



The Future of Spirits: A Toast to Balancing Growth and Responsibility

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From the *aqua vitae* of mediaeval Europe to the baijiu of ancient China, distilled alcohol has an incredible global heritage, and today each sip of spirit tells the tale of its birthplace.

Helen Medina is the CEO of the World Spirits Alliance.

Take Scotch whisky for example, which cannot be replicated outside Scotland due to the unique geography and climate – factors that are as crucial to its identity as the ancient lore that surrounds its production. Similarly, in the Caribbean, rum production runs like a thread through a complex history, telling a story of resilience and ingenuity as much as craft and culture. This sacred connection between spirit and place deserves not only our respect but our active protection.

As we safeguard and promote this precious cultural heritage, we must also recognise the industry's transformation into a sophisticated global powerhouse. A recent landmark **study** conducted by the IWSR and Oxford Economics highlights the sector's immense contribution.

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In 2022, the production and sale of spirits added \$730 billion to global GDP and generated \$390 billion in tax revenues. Behind these headline numbers lie a huge number of livelihoods, with an estimated 36 million jobs – equivalent to the entire workforce of the UK-supported by the sector worldwide.

Whether originating in the agave fields of Jalisco or the vineyards of Cognac, the journey of spirits from grain and grape to glass is multifaceted, relying on farmers, truckers, distillers, blenders, bottlers and more. Our market really is truly global, with spirits being a major agricultural export, thriving in a free and fair international trading environment. However, in recent years, spirits have been affected by unrelated international trade disputes, leading to damaging retaliatory tariffs on producers, both large and small. This is why market openness and a rule-based system are imperative.

That is one reason why I am delighted to be taking the reins of the World Spirits Alliance (WSA) from our newly established home in Geneva, the seat of the World Trade Organization and many other crucial multilateral institutions including the World Health Organization.

At the WSA, we believe it is imperative to foster a culture where the enjoyment of alcoholic beverages goes hand in hand with moderation. Therefore, we are committed to working with the WHO and governments across the world to promote responsible drinking habits, combat underage drinking and contribute to reducing the harmful use of alcohol. Over the past decades, global alcohol consumption has been declining, reflecting shifts in consumer habits and evolving social norms. People are increasingly favouring quality over quantity or opting for lower-alcohol or alcohol-free alternatives. The spirits industry welcomes these trends and is already supporting them: half of the spirits sold globally fall into the premium category or above, and companies continue to innovate, producing more lower- and no-alcohol products. We are eager to collaborate with partners to accelerate this trend towards premiumization and innovation.

As part of our commitment to tackle harmful use, we strongly support the concept of standard drinks and low-risk drinking guidelines, which are critical to raise awareness and address common misconceptions about alcohol. For example, it is crucial to understand that every standard drink – whether whiskey, wine or beer – contains the same amount of alcohol, and that health impacts depend on drinking patterns not the choice of beverage.

Consistently and comprehensively educating consumers about this will greatly encourage a more informed approach to alcohol consumption.

In summary, the WSA will advocate for policies that support responsible consumption and sustainable production, while also protecting geographical indications and promoting fair trade. I am sure that this is a strategy to which we all can raise a glass.

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