. This is in addition to increasing our local distribution with

a sophisticated salesforce,” says Wagener.



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Lauren Hartzenberg 28 Sep 2022



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### Brand with a purpose

“We believe Rhino’s success lies not only in the taste, but what the brand stands for: driving awareness of rhino poaching. We could discuss the harrowing figures of rhino poaching until we are blue in the face, however, Brin and I wanted to be a part of a solution and somehow raise awareness globally. We created a product with a purpose which resonates with consumers today,” notes Wagener.

He adds, “With China only opening up very recently we have now started engaging with importers there but their landscape has changed significantly. We’ve lost previous established relationships as importers on their side also struggled but the region remains a key focus for us.”

Rhino is currently establishing itself more in Europe and will then put official launch plans in place for China.

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