

## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Please Don't Go!  
Transformation  
in Beverage Alcohol –  
Sharing Stories of  
Challenges and  
Change Through  
COVID



Vinexpo America | Drinks America  
MARCH 9, 2022

## INTRODUCTION

This is a recap of “Please Don’t Go! Transformation in Beverage Alcohol – Sharing Stories of Challenges and Change Through COVID” presented at [Vinexpo America | Drinks America on March 9, 2022.](#)

**MONIQUE HUSTON** began her spirits career over two decades ago at the Dundee Dell in Omaha, Nebraska. There she helped build and educate across one of the largest whisky and spirits collections in the world, boasting over 1,000 unique single malts and 1,200 other spirits. After spending time in Spain, focused on continued whisky and sherry education, Monique returned to the U.S. with an opportunity to partner with distilleries in import and distribution, proudly telling their stories through authentic, transparent and very tasty spirits. Monique has recently taken up her current position as the Vice President of Wholesale Spirits for Winebow. An avid spokesperson and educator, she has served as a spirits judge and panelist at events and competitions around the world. She has contributed to numerous publications and been featured in the Whisky Advocate, Forbes and The Wall Street Journal. In addition to membership in many industry groups, she has been inducted into the exclusive international society, the Keepers of

the Quaich, focused on outstanding commitment to the Scotch Whisky industry. This passion for whisky has led to deep exploration of the incredible, terroir-driven spirits of Mexico – her second great love. If not at her desk, she can likely be found in one of her two favorite places, Oaxaca or Scotland.

**HOLLY SEIDEWAND'S** journey into the world of spirits and began with a trip around the globe. She knew she wanted to work in whisky but wasn't quite sure where she fit within the industry. Not finding much success in traditional alcohol education programs here in the U.S., she set off on a year-long trip of her own design to immerse herself in the cultures and communities that are known for creating legendary whisky. She dubbed this trip her “mini masters” program; she visited over 100 distilleries throughout Scotland, Ireland, Japan, Tasmania, and the U.S. Each distillery visit and unique experience was captured on her blog and Instagram account, “Her Whisky Love.” While on



MODERATOR:

**Monique Huston**  
Vice President –  
Wholesale Spirits,  
Winebow



PANELIST:

**Holly Seidewand**  
Co-Founder  
and Owner,  
First Fill Spirits



PANELIST:

**Jackie Summers**  
Founder,  
JackFromBrooklyn,  
Incorporated



PANELIST:

**Dr. Hoby Wedler**  
CEO,  
The Wedland Group

her travels, she completed an internship at anCnoc Distillery in Scotland and earned her Certificate in Distillation through the Institute of Brewing and Distilling at Midleton in Ireland. As her travels were winding down, she was asked to join a small retail chain in Massachusetts as their Whisk(e)y Specialist. Here she built their education program with classes and seminars, expanded their single barrel program and guided product selection.

Wanting a change in direction, she joined the Bacardi Single Malt Ambassador team as the North American Ambassador. She handled re-launching an amazing portfolio and coordinated branding, pricing and consumer education all over the country. Always lingering in the back of her mind were the friendships and experiences from her travels. She couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to bring to life all of the small to medium-sized brands that hadn't been able to find their way to shelves and backbars. This is when her shop, First Fill Spirits, was born. Holly partnered with a good friend to open a boutique whisky shop where the focus is on small, specialized brands of whisky and other spirits - consumers are only seeing a small number of brands that are available around the world. Their curated choice speaks to those who want to push the boundaries of flavor and explore the future of whisky - independent bottlers, new world whisky, craft distillers and so much more.

**JACKIE SUMMERS** is an acclaimed author, seasoned public speaker, and serial entrepreneur, and is the founder of JackFromBrooklyn, Inc. and the creator of the award-winning Sorel Liqueur. In 2012, Summers became the first known licensed Black Distiller in the U.S. His flagship product, Sorel Liqueur, is based on a 500-year-old Caribbean recipe, and is an inaugural recipient of the recently established \$50M Uncle Nearest Fund.

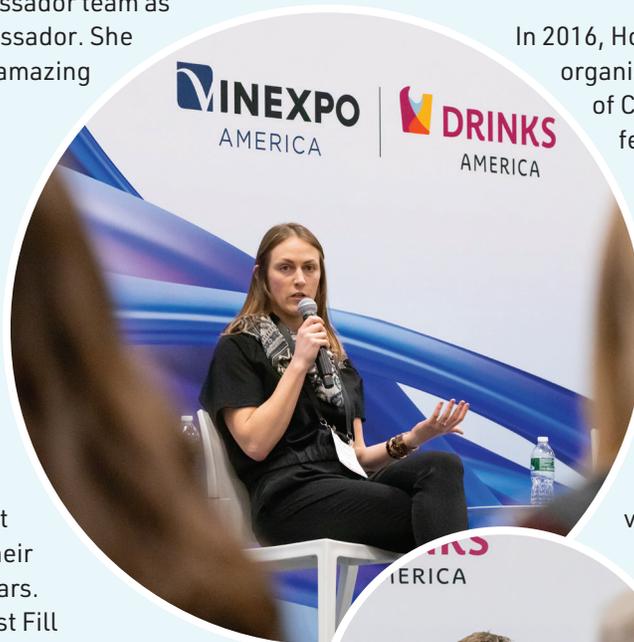
**DR. HOBY WEDLER** is an insightful, disarming, and passionate thinker who loves to bring people together to help them see new possibilities. With the heart of a teacher, Hoby helps turn dreams into realities. Hoby has been completely blind since birth. He is a scientist, an entrepreneur, a sensory expert, and is driven by his passion for innovative, creative, and insightful thinking. Hoby is remarkably tuned into his surroundings and has often chosen to walk the unbeaten paths in life over known territories.

In 2016, Hoby earned his Ph.D. in organic chemistry from University of California, Davis. His fearlessness is infectious, and he has actively paved the way for others to join him in his quest to follow passions regardless of the challenges that lie ahead. In 2011, Hoby founded a non-profit organization to lead annual chemistry camps for blind and visually impaired students throughout North America.

In the same year, he began opening doors to the world of wine aromas by developing Tasting in the Dark, a truly blindfolded wine experience, in collaboration with the Francis Ford Coppola Winery. He has since expanded

the program to a global market in a variety of industries and special projects.

Hoby has become a motivational speaker, a mentor, and an educator. He is committed to making the world an inclusive, fair, and accessible place for everyone. His work combines a unique trilogy of sensory awareness, scientific knowledge, and a love for sharing his insights. Numerous people and organizations have recognized Hoby's





work, including President Barack Obama who named him a Champion of Change for enhancing employment and education opportunities for people with disabilities. Forbes Media named Hoby as a leader in food and drink in their 30 under 30 annual publication. Hoby is dedicated to impacting everyone he works with by unlocking doors, overcoming challenges, increasing awareness, and expanding their horizons.

Huston started the session by quoting a February 2022 poll that found that 50% of independent restaurateurs are facing bankruptcy and 28% are facing eviction, noting that 99% of all U.S. restaurants are family-owned with fewer than 50 employees. Restaurants, particularly in city centers, suffered during the pandemic due to the flight to more rural areas. So, while the country is coming out of COVID, the industry is still in a precarious space.

She also referenced a National Restaurant Association statistic that put the size of the independent restaurant industry at \$864 billion in 2019 and \$799 billion in 2021. In 2022 it is expected to be at \$898 billion in revenue. Adding in the adjunct industries, including those having to do with alcohol—everything going through the three-tier system—the number grows to \$3 trillion.

Huston also noted that 63% of people surveyed said they had considered leaving the industry while 75% were looking for better wages and 40% had health concerns. Some of that was COVID-based, but some was due to having to be on one's feet and being in an industry that can be mentally as well as physically challenging. In addition, 35% cited harassment or hostile work environments as a concern.

What is clear at this point, said Huston, is that there is an emerging labor force that has higher standards and is holding everyone else to one.

Huston asked Wedler why he has continued in the industry and where he finds inspiration.

Wedler explained his foray into the industry when he was given the opportunity to develop a truly blindfolded wine experience for Francis

Ford Coppola's hospitality team. He innovated an experience that is based on temporarily depriving participants of their eyesight, which people use to take in 85-90% of information from their surroundings. This started his journey as a sensory expert, and he found a passion for the people in this industry.

Having segued from working through his marketing firm, he is now consulting under his own name, in alcoholic beverages and in other areas of food and beverage, with the goal of working with people to make a difference.

Wedler urged members of the audience to think about why they joined the industry, what their passion was and is, and to use that to propel them forward.

Huston asked Seidewand to give history on her journey and where she sees her future.

Seidewand realized early on that she liked whisky—smelling it, tasting it and talking about it—and after a brief stint at WSET, decided that her money might be better spent showing up in places. Her advice to people is that if they show up, they are at least 90% ahead of others who are nervous to show up. She said to show up, ask questions and have a notebook ready. She showed up at distilleries for a year, learning in a way that cost much less than a Master's program. Many of the distilleries she visited did not have a visitor center, so she would find the right person and ask for a tour. She did this throughout Scotland, Ireland, Japan, the U.S. and Tasmania. After her year of discovery, she continued to go back to some of the distilleries she had visited. She reported her findings and new knowledge via Instagram.

Through social media, she was offered a job with a small family retail chain in Massachusetts where she harnessed and critiqued her own educational style and determined how she could share what she learned with the whisky community and those who would adopt whisky as a drink.

From there, she joined Bacardi to launch a single malt scotch and to gain experience on the brand side. After a few years, she decided it was time to

get back into retail and do it in a beautiful way, so she started First Fill Spirits with a friend. The store seeks to present a spirit of community with bottles ranging in prices from \$30 to \$500. The store carries only whisky and spirits.

Huston asked Summers to give an overview of his history and where he is going with his Sorrel brand.

Summers expressed his passion for the business ("Look at what we're doing on a Wednesday afternoon!") and advised audience members to "Start where you are," advice he'd been given by a mentor. Early in the pandemic shutdown phase, Summers launched a virtual cocktail hour where bartenders were paid by brands to teach virtual guests how to make cocktails. This program ran twice a day, six days a week. The program got \$15,000 in the hands of bartenders who were temporarily out of their regular work.

Then, when the Black Lives Matter movement took off in May 2020, Esquire profiled Summers as the first Black licensed distiller, sparking renewed interest in his brand, which had been in existence for a decade, and investment opportunity that has helped him take his business to a new level. He feels fortunate because he gets to contribute to a story that is 500 years old.

To audience members, he suggested that no matter where they are, they can start there and get on a path to success.

### The Value of Mentorship

Huston added to that the value of seeking out mentors, noting that she has had them - including the three panelists she was with on this program.

Wedler acknowledged that mentors needn't be limited to one and that people should look for new mentors constantly. The mentor can be younger or older. It is someone who can see a future in a person, at times even before that person sees it themselves. He also recommended thanking mentors often for their guidance. It keeps them motivated to do what they do in love.

Summers highlighted his mentor, Arthur Shapiro, who has been an advisor for many years, and also cited a current young intern from whom he is learning. He is 21 years old and is seeing things in a way that Summers can't imagine.

Huston encouraged audience members to ask others for counsel, noting that many are willing to help, but just need to be asked.





Seidewand did just that because she was new to the whisky industry and had to show up as her option in lieu of industry contacts. She is willing to pass on her knowledge as a mentor and through the community of people who come into her shop. She notes that not everyone is able to show up at 120 distilleries; she was fortunate to do so. She would like to use that as a launchpad for people who want to home in on their whisky education.

### Recommended Resources and Personal POV

Huston asked the panelists if they have a resource to share – a book or podcast, for example.

Summers suggested a book called *How Brands Grow* (Sharp, Byron, 2019).

Wedler suggested *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Allen, David, 2015)

Seidewand annually reviews *Proof: The Science of Booze* (Rogers, Adam, 2014). She feels that in the romantic world of whisky, this brings her back to reality. She also disconnects from the world of spirits by listening to The Adventure Sports podcast which is inspiring and a departure from her daily routine.

Huston followed up by asking the panel for anything they've learned from living through the pandemic that they would like to share.

Wedler said that industry professionals should think of themselves as good time makers. He likes to frame the industry as happiness generators, not because of alcohol, but because of the ability to engage with the person who is behind the cocktail or the glass of wine that has been poured for them. By being in this industry, audience members are happiness makers and should feel confident in that.

Seidewand referenced the challenges of being a store owner in the business where an idea may not work because it turns out to be illegal. Unlike a flower shop where there are few rules around cutting flowers, the beverage alcohol industry is highly regulated and changes often. It requires an extra level of education that retailers need to stay on top of. It can be hard, but worth it if what is being created is different and engages a community.

Summers brought up the idea of comfort zone, and what it really is. In his purview, comfortable people don't change the world so it's okay to have discomfort. He wishes people as much discomfort as they can tolerate because those are the people who will make change.

Wedler agreed, cautioning against complacency which he says kills creativity, calling it a slow death. Life and longevity are about mindset, and he implores audience members to challenge themselves because that is the way to succeed. ●

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