

“IT’S A WHISKY SHOP – IT’S NOT A CHAMPAGNE SHOP OR A COGNAC OR RUM SHOP – AND THE FACT THAT WE CAN HAVE THIS KIND OF SHOP IN THIS LOCATION IN LONDON TELLS A GREAT STORY ABOUT HOW WELL THE WHISKY INDUSTRY IS DOING”

“We should be really proud that we make whisky here in the United Kingdom, and we should also be the best at selling it. We wanted this store to be a statement of how that should be done,” he says. “It’s about saying to the whisky industry, ‘this is where you showcase your old, rare whiskies’. It’s not in Hong Kong or overseas, it’s here in the UK, and the time is right for doing it.”

Andrew says that the issue of ‘the right time’ is backed up by a discussion he had with bartenders at The Ritz when he was getting the shop ready to open. For the first time, they told him, whisky is the most requested spirit in the bar – a testament to the current strength of the product in the spirits market.

“It’s a whisky shop – it’s not a champagne shop or a cognac or rum shop – and the fact that we can have this kind of shop in this location in London tells a great story about how well the whisky industry is doing. We probably wouldn’t have been able to do this 10 years ago.”

But while the shop – which has whiskies ranging in price from around £20 into the thousands – is in place to show off the product, it is equally about making whisky accessible to any of the varied consumers that circulate in this part of London: from the tourists

visiting nearby landmarks, to the suited businessman and the curious Londoner who happens to poke their nose in.

“We want to make it fun as well. We’ll normally have someone playing a piano at the back and then you come and watch something on the iPad and listen to the videos on headphones,” says Andrew.

Great focus has also been placed on employing a team of people who

will engage with each customer on a one-on-one basis. The staff are a relaxed, friendly bunch that belie the stiffness of the service you may find in the cigar, sports car or luxury clothing shops nearby.

“At the end of the day, people buy from people. It’s about spotting what the customer is in for. The industry is really bad at throwing facts and figures and overwhelming people. Here, we’re more about getting to know the customer, possibly when they move from buying in the supermarket to looking for something unique,” he explains.

That through-sale conversion (whether from supermarket to specialist or from advertising to buying) is the key space for development in the whisky industry right now, and is an area Andrew is keen to concentrate on for the Piccadilly store.

“That’s where the real opportunity is. We want the guy in his late-20s who saw an ad about J&B and thought that it was quite cool, to have the through-thought that he can buy whisky. We want him to come into the shop and feel comfortable about shopping here. We’re not about ripping up the heritage but about making it fresh,” says Andrew.

A big part of this reasoning is that Andrew believes whisky’s future lies in a different direction than it has done in the past. “We are seeing women and men 30 years upwards getting into it. And that’s exciting because 10 years ago, it would have been people over 40. The future is about a new consumer group coming into whisky, with no pretensions,” he says.

He will also put continued focus on what he considers one of his proudest creations, The W Club: an online



members’ club where whisky lovers have the chance to win premium prizes, such as a recent trip to Japanese distillery Yamazaki. The idea of the Club was based on his desire to let the consumer further into the whisky world.

While there is still much work to do – as in any business in this day and age – and even though London has many other whisky retailers vying for trade, Andrew says he truly believes there is room for everyone. The most important thing is encouraging new people to discover whisky.

“All the retailers are doing it slightly differently but we’re still all about getting people into whisky. And the biggest buzz we get is getting a new customer who may have felt intimidated, to decide to try whisky. Find enough of them and everyone’s happy.”