

SHISHA MASTERS

THE EUROPEAN SHISHA COMMUNITY ALLIANCE MAGAZINE



RUTH GUNNING
HEAD OF EU REGULATION FOR
AIR & ESCA BOARD MEMBER



ADVANCED INHALATION RITUALS

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Shisha culture is under attack in Europe by regulators and governments that all too often know very little about this uniquely social, occasional and cultural pastime. Leading on EU regulatory engagement for Advanced Inhalation Rituals (AIR) is Ruth Gunning. Ruth and AIR, which was formerly known as Al Fakher, have been strong supporters of ESCA over the years and have been working at the forefront of shisha regulations in Europe. This month we speak to Ruth about her work, her involvement as an ESCA board member and the sector she defends so passionately.

Ruth grew up in Dublin, Ireland. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Civil Law with Politics at University College Dublin, having also spent her Erasmus year reading law in Uppsala University in Sweden. In 2011 she moved to London to train as a Barrister before being recruited by the global tobacco giant British American Tobacco (BAT) working for them in London and Brussels. In 2021 she joined AIR (previously Al Fakher) to lead on EU Regulatory Engagement.

Why are you passionate about the shisha sector? I've worked in the tobacco sector for quite some time now and more recently made the move to shisha. The shisha sector is extremely niche and unique; it is not the most sophisticated but that in a way adds to its charm. It's a sector where small entrepreneurs play an important role and the community is a key factor in the sustainability and success of the industry – it is cultural yet innovative and the balance between the two seems to work well.

This is not a sector comprised of massive corporations where the distribution of wealth is focused on the few – it is a sector of small and medium sized businesses, often family run and the value generated is not concentrated in the hands of a few global corporations but rather spread out amongst a wider group of stakeholder including the local community, manufacturers, and consumers.

I recognise that there is a huge knowledge gap when it comes to shisha and the many myths circulating about product composition, the health impact, etc. Whilst this is frustrating, I do see it as an exciting challenge; to educate people and inform them of the importance of the sector from a cultural and business perspective but also to debunk the many myths and falsehoods that are perpetuated from those with zero knowledge of the product. I strongly believe that shisha is a force for good and I am passionate about people understanding that.

“ESCA IS DEDICATED TO PROTECTING AND PRESERVING SHISHA CULTURE AND BUSINESSES ACROSS EUROPE”

You are also a representative of ESCA, could you tell us more about this alliance? Yes, I sit on the Board of Directors and help with the running of the alliance. ESCA is dedicated to protecting and preserving shisha culture and businesses across Europe. For too long, the shisha sector was absent from the legislative debate – that is no longer the case. ESCA is giving a voice to the many thousands of businesses that make or sell a part of the unique social and cultural experience that is shisha. I'm very proud that AIR is a founding member of the alliance and has been a driving force behind its success.

Tell us about your role at AIR (previously Al Fakher)? I lead on engagement activity in Europe for AIR with a primary focus on Brussels, Spain and Germany, the latter two being our biggest markets. Shisha is a heavily regulated product, and it is widely misunderstood. The risk is that we are caught up as collateral damage in the war against Big Tobacco and so I work to ensure that doesn't happen. I also provide support to our markets in Europe to determine regulatory risks and to ensure reputationally we are on the front foot and fully compliant with all applicable laws.

What are the long-term goals of ESCA?

A long-term goal is continued growth. We have nearly 200 members now, but we need more. As the category grows, which I hope it does, we want more members but members who are active and just as passionate about the sector as we are at AIR. One of the aims of ESCA is to mobilise the community – shisha is unique in the sense that there is a well-established grassroots community and this community developed and evolved because of a love of shisha. It is not manufactured, it is wholly organic. This is the type of dedication and passion that we will need when fighting overly restrictive legislation like the third Tobacco Products Directive.

Why do you think shisha users often choose Al Fakher over other brands? Al Fakher has a reputation for being the highest quality shisha molasses with the best flavours. We use quality ingredients and source our flavours from exceptional flavour houses. Our teams in Ajman and Poland adopt the highest of standards when producing shisha and customers know that when they purchase Al Fakher satisfaction is guaranteed. I believe that consistency is crucial for success in all aspects of life. Al Fakher has been consistently excellent for many many years thus meeting customer expectation every time.

Can you remember where you enjoyed your first shisha and shisha flavour? I enjoyed my first shisha not that long ago and it was on holiday in Portugal. The first flavour I tried was Al Fakher Blueberry – and this was before I worked for them. I like to think it was fate!

Why do you think shisha has become so popular? I think the social aspect of shisha consumption has contributed hugely to its popularity. People like to come together and share experiences, especially after the pandemic where we were deprived of it. Flavours are very unique to the category and the enjoyment of experiencing new flavours or mixing flavours is also attractive to people. Many people also recognise that shisha is low in tobacco content and thus sits lower on the risk continuum. The use is so infrequent that nicotine addiction is rare compared to less occasional tobacco products.

“ESCA SEEKS TO BECOME THE UNIFIED VOICE THAT REPRESENTS AND DEFENDS THE INTERESTS OF THE SECTOR”



Do you believe that nowadays perceptions towards shisha are changing? If so, how?

I think in Europe it's a very slow shift towards the positive. As people learn more about the culture of the product and the social traditions, their mindset changes. However, there is still a very negative perception which often rears its head in sensationalist news articles – with no robust scientific basis or recognition of the credible players in the sector. Often there are links made between organised crime or high immigration to shisha bars in a covert attempt to spout racist ideology. That being said, I do believe that as the category continues to grow, more people are beginning to understand it and recognise it as a social act of entertainment with friends whilst discovering a different cultural tradition that offers a wide space for creativity and innovation.



What challenges has ESCA faced so far? And what are the key policy areas that the Alliance has identified? One of the big challenges for us is the perception of the category and establishing ourselves as the point of contact for legislators across Europe. Building up the name of the alliance has been a major focus and we've managed to do that quite effectively. We meet regularly with politicians across EU Member States and in Brussels to inform them of the cultural, social and occasional nature of shisha, the importance of flavours and the risks facing the category.

In terms of the key policy areas, it's almost always health related – consistent amendments to tobacco control laws that restrict the product and its consumption. We also face constant excise hikes which, as the most impacted tobacco product by illicit trade, means an exacerbation of an already growing problem. And, because the sector is so niche, it is low on the radar of enforcement authorities. ESCA aims to represent the thousands of lawful and responsible operators of the sector and our survival is threatened by the black market which is fuelled by high taxes. We work to fight against this.

At the moment our focus is on Spain where there is a move to ban smoking on terraces; for lounges this would mean the destruction of their business and we are working with Der Shisha Verband in Germany to oppose the upcoming restriction on shisha pack sizes. Governments around Europe and the world make policy decisions to win favour with NGOs and the public, without considering the cultural or social significance of the shisha sector or the nuances of its consumption – the 25g restriction is a clear example of that. Legislation coming from Brussels is a major priority for ESCA – There is the upcoming revision of the Tobacco Excise Directive and ESCA's job is to ensure policy makers are fully aware of unintended consequences of ill-thought out decisions such as a harmonisation of minimum rates with high excise countries like France, which it's worth noting, has a 90% illicit shisha market. Finally, we are gearing ourselves up towards the revision of the Tobacco Products Directive where we know there is a risk of an outright ban on flavours for shisha – which of course poses an existential risk to the entire legal shisha sector – the black market would thrive and the legal sector would vanish. This will be a real test for ESCA and we'll need to effectively mobilise the community to oppose this threat. We have our work cut out for us!



ShishaMesse Frankfurt 2022

As an expert on the matter, what do you think sets shisha apart from other tobacco products? The social, cultural and occasional nature of shisha sets it apart from all others. Traditional smokers have a very negative relationship with cigarettes where consumption is compulsive and frequent – the same is not true for shisha.

Shisha consumption, on the other hand, is a ritual to be enjoyed with family and friends and is done so on an occasional basis. It has cultural ties to the Middle East, Turkey and North Africa but is also a mode of integration for many migrant communities as a large proportion of native Europeans are embracing the product.

If there is one word that springs to mind when I think of shisha, it's integration. That is absolutely something that should be considered by policy makers and the media. Shisha brings people together regardless of background and that should be celebrated.

“Shisha brings people together regardless of background and that should be celebrated.”

If you could choose any company or business person in the world, which do you admire the most? And Why?

I need to be loyal to my roots so I'm going to be controversial and say Michael O'Leary the CEO of Ryanair – I'm aware most others would disagree, but I think he is extremely intelligent, very business savvy and has managed to revolutionise air travel in Europe. His business approach is no frills and so is his interview style. He speaks his mind and I admire that. You get what you pay for with Ryanair and over the years it has made travel home to Ireland very easy and affordable for me so for that I'm extremely grateful!

What 3 things can you NOT live without?

I know I'm probably supposed to say shisha here but it's not in my top 3 – friends/family, the gym and chocolate.

What is your favourite shisha flavour? I love Al Fakher Watermelon and am also a big fan of the new Shisha Kartel range which has so many great mixes – my favourite being Plata o Plomo (a mix of Pomegranate, Melon and Watermelon).



“A different cultural tradition that offers a wide space for creativity and innovation.”

Where is the best place in the world to enjoy a shisha? Dubai has the best venues for enjoying a shisha – it's integral to the local culture and the quality of the preparation is second to none. In Europe, the lounge scene in Spain is really great, very sophisticated and definitely a contender for being the best.



ESCA works to promote shisha and to educate the public and political leaders about the tradition of shisha and those who use it.

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