

## Etc. Next Life

# Just the Tonic

The quest for a crisper G&T led Jordan Silbert to start a beverage company. *By Alexandra Wolfe*

**M**ost business ventures aren't launched by bringing tree bark to friends' parties. But that is precisely how Jordan Silbert, 34, got into the artisanal tonic-water trade.

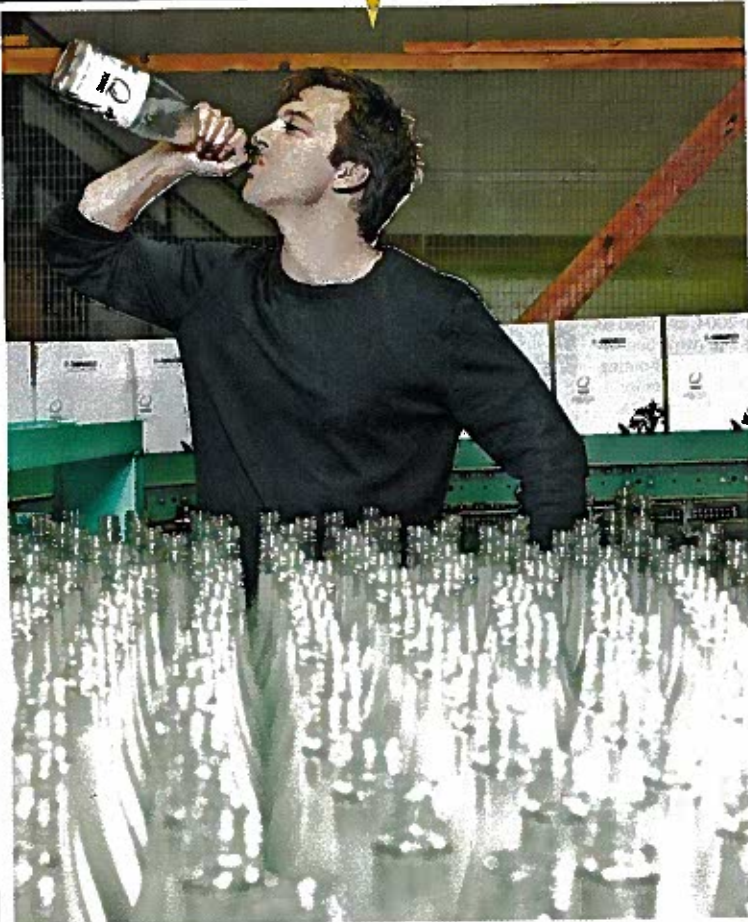
After graduating from Brown University in 1998, Silbert moved to Sonoma, Calif., where he worked on tech projects for the County of Sonoma Economic Development Board. He later managed the disney.com account at an interactive marketing company. Then Sept. 11 happened, and he returned to New York City to work for the Downtown Alliance, which manages Lower Manhattan's Business Improvement District.

One night in 2003, Silbert was drinking a gin and tonic in his Brooklyn backyard when his teeth started feeling sticky. He saw that the tonic's "ingredients were identical to Sprite, with different natural and artificial flavors," he says. Curious, he discovered that today's tonics lack a key ingredient used in the original libation: quinine from Peruvian cinchona trees. It was replaced with a synthetic during World War II. Silbert ordered the bark for \$10 online and found a recipe to extract the quinine. He added homemade seltzer and agave instead of sugar. He started making the tonic at parties, and his friends loved it.

Silbert started business school at Yale University in 2004 with plans to go into city development. He still tinkered with tonic, and a professor—an Honest Tea co-founder—encouraged him. Working on a business plan, Silbert realized he needed a bottling facility and found one in Worcester, Mass. Investors provided \$3,000 for ingredients and bottles, and Q Tonic was born. Then he offered samples on foodie websites.

New York standard-bearer Gramercy Tavern was an early adopter, and farm-to-table trendsetter Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, N.Y., signed on when Silbert ate there and brought Q Tonic with him. Downtown hot spot Bobo soon followed. "At first it was part of our competitive edge," says Bobo owner Carlos Suarez. "Now I'd be surprised not to see it at a sophisticated cocktail bar in Manhattan." Q Tonic has grown to six employees and is in more than 3,000 outlets, including Whole Foods Market. Silbert calls it a start: "The goal is for every place serving Grey Goose or Tanqueray to have a good tonic to go with it." **E**

At parties, says Silbert, "I was that guy who would show up with the bark," from which he would extract tonic ingredient quinine using alcohol, coffee filters, and heat



A Silbert favorite:  
3 oz. Lillet and  
5 oz. Q Tonic—  
"not as strong as a  
G&T but refreshing"



### D A STIRRING VENTURE

**\$35,000**

Startup costs. Silbert also had free use of an apartment in New York City for six months.

**\$500**

Cost to rent the facility where he bottled his first 200 cases.

**65,000**

Cases of Q Tonic sold in 2010, compared with fewer than 500 in the brand's first year.

**4**

Number of financing rounds Silbert has raised to expand his company.

DATA: Q TONIC