



**Interview with Ben Branson,
Founder and Owner of Seedlip**

I'm delighted to welcome **Ben Branson**. Ben is the founder and owner of a very interesting spirit called Seedlip.

JP: Hello Ben, welcome to the show.

BB: Hi JP, thanks for having me.

[00:47]

JP: Ben joins us from, where do you join us from? From Buckinghamshire in the U.K.?

BB: I am actually sat in our studio in London.

JP: London, sounds great. New York/London connection here. Ben has this very interesting spirit called Seedlip, which I read from the website he calls "the world's first distilled non-alcoholic spirit." Is that correct?

BB: That is correct.

[01:14]

JP: To get us started, tell us a little bit about yourself, particularly as it relates to ending up making a non-alcoholic spirit. Before we even talk about what that is.

BB: I am kind of a man of two hearts. Half of my family have been farming in the North of England for just over three hundred years. The other half of my family is in brands, design, marketing. So I grew up on a farm, outside, in the countryside and then went into working with brands and design and marketing. And so really, *I am putting on my love of nature and kind of my farming history as much as my career at working on other people's brands to kind of build something and do something that solve the modern dilemma what people are facing*

of what to drink when you're not drinking. By working on other people's brand but also wanting to keep us farming and continue my family's legacy of working with the land; I kind of ended up creating something that we're reliably informed no one's ever created before which is pretty excited.

[02:34]

JP: And when you talk about that dilemma, just to be clear, the dilemma is what to drink when you're not drinking. Is that based on some personal experience? Like, you like to drink but you don't want to get drunk? Or is there a personal story behind that?

BB: It's based on I spent ten years working on a lot of spirit brands and alcohol companies. And also working on a lot of soft drink companies. My favorite project, by far, were the ones the Absolutes and the Glenmorangies of this world, rather than the soft drink projects. I think they kind of depth and the story and the history behind them I just found more exciting. *The irony within all this is I actually don't drink. Part of wanting to solve this dilemma, initially started wanting to solve my own dilemma of I love food, I love going to a great restaurants.* The world of food in London is absolutely incredible and what's going on in the world of cocktails and with spirits in London, and across the world, has never been more dynamic and more exciting. I think when it comes to what's on offer when you're not drinking, it's really poor. The same kind of fruity, sweet fairly childish options. *So initially it started out: I wanted a better drink.*

[04:00]

JP: Is there also an element of social pressure? Like if you don't have a drink you know, you aren't really participating in the party or whatever it is?

BB: Yeah, I think, you know, it's a very fundamental human need to want to belong and if you're in a group of people and you're singled out or ridiculed or pressured because you're not drinking. Personally, in this day and age when you can get pretty much anything you want from wherever in the world that you want, I think it's a sad state of affairs.

But, if your options are juices and sugary sweet drinks then it's not surprising because you're compromising because you're not actually satisfied with having a great drink whether it's got alcohol or not.

JP: Right. I think this is a good time to actually tell us about what the product is all about. It's a spirit that is distilled, yet has no alcohol. I thought distilling means extracting alcohol but I'm no expert. So tell us how this all works.

BB: First of all, distillation is a form of extraction. Fermentation is how alcohol is actually made, but alcohol is used as part of distillation to extract flavor from herbs, spices, from botanicals. What we do is quite similar to gin. We are using herbs and spices and different botanicals. We are using copper stills as gin and most other spirits are made. *What we do slightly different is that we managed to find a slightly laborious, but very kind of specific and special process working with our distillery to actually individually distill all of our ingredients at different temperatures, under different pressures, for different amounts of time. Which means we can get the best flavor that we want from each individual ingredient.* Respecting the oak and grapefruit peel for example, are two very different things and therefore the rates at which they give off and give out their best flavors and the best compounds are different. We're then blending those individual distillates without any sugar or sweetener back here in England. *So yeah, we're very transparent about what's in it, but we're not transparent about how it's made,* if that makes sense. We've got to keep some secrets.

[06:19]

JP: Right and this all happens in this cottage, this stone cottage, that you have on your website?

BB: JP, I am guessing you just answered a future question around you know, myth verses what's going on. I am really glad that that's how it appears in some ways, but no, I don't. I started distilling in my kitchen, quite quickly became apparent that I was not going to be the man that was going to be behind the distill wheel doing all the science around it.

So no, we have a distillery in Germany that we work with. A man called Norbert, who is our master distiller, who does all the distillation for us.

[07:00]

JP: All right. This is interesting. I think this is a little bit where rubber hits the road in the story telling and myth-making arena. You, yourself, use words like “laborious.” I read on your website about 1400’s stone cottage and I seen beautiful pictures of you working on your Apple laptop but in a kind of rustic, modern, really clean line kind of environment. So this is obviously all about story telling. You have an agency background.

How do you reconcile this? Do you try to create authenticity or is it very consciously a façade? Or on the contrary, you say no, if you scroll further down on the website you’ll read about Norbert and about the German distillery as well? How do you handle this?

BB: I think we wanted to bring Seedlip to life visually, obviously, and to do that in a, forgive the pun, instill in a beautiful and natural way. And certainly, given I’ve had a career in it I would hope we could. I don’t know much about the science and distillation and about building the business of a drink company but the brand, and the storytelling, and the aesthetic are something I feel very strongly about and I’m very passionate about. We make no efforts to conceal the fact that we couldn’t find a distillery to work with in England.

[08:33]

JP: Why couldn’t you find any in the U.K.?

BB: Part of it is that we couldn’t just go to a normal spirits distillery because it does take more time; it is more complicated to do than just creating a vodka or gin. We had to find the right partner that was willing to help. The other thing is, when you wind the clock back and you haven’t got a product and you’ve got the bare bones of the brand, and you’re one man band asking people to get on board with your journey at creating a non-alcoholic spirit; people laugh and shut the door and say no because they can’t get their head around it. They don’t think there’s anything in it and it’s one guy who’s had an idea. So that was, you know,

that took a lot of time to find the right people to help us. Norbert, fortunately, is crazy enough and thinks we're crazy enough said, "Okay, let's do it. Let's give it a go"

[09:30]

JP: Right. Beyond the idea of non-alcoholic, did you have a very specific taste in mind? You didn't know what it would taste like before you started it right, or did you?

BB: So I have two very key points of guidance. One was the book the book that I found which was published in 1651 called "The Art of Distillation." This book, I didn't find under my grandfather's floorboards. I found a copy of it online, which I since have seen the original, which was King George III's copy that lives quite happily in the rare books section of the British Library. In this book are all these alcoholic remedies, but all these non-alcoholic remedies. All using herbs and spices, and all using distillation, all using copper stills. This is back when there was a lot of illness, a lot of people looking for cures, people were trying to turn water into gold, looking for the elixir of life; it was a fascinating time, certainly in London, in terms of spice routes and trade routes being set up.

The movement of where [xxxx 10:37] ingredients. There are two hundred ingredients mentioned in this book, so that gave me a really good reference. I then had a guide, in my own mind, how I wanted it to kind of smell and taste. *It was very personal to me... it was inside of my grandfather's combine. So, during harvest, when it's dusty and when you're moving the earth, and there's a lot of smells, and a lot of movement going on. That smell of being on the inside of the combine with my grandfather... however strange it sounds. A very great post marker for me in terms of is this what I imagined it to be.*

JP: We're obviously not able to taste here over the podcast but can you get us a little bit of a feel of the flavor, and how you mix it, and how it all comes to life from a product prospective?

BB: Sure, so we use two barks, two spices, and two citrus peels and so, Seedlip, our first product, has got a very good spicy and earthy flavor

profile. Think clove, pepper, cardamom, with some kind of nice grapefruit/lemon juiciness. We recommend it to be served in a very simple way with tonic and a nice slice of red grapefruit. You can play around with different kind of mixes and sodas for long drinks. And then we do some kind of short, martini style non-alcoholic cocktails. We try not to use fruit juices, we try not to use lots of syrups; we use more interesting, hopefully, ingredients like brines and vinegars.

JP: But it doesn't remind of an alcohol, does it? It doesn't have like, oh, this is more like gin and this is more like whiskey. It has nothing to do with that?

BB: No, no. There's no chili in Seedlip, so that you get a burn. We purposefully didn't use juniper berries to try and make it taste like a gin. *I think we wanted to create a new category for people to have a new experience rather than what they're used to at the moment, which we think is a compromise and a less than and that something has been taken away.*

[12:43]

JP: So it's nothing that existed before? You're the inventor outright of this kind of flavor?

BB: Exactly.

JP: Wow. As I listen to your story. I wonder whether, how should I put it, whether you're too honest? We have done many of these stories, as listeners will know. It's very heavy story telling, it's very heavy myth making. You going out and saying, you know what? This book- I didn't find it under the floor board, which by the way, would be a great story. Right?

BB: Yes.

I found it at the British Library and the only distillery that was game enough to play with us is in Germany. Which kind of bursts the bubble again there a little bit, right, because we're in Buckinghamshire here and you take us to industrial Germany, which has a whole different image. Are you afraid to be too honest? Or on the contrary is that maybe part of what's going to make your

mission and myth? Have you thought about what you want to stand for beyond the product?

BB: Having worked big brands from bleach, to cheese, to yogurt, to water, I think I've seen first hand, and really been part of, creating too many of those myths. I think A. consumers today are more savvy and they kind of, excuse my language, bullshit alert. They're a lot quicker to catch on when they're being sold to. We want people to read in and discover and love all the depth and layers of Seedlip. And so, what you take at whatever layer, I think, is really important. If you look at our website, you'll take your own perception of that. If you're reading, you will get the full picture, that backs up some of the, what I call the "substance behind the style." We want to look great and we want to be desirable and use design to that affect and use storytelling really well. But I don't know, maybe we are too honest but my conscience is clear. I find the number one purpose with Seedlip is to solve this dilemma of what to drink when you're not drinking. That's our number one mission.

JP: Okay.

BB: If we do that with the right people on board and I have the right team then the money will take care of itself.

[14:50]

JP: You talk a lot about "we" and "the team" so that's clearly important to you. Tell us a little bit about key players and why they are key to this proposition.

BB: When I don't see that **[xxx 15:07]** I had about a hundred prints made of our illustrations on nice card. I counted up how many people have been involved, really in helping Seedlip get to launch. Because although, it was me living and breathing full-time Seedlip. Everybody from Norbert in Germany, to the guy that makes our cases, to the guys that print the labels, to the bookkeeper, to the courier who we still use today- who has been an absolute hero. They all got one of these cards because I cannot do this by myself. We now for four people full time, which happened in the last few months, which is pretty quick. I definitely can't do this on my own so the more people the merrier.

JP: And are they also all or many of them owners of the company?

BB: No.

JP: You're the sole proprietor?

BB: I own the majority of the company. We have a design agency that has a stake in the business. And then we've got some investors as well. I was the crazy one that thought, I guess when I tried to launch this on my own I didn't think it was go as quickly as it has so I didn't think I would maybe need any other kind of full time staff for a while after the launch.

[16:19]

JP: Right. Right. Growth is another interesting arena. It feels like this is the right place to talk about this... so it sounds like your design agency verses you having to pay them, which is often as barrier as you start out, they took a stake in you? Then you also have investors.

How do you look at raising capital and growth, is there a plan? Or is it kind of let's see what happens? You chose Selfridge's, it sounds like, as an initial retailer partner. How do you choose your distribution? Can you talk a little bit how you look at growth right now and where do you see Seedlip in five years from now?

BB: Again, connected to how do we solve this what to drink when you're not drinking dilemma. I thought a way to do that is to give people a really great, desirable premium brand. They would feel good about drinking, and would feel good about choosing, and feel good about ordering. We've launched a kind of top end brand in top end places and for the moment, we want to stay there. There are, for example, 158 Michelin star restaurants in the U.K. We're in twelve of them, which is great, but there is a lot to go at in terms of the really top quality food and drink hotels, bars, restaurants, members clubs, fine food stores. There is a lot to go at. We said no to a lot of people. We've said no to a lot of big retailers. *We're not chasing volume for the moment. I think we want to build this brand in the right places, with the right people, in the right way.*

JP: And how much does it retail for? And how can you afford that because often, being in a place like Selfridge's demands an incredible retail margin so that not a lot of money can be made.

BB: There's an issue in that Seedlip's not cheap to make and it's not cheap to buy. You know, you have fourteen servings in a bottle and Selfridge's sells for 29.99.

JP: Pounds Sterling.

BB: Pounds, exactly. Let's say top gin, vodka, other spirit without, you know we don't pay the duty so you take the duty off, 29.99 is a good, strong price. It's ten times what a premium soft drink would cost. We set the bar very high. We do want to keep it there because we think that's part of giving people a really great grown-up adult drink.

[18:48]

JP: And you don't feel the pressure to scale faster because it's tough to get to profitability at this point? I am just saying that because it's often the story. Right? At the beginning, you're bleeding because these light house, early distributions- a couple of restaurants and a department store- they have such low volume and demand and such high retail margins that a small business that has mostly cost in overhead at this point can't afford to stay with that little volume. That's not an issue in your model?

BB: We're trying to strike a fine line between, we're in a Michelin star restaurant that sells more Seedlip in a week than it does gin and vodka combined.

JP: And how come?

BB: Because we have some drinks in the menu and the chefs are absolutely huge fan of it, and so is the bar manager. It's a restaurant that some people have to drive to so there's a drink/driving element that we know comes into it. And as part, I think, of what we're learning at the moment, is certainly food in restaurants is potentially a very big area. I think we are fortunate we don't, we can't just chase volume. I think it would be detrimental to the brand. Trying to hold our nerve, which is

nerve wracking in itself is critical to see them sticking around and us building a sustainable business for the future.

[20: 12]

JP: What is your ideal growth vision?

BB: You mentioned it before we started the interview in terms of, we have two choices really, we can go to other cities in the U.K. and we could keep saying no to all the international requests that we get and sort of go through some of the layers, go into big city markets, and then look at export. I think what we've learned and certainly the demand that we've experienced, and the internet is a fantastic leveler for this, is that the global food and drink trend setting organs, for want of a better phrase, are just that- they are global. Things that are happening in New York happen in London and they are happening at the same time. Our plan is to actually start seething into other key culture capitals of the world; where there's a fantastic world of restaurants, there's a fantastic world of kind of culture, design, and arts. There's a real, I guess an appetite actually for more of a balance and moderate approach to drinking.

JP: I guess you have a unique advantage over your liquor competition in that you're actually not alcoholic. So, from a regulatory and duty perspective you have an unexpected advantage there.

BB: We do, and certainly when you take the States for example, there's this three tiered system if you have an alcoholic drink and there's no way around that with alcohol. We don't have to be a part of that.

[21:48]

JP: That can be a huge enabler. Now interestingly, we have another podcast coming up, as I told you, with Lakrids which is a Danish gourmet licorice. They've talked to us about how interesting and important Michelin star restaurants are. We had a podcast already with Diageo and Johnny Walker, I am sure you're very familiar with them, and they tell us how important it is to be in the right premises and to have the support of the barkeepers. It sounds like,

for you, as well. In general, what we find is that there needs to be a group that really loves your proposition, that really sponsors it, and that you need to keep engaged. We call them the design target.

And we chatted a little bit before we started recording, we said it's the hogs, the Harley ownership groups for Harley Davidson, even the Hell's Angels kind of making the reputation of Harley, even if they might not be the majority of actual drivers. They might be bankers in the mid-life crisis, right, buying Harley Davidson's. Do you very deliberately plan for this design target? It sounds like, for example, restaurants you need to drive to might be such a supporter group, do you have an emerging design target?

BB: One was planned; we've started to discover another. One was planned and is work, which is bartenders and chefs. And chefs, just love great taste, great flavor, and ingredients, and produce. And we have our second product that launches in two weeks time and that will start using ingredients from my farm that we've grown. Chefs are very engaged by that and they're engaged by offering food pairing ideas with Seedlip drinks because typically soft drinks and non-alcoholic drinks don't necessarily pair well with food.

The other audience within that is the bartenders. These guys are kind of hungry for new things and they are there to really make guests happy. So if they can make a guest happy who wants an alcoholic drink, they've got all the tools behind them, sitting on the back bar. They want to do the same for non-alcoholic drinks, someone who isn't drinking. They don't have that same whole plethora of ingredients to work with. And so, you know, we are effectively helping them give their guests a great time.

Those two, chefs and bartenders, great.

[24:24]

JP: If I may say, I can imagine maybe some bartenders do not always feel comfortable serving alcohol to people. This might be a nice addition to your portfolio if you feel like somebody had too

much but they want to keep being a part of the party. Or, you know, is that an element? I might be making this up.

BB: We were at an awards ceremony last night. I stood and was talking to a lady, she started asking what I do, and she stood there with a glass of champagne and it was a Monday night. She's like, I didn't really want this glass of champagne. The amount of people that say to me, well, yeah, if it's a Tuesday lunchtime or Wednesday evening or I don't really want to have a drink but there's nothing good that's non-alcoholic; I always sort of opt for, well, I'll have a glass of champagne anyway because it's fits the occasion. If you have a non-alcoholic drink that you feel fits the occasion, that's good enough to fit the occasion, I think that's potentially super interesting and will be part of us sort of having done our job.

This sort of leads onto the other design target that we really didn't expect, which is the sort of, there is group of healthy foodies. They will do yoga and they look after themselves and they do drink, but very much in moderation, they might not drink much. They appreciate good quality food and drink. There's a kind of cult wave of these people now in London. A lot of kind of untrained chefs who, seriously people will kind of literally hang on every Instagram post that they're doing for breakfast.

[26:12]

JP: Can I hear a bit of sarcasm in those descriptions?

BB: It's not so much sarcasm; it's more just disbelief. You know, taking a photo of your breakfast and people commenting on that, it just kind of astounds me.

JP: As you describe that, on the one hand, absolutely now want to try this drink. And hopefully a lot of listeners will say that too, which would be great for you in terms of trial. And as you describe the foodies, the big question in my mind is: how will you avoid this being fashionable and a fad? I.e. I'll have my Seedlip, I'll spend a relative fortune on a soft drink once and then I'm like, yeah fine, I've had it. I suppose you want to be in the business for a longer

time, maybe you don't, tell us. But how do you work to avoid, this is a fashionable fad?

BB: It's a really good question because I don't think that the problem that we're trying to solve, given the way the world is now moving. We are a bit more conscience of health, and we've got a sugar tax coming in the U.K. next year. I heard last week about are we going to ban alcohol in planes? There are lots of forces at work that we are not having to do all the kind of shouting. *The world is not drinking more alcohol, it's spending more on it, but it's not drinking any more.* People are drinking and have been steadily for the last fifteen years less Coca-Cola, and for the last ten years less diet Coke. Now certainly here in the U.K. people are sort of a bit more worried about how much juice they drink. These aren't fads; these are things that seem to be going one way. Therefore, I think we are hopefully not just part of the trend or a fad but part of just the future.

[28:17]

JP: Was that all ingenious foresight? Did you have all these macro trends in mind? Or is this kind of all slowly sinking in as you are obsessed with your proposition and of course read every article that is about sugar taxes, etc.? Or was this kind of a driver of your landscape analysis before you even started out with Seedlip?

BB: So two and a half years ago, I wanted to solve my own problem because I want a great grown-up nonalcoholic drink. I then was mucking around at home growing different herbs and old spices.

JP: And at home is not in London, is it?

BB: No, at home is out in Buckinghamshire.

JP: Gotcha.

BB: And that lead me on to finding the book that was written in 1651 and that lead me on to buying a little copper and playing around in my kitchen. And then, that lead me to hey this could be interesting, I wonder if anyone has ever done this before.

[29:07]

JP: Interesting because I think it gives a lot of hope to some of our entrepreneur brand builders because it often looks and sounds like in hindsight these creators, whether it's Steve Jobs or Elon Musk, had it all figured out before they started. But the reality, and you're currently creating your start-up reality, is a lot of the things come together as you go I guess. And it sounds to me like there is a lot more story-telling, myth making, cultural relevance, design target discovery, and design target support yet to come as you come along. Does that sound right?

BB: Absolutely, because the two most incredible things that have happened are totally beyond my control are luck and timing. You know, I think if we launched in two years time, we'd have been too late and I think if we launched two years ago we'd have been too early.

JP: Fantastic. So, definitely when you come to the States, and you told me earlier you had an article in the Wall Street Journal I think coming up, it won't be long, we would love to be part of your party.

If people listening to the podcast want to find out more about Seedlip, what's the best way to get in touch with the brand and you maybe?

BB: When I launched Seedlip, I put my personal e-mail and my mobile number on the website and that was a really big mistake. I sort of was like, is anyone going to call? I don't know. Now there's not a phone number on the website, but there is an e-mail address on there. I am on Instagram, that's kind of a favorite channel of ours because we've got a lot to show and share. But yeah, the website: seedlipdrinks.com is going to be the easiest way to get in touch.

JP: Excellent and that's S-E-E-D-L-I-P for Seedlip and Ben Branson. No relationship I guess with Richard Branson. Even though entrepreneur as well.

BB: No, no relation.

JP: And for you our dear listener, you can always reach us info@ueberbrands.com, and Ueberbrands is written with an U-E as it should be. That's the proper way of writing Ueber and it Ueber

not Uber. If you like this podcast, let us know. Give us some stars, do great reviews, that's what keeps us going. And we hope that you listen in next time.

Thanks Ben, again, for being here. I hope you had fun.

BB: Thanks very much JP, it's great.

JP Commentary: For those interested in the subject of myth making, I append another four minutes of the full length interview I had with Ben. I just want to keep the regular podcast about thirty minutes. So, take a listen, if you're curious. Enjoy.

Bonus:

JP: It does seem to me that there are more and more critical articles about the artisanal. And I wonder if there's going to be a backlash against you tried to get us by calling everything fair-trade, organic, local, homegrown, healthy, no fructose corn syrup and so on and so on.

BB: Yep. I think we don't, so there's a few words that are absolute no-nos for us. You'll never hear or see us talking about craft, you'll never see the word artisanal or us using the word artisanal, you'll never hear boutique. All that. All those words that slightly make me cringe. A. We don't want to stay small. We're very open about that. Yes, we started hand-labeling bottles; now that a machine puts it on I don't want to keep it in my garage. I don't want to be making it in my kitchen. The problems big that we want to solve and the problem's global.

JP: It's funny because in that film that we posted on our blog on the artisanal, critical of it. In the film, Timmy Brothers, they actually make exactly that, the hand written labels and then say, "I don't know why people think 11 dollars for a bottle of water is too much! It is hand crafted water!"

BB: Yes, yes. I don't think people really give a shit. If I go and talk to a bartender, they want to know about how it's made. They want to whether we use a Carterhead Still or not. We're not going talk to

somebody sampling at Selfridge's- they don't care that it takes six weeks to distill a batch or they don't really care about Norbert and whether he's got long hair or short hair.

JP: Even though, you do look the part when you go on the website, right? I don't know if it's intentional but it is the very crafty, artisanal kind of look.

BB: That's just me.

JP: But in that sense, I guess, you might in hindsight make the right choice of, we said earlier, being maybe too honest. I.e. not pretending that it's all happening in that little stone cottage. You know, you're digging out the carrots and distilling them yourself in your little copper pot.

BB: Yeah, no. Myths are really powerful.

JP: So what about the Seedlip myth then? Is that work in progress? Do you expect it to kind of emerge by itself or do you deliberately start to create something?

BB: You know, I hear other people tell the Seedlip story right in front of me. I heard it last night! A friend of mine, who is a restaurateur saying to another restaurateur, "oh, this is Ben. You know, he was the Queen's entrepreneur of the year this year." We weren't. I was invited by Buckingham palace to meet the Duke of York. We did an event with the Duke of York. That's great. Seedlip is in, there is a bottle of Seedlip in Buckingham Palace, great. But he'd then taken it on to all right well the Queen's, you know, knighted Ben for his services to the drinks industry, you know in his first six month. You can't stop people doing that.

JP: So in a way, I get a feel that you're quite relaxed about not having everything totally figured out, ready, planned in advance. That things actually are created quite organically, like maybe a more authentic myth is one that isn't totally planned because that would be very apparent and is something that comes together over time. You just help it along a bit.

BB: Yeah, I think we're not set in stone and we never should be. You have to allow perception and word of mouth to happen and that's

something that so like, I can't tell you. It kind of just takes some patience, right? To let people talk about it, you've got to let people discover it, and you've got to let people make up their own stories for it, of how they then tell someone else. I've heard it. I've heard someone else go, oh yeah, Ben's a farmer and he grows it all himself. He's got his tractor up in Lincolnshire, and he you know, he comes down to London and sells it.



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