

# ALUMNI MATTERS: A VIEW FROM MINNEAPOLIS

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## Tell me about BET Vodka.

The correct way to write the name, reflecting how beet is written phonetically, is BĒT Vodka. It is my husband Ben's business, which he started with a friend in 2014. They were interested in the whole idea of craft breweries and wondered whether that might work for spirits, specifically making vodka from sugar beets. Minnesota, where Ben comes from, is the third largest grower of sugar beet in the world, after being introduced by a Frenchman in the 19th century. No one had made vodka from sugar beet before, so that could make for an interesting product and an interesting story to help sell it.



Ben and his friend tried a number of different formulas/recipes at home before hitting on the current one. They have been helped by a local creative and digital marketing company, who threw their weight behind the product. The bottles started hitting the shelves in 2016. The name itself was a challenge, and it was quite a process to get the name approved by the Food and Drug Administration, which looked at many things, including the percentage of alcohol. The product couldn't be called a commodity, like carrot vodka, for example, and be called beet. So, we think our name is a clever one!

## Where were you while all this was happening?

I was with Herbert Smith Freehills in New York, so hearing all about this on the fringes. I did mention some of these issues in passing to the lawyers in the product liability team, who offered some helpful hints. But this was not official, since Ben used a lawyer in Minnesota.

## Did that prompt you to leave the firm?

Yes, it did. I left Herbert Smith Freehills in 2017, moving to Minnesota and joining a company to help with their marketing. The following year, it was clear we both needed to be working on the business full-time. I had a background in marketing, sales and HR, so that was and is my focus. I have also been working on social media strategy, with the aim of getting the product into restaurants, hotels and airlines. We were successful with Delta, which sells our mini bottles. We are aiming at the higher end of the market. To get ourselves known, we have tapped into a lot of culture and arts events, for example. We sponsored the local opera for two years.

### **How far do you incorporate ESG into the business?**

In terms of working with the land, we definitely factor in environmental considerations. We are very conscious that we want to minimise or eliminate any harmful impacts. We are thinking about how we can address water and soil concerns, in future, to further reduce any adverse impact on the environment.

So far as working with the local community is concerned, we actually receive grants from government to help educate people, including schools, about sugar beet. That has been very interesting for us. And as regards the social elements, that is at the heart of our business - we hope that by selling our vodka, we are promoting great social interaction for the benefit of society. We work closely with farmers, of course.

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### **Who are you competing with?**

We have one competitor in Denver, in that they make vodka out of sugar beet, but there are lots of competitors making vodka from many different products. That is why we enter our vodka into competitions, and that has paid off. We have won silver and bronze medals, which vouch for the product's quality.

### **What do you like about Minneapolis?**

It reminds me a bit of Melbourne for size and feel. It has dramatic changes in temperature - very cold winters that last five months, a lovely temperate spring and then very hot summers. There are 10,000 lakes and plenty of water. Lots of parks and bikeways that make it very pleasant for outdoors. In terms of business, the city is very entrepreneurial with many young millennial creatives. It is the sixth-ranked state in the US for Forbes 500-headquartered companies.

### **What comes next for the company?**

We don't yet have a distillery, which is probably the missing link. We were thinking of that in 2019, but then the pandemic hit, which would have been terrible timing if we had by then invested. We saved ourselves a lot but, of course, we have suffered because people don't necessarily want to splash out on our product online and they weren't going to restaurants.

Post-Covid, however, we are thinking of expansion. At the moment, we only sell to Minnesota and the three surrounding states. The bigger beverage companies have advised us to stay small and go deep in our local market, get entrenched, and then build from that. We will weigh up different options, whether inviting some outside investment or hooking up with a large beverage company

### **Tell us about your route to Herbert Smith Freehills.**

After doing a degree in business studies, I started in the recruitment sector. I was working in that sector, including in London, when in 2011 a very good friend, who happened to be working at Herbert Smith Freehills, asked me whether I might be interested to try my hand at legal marketing. I knew nothing about the legal sector, but I was definitely interested.

I was introduced to Darren Milo, who turned out to be my boss for the whole time I was with the firm. I went through a rigorous recruitment process and joined the firm's employment practice in Melbourne. Then I went from Australia to the UK in 2013 and then to New York, in 2015. In those last two roles, I was attached to the International Arbitration practice. I thoroughly enjoyed working with the International Arbitration practice, which at the time spanned over 20 offices. I really learnt a lot in that role and had such wonderful people who supported me and helped me. My role in New York was managing the BD strategy for the office. I feel that it was a culmination of all of my experience at HSF. It really required me to utilise my expertise in domestic and international practice management and working across multiple time zones and cultures.

### **Did you enjoy your time with the firm?**

Yes, I loved it. I was very fortunate to work with the most fantastic people, and I keep in touch with some of my Australian cohort on the BD side and some of the partners in the New York office. I was sad to leave as I had such a great experience.

