

Growing Brands

An Interview with Bruce Hunter, Managing Director, Shaw-Ross International Importers

EDITORS' NOTE Bruce Hunter joined Shaw-Ross in 1995 as Executive Vice President, Director of Wines. He was appointed Executive Vice President, Director of Marketing in 1998 and oversaw the expansion of the marketing department by developing a professional brand management structure. Hunter was appointed Managing Director in 2004. He brings 48 years of domestic and international experience in the Wine & Spirits industry, starting in 1970 with Almaden Vineyards and with Parrott and Company serving as its president from 1984 to 1995.



Bruce Hunter

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1968 as a boutique wine and spirit importer representing a handful of brands, Shaw-Ross (shawross.com) has grown into one of the U.S.' leading importers representing nearly 40 suppliers from around the world whose brands enjoy full national distribution through a network of outstanding wholesalers. By concentrating on building a balanced portfolio of wine and spirits that cover the spectrum from small boutique gems to powerhouse volume brands, Shaw-Ross is able to offer a wide range of interesting and unique products that are relevant in today's ever-changing environment.

Will you highlight the history of Shaw-Ross and how the business has evolved?

Shaw-Ross began its journey in 1968 with a small portfolio consisting of only a few spirit and wine brands. As it progressed, Shaw-Ross started to take on a life of its own, but still with limited products such as Maison Louis Max, Real Sangria, White Horse Scotch, Aguardiente Cristal, and a hodgepodge of brands that didn't have cohesiveness to them.

I joined the company in 1995, after nearly two decades at Parrot & Company where I started my career on the East Coast and later took over as president in 1984. We really started to gain some structure due to my background in the wine and spirits industry, and started to add prestigious products to the portfolio which would set us apart. I'm a fast learner and we saw there was a need for quality spirits, so I called some friends who gave me leads on great products. From a very meager start in 1968 with just

a few brands here and there, we added brands such as Biondi Santi, Lombardo Marsala, Marques de Riscal and Pusser's rum. In 1997, we took over Viña San Pedro which was doing 60,000 to 70,000 cases and we built it up to 400,000 cases by highlighting different brands within that portfolio. Today, we proudly represent an award-winning portfolio consisting of the world's finest wine, spirit and sake brands representing 40 suppliers from 14 countries.

How do you define Shaw-Ross' mission and purpose?

Our wish was always to have a portfolio of leading brands. We take our crystal ball and ask, "What's going to be the next trend," not only what's trending. That's what we try to build the company on. Where are we going to go with this? What categories are hot? That was my vision – to put together a portfolio which encompassed things that were needed in the industry.

We took on Gekkeikan six years ago and built it up to 550,000 cases. We recently took

over iichiko Shochu, and a new Japanese whisky called Maen. Our aim is to add things that are gaining in popularity because Japanese whiskies are very trendy, same with gin. One of the things we are very good at is transitioning an on-premise heavy brand such as La Scolca Gavi to off-premise. During the pandemic, we adapted and took advantage of the market conditions, subsequently building a new platform for the brand. Our goal was to maintain a good balance. We're very cognizant and don't want to overlap the brands since I see too many people get portfolios as importers that have conflicting products to a large degree.

We strive to offer our wholesaler partners, retailers, and consumers a portfolio of brands and categories that are in demand and represent the best of the best in each category. We continue to stay on top of emerging categories and new trends.

Will you discuss Shaw-Ross' professional brand management structure and how valuable this structure has been to the growth and leadership of the company?



Bruce Hunter with a selection of products imported by Shaw-Ross



When I first came to Shaw-Ross, there was one person for wines and one person for spirits. Over time, we've hired a great group of brand managers which changed our structure. We instituted having brand managers and assigned them brands that were in their wheelhouse and fit their expertise. We have certified wine, spirit, and sake specialists, and they are the direct extension of the supplier to those on our Shaw-Ross sales team who become educated in the nuances of each product and ready to educate the trade. Brand managers are in constant contact with suppliers and put the goals and budgets together, along with the future game plan.

How broad is Shaw-Ross' portfolio and where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth within the portfolio?

We believe that the future growth of the industry will come from the premium, super premium, and uber range of wine, spirits, and sake. I feel very bullish on that. That's why we acquired the Chadwick portfolio including Seña and Vinedo Chadwick which are represented in our portfolio today. Commercially priced products are also an important part of the market, but to me it's not conducive to building a firm basis of business. When you build with the premium categories, you're getting people who want to have that quality and are willing to spend more. We conducted an internal study and found that the commercially priced products in wine and spirits are stagnant compared to that \$15 to \$50 category and up. The young consumer today is

eager to try new things and spend a few extra dollars to do so.

Will you provide an overview of Shaw-Ross' global footprint and international capabilities?

Our strength is in the domestic market, but we have the capability of extending our services on a global platform. The success that we've had in the market includes Whispering Angel, just to name one. Founder Sasha Lichine is a great friend and asked me to meet him in Provence to see his new property about 17 years ago. I flew down and met with him to see the property. At the time, rosé was not a significant category in the states and, being the consummate salesman that he is, Sasha convinced me to represent his product which we took from 0 to 525,000 cases. With a lot of hard work and luck, we've been able to establish ourselves as a "can do" importer that takes care of the logistics, sales, and marketing. The overseas suppliers depend on our expertise to navigate the U.S. market. We're a company that gives them that comfort level and they are part of our family.

How do you focus your efforts leading Shaw-Ross and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

Leadership is easy if you surround yourself with a professional team who shares the same goals and passion as yourself. It's not rocket science. You hire good people and educate them in the area of expertise, and you give them guidance but you allow them to go out there and do their thing. You don't want to micromanage because that's counterproductive. We allow our people to be themselves and to take ownership of the brands and we have 100 percent confidence in the teams that we have. I've been leading the company for many years in this role, and while the brands may change, the commandments of running a good successful company never change. Hire the right people in the right positions and give them the ability to make decisions.

You joined Shaw-Ross over 25 years ago. What has made the experience so special for you?

It is having the honor of working with a team that shares my passion, loyalty and work ethic for our business and the goal to continue to make our company great. My experience with Parrot and Company was invaluable for my growth and success, but Shaw-Ross gave me a perspective on all of these global brands. It's an honor to do business with the Chadwicks, Lombardos, Marques de Riscal, and Frescobaldi to name a few. Winning *Wine Enthusiast's* 2008 Importer of the Year award and taking Shaw-Ross from a small player in the market to achieving this award was one of the proudest moments of my career.

What are your priorities for Shaw-Ross as you look to the future?

You can't rest on your laurels. You always have to be looking and keeping your eye on the ball. We want to look for innovations and better ways for us to do business and communicate to wholesalers, retailers, and consumers. We want to continue to educate our people and allow them

to visit the countries we represent because being there and having a glass of wine and breaking bread is what bonds you with these suppliers and their families. I want to see us strive to be bigger and better. My goal is to continue to grow our company, keeping in mind there's always room to improve. If you think you're the best, then hang up your spurs. ●

