

When Life Gives You Lemons

Bronya Shillo '08 makes lemonade.

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— Bronya Shillo '08
*Founder and Sole Proprietor
 Fishers Island Lemonade*



Called "one of the best drinks we tried all summer" by Town & Country Magazine, Fishers Island Lemonade is entrepreneur Bronya Shillo's first business venture.

"Not too sweet ... but not too sour; it's just right!" Bronya Shillo '08 proudly announced after she finally perfected her first spiked lemonade recipe. Based on a decade-old, home-brewed recipe created at her family's Pequot Inn on Fishers Island, N.Y., the drink was originally made in 15-liter buckets and is still sold at the inn's bar.

After almost three years of calculating formulas and numerous taste tests, Shillo has taken the drink into taverns and on to store shelves, naming it Fishers Island Lemonade. Her canned version closely follows the inn's original concoction of corn vodka, whiskey, lemon juice and honey-derived sweeteners, and Shillo recommends it served over ice "with a lemon wedge and mint from the back garden."

Recently called "one of the best drinks we tried all summer" by Town & Country Magazine, Fishers Island Lemonade contains nine percent alcohol by volume and is sold throughout Connecticut and Rhode Island.

"People are finding that this is a good alternative," Shillo adds. "They're excited there's a cocktail, an actual true cocktail spirit in a can, versus a malt substitute."

After working in New York City as a marketing and an e-commerce specialist for Patagonia and Under Armour, Shillo considered graduate school.

"I had a choice to make. I could either pay \$50,000 for graduate school or I could invest that money into starting a business," she says.

With the experience of a family business and a marketing career in Manhattan under her belt, Shillo decided to take the leap into sole proprietorship. She soon discovered that creating the drink and getting it into cans and stores wasn't as easy as it sounded.

"Bringing this kind of drink from the kitchen to the lab to the shelf is tricky – what you taste from the homemade brew at the inn wasn't originally how it tasted at the lab," she adds. Frustrated with innumerable attempts to find the perfect balance, Shillo was anxious to bring the drink to market.

Two years later, she found the right mix, and Fishers Island Lemonade began popping up on store shelves in yellow-striped containers designed by Camilla Benbassat, founder of the design agency Avec. During an Aug. 8, 2014 interview with The New York Times travel magazine

blog, Shillo explained that the can's design was inspired by the Giorgio Beverly Hills Perfume towel that "my mother had around the beach house, which always reminded me of summer."

With feedback beginning to pour in, Shillo is ready to take her business to the next level and sell her lemonade in stores across Long Island, Massachusetts and beyond.

"It's so cool when I get a call from a friend telling me they saw my drink at the store, or that someone's aunt bought it and thought it was amazing," she remarks.

A former marketing major, Shillo's experience from her family business has taught her how important it is to establish solid relationships with both distributors and manufacturers.

"I'm a very frugal business owner, so every dollar spent is recorded," Shillo adds. "I want to make sure I can expand and grow in a sensible manner."

Now focused on growing her business, Shillo turned to Salve Regina to recruit an intern for the spring of 2015, and found Richard "Zack" Bissell '15, a business administration major with previous experience in wholesale international sales.

"It will be great to have a fresh set of eyes and new ideas for my business, and it's always fun to make connections with fellow Salve students," Shillo adds.

With visions of further expansion into Rhode Island, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, Shillo's outlook is bright. Her lemonade made its Salve Regina debut during the 38th annual Governor's Ball Dec. 6, 2014, and in Newport, the cans are sold at Bridge Liquors, Downtown Liquors, the Tavern on Broadway and Vickers' Liquors.

"The sky's the limit," Shillo says. "And it's only the beginning from here."

— Maeve Shaughnessy '15

Editor's Note: A portion of this story was excerpted from Zeke Wright's Oct. 29, 2014 Newport Mercury article.