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A Porfidio Tequila Interview

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Suave-Agave: What first gave you the idea of starting a brand new tequila company in Mexico?

The idea of creating a new tequila company was born of the realisation back in 1991 that no quality tequila was available on the market. To be more precise, the reason for establishing a tequila company in Mexico was that I had spotted a gap in the market for a quality distilled blue agave product of Mexican origin.

Ten years ago tequila was targeted towards college kids who were receptive to any type of firewater which had an instant and lasting impact. My purpose in establishing the Porfidio brand was precisely to blast the image of tequila out of the firewater category and into the super-premium spirits sector. From there we set out to separate Porfidio entirely from the tequila category as a product far beyond tequila.

Suave-Agave: How difficult was the start-up process? Did the competition hinder your progress in any way?

Starting up any company in Mexico, and a tequila company in particular, is no easy affair. Starting up a company as a foreigner in a national industry in the ultra-nationalistic context of the state of Jalisco adds one or two extra obstacles.

Nationalistic obstacles can be overcome if the end result is to the greater benefit of the country - if it contributes to the economic welfare of Mexico and its citizens. Porfidio has done so successfully over the last ten years, and I say this with great pride, as the only private foreign investor which has managed to succeed within the established political limits of the tequila industry.

If the adage holds true that one's success is measured by the sum of one's enemies, the relationship between Porfidio vis-à-vis the Mexican Ministry of Economics during the last three years would be a prime example. Despite these obstacles, Porfidio is proud to have been able to carry on its business in Mexico through four presidential cycles.

Suave-Agave: What types of problems did you run into during the start-up process?

From an historic perspective, during the start up phase the political modus operandi consisted of interested parties establishing arrangements with the infamous Profeco government agency to arbitrarily close down a company or to impose product recalls on its products as a "precautionary" measure until the accused company proved its innocence. This is done without establishing any responsibility on the Profeco agency to redress the situation after the company's innocence had been proved. Thus the burden of proof is on the accused and the accused is not automatically entitled to any damages for wrongful accusations. Obviously this legal system is open to abuse in trade disputes between competitors and causes considerable political 'bad will'.

President Vicente Fox has made many legal reforms over the last years and it can reasonably be assumed that the country will be able to reform this arbitrary legal application within the next years and convert the Profeco institution into something more akin to its U.S. equivalent.

One of the legal developments in the tequila industry over the last years has been the establishment of the Tequila Regulatory Council, A.C., a euphemism for a private non-profit company financed through its members and mostly dedicated to collective political lobbying. Rather than being keen on Profeco and other legal reform, this private non-profit organisation uses the existing Profeco system to its advantage in systematically monopolising the industry in favour of its financial contributors.

Suave-Agave: How did our brand eventually come to be recognised around the world, and especially in the United States as a premium tequila?

Porfidio as a brand achieved recognition through uncompromising quality standards and consistency in quality, as well as innovations in production techniques in the tequila industry previously unknown to Mexico. Porfidio is proud to have contributed to the general improvement of tequila production standards in Mexico to the benefit of the industry as a whole.

Basically Porfidio's success comes down to a realisation that the consuming public in general is smart enough to recognise the difference between a good and a low quality product. You don't have to rely on heavy advertising to convince consumers that a bad product is actually good.

Simply making a highest quality product has been the core of Porfidio's success.

Most of Porfidio's imitators have relied heavily upon imitation of Porfidio's packaging without actually copying its inherent quality features and were thus short-lived products.

Suave-Agave: What sets your product apart from the rest of the competition in terms of taste and quality?

Destileria Porfidio has successfully challenged the 'bad-boy' image of tequila and established its pure agave spirit as a sophisticated range of drinks that appeal to a refined palate. We have in effect created a 'Super-Jalisco' category beyond tequila analogous to the creation of Super-Tuscany wines beyond Chianti.

This transformation has been achieved by applying uncompromising quality controls to every aspect of our production:

"all our agave spirits are made from 100% agave without the addition of the cheaper sugar used by some manufacturers for mixto tequilas;

"we use only the first undiluted pressing of the agave fibre, rather like the production of extra-virgin olive oil;

"following controlled fermentation and distillation, only the 'heart' of the distilled spirit is used - the lower quality 'head and tails' which cause the infamous tequila hangover are discarded;

"during ageing, Porfidio lies in small barrels made from the best new oak - the competition generally uses tainted barrels discarded by the bourbon industry;

"and finally we insist on the most hygienic conditions possible at every stage of production. We apply equally rigorous standards to our rum production.

It is precisely this unrivalled quality which sets our products apart. At an average retail price of US\$100

per bottle, our products are definitely not price-oriented; rather they are aimed at the scrupulous and discerning consumer who settles only for the best.

Presented in bottles hand-blown by local craftsmen and individually labelled, each with a distinctive glass cactus at its core for Porfidio agave spirits and a palm tree for rum, our products are quite unique.

Suave-Agave: Porfidio was not available on the US market for quite some time. Can you describe what happened that stopped its sales in the US?

There are two types of commercial competition: one is competing in a free-market environment by producing a superior product and one is by getting into bed with certain public officials at the Mexican Ministry of Economics to act upon suspicion clauses - as explained previously - to hinder the free circulation of a competitor's products.

Such legal constraints were made on Porfidio and thus disabled us temporarily from exporting to the United States. Ultimately, these unjust "precautionary" accusations were proved to be false. However, the slowness of the legal system imposes an additional time burden on Porfidio - intentional of course - which kept the product outside the reach of US consumers for two years.

The painful recognition that foreign investment in Mexico will remain complicated obliges Porfidio to diversify geographically. Porfidio has done so successfully by establishing a joint venture in South Africa for the production of South African produced super-premium 100% agave spirits.

Nevertheless, I am confident that Mexico will continue its course of legal reforms and will gradually eliminate its free trade obstacles as part of the NAFTA integration process over the next years.

Suave-Agave: To discuss your bottles collectable nature, how many bottles are produced in a year of each type: Añejo, the Añejo mini, Reposado, Plata, Rum and South African?

Porfidio is an ultra-premium producer, which by its very nature means we limit production to ensure quality. We have a total production capacity of no more than 50,000 litres in order to ensure proper attention to detail, consistency, individuality and exclusivity.

Suave-Agave: Porfidio Plata is Suave-Agave.com's best selling item. What sets this product apart from the rest? What types of tastes can our clients expect to encounter when trying this product?

Porfidio Plata is entirely unique in terms of its pressing process, natural fermentation, triple distillation and perfect separation of head and tails from the heart.

The true nature of the agave flavour can best be appreciated in our unaged Porfidio Plata. Good Plata is much more difficult to produce than aged spirits. Thus many tequila aficionados have a tendency to prefer unaged agave spirits.

Porfidio is proud to have created a Plata 100% agave spirit with an unequalled agave aroma worthy of being enjoyed straight and not just in cocktails.

Suave-Agave: Porfidio Rum and Porfidio South African Blue Agave spirit are two very new yet unique products to hit the market. What makes the rum such a premium product and a step above any other rum on the market? How is the South African Blue Agave spirit like a tequila and what sets it apart from one? Do you have any plans on producing a miniature rum bottle, and when would that be expected to hit the market?

Porfidio Rum is a single cane rum distilled from the naturally fermented virgin cane juices, undiluted with water and allowed to rest in ceramic vessels. Most rums are made from molasses, which is a waste by-product of sugar refining. Porfidio, on the other hand, actually goes through the process of pressing fresh sugar cane and transforming this into rum; a unique process which results in a unique taste.

Porfidio Rum is to Bacardi what Porfidio 100% agave is to Cuervo: uncompromising quality at its very best.

I have taken the step of launching a white spirit made from pure sugar cane, which best accentuates the delicious flavour of the sugar cane juices. Drinking Porfidio Plata rum is equivalent to drinking a glass of freshly squeezed cane juice - with an alcoholic twist of course.

Ageing in wood would only harm its delicate flavour so we have actually opted for ageing in ceramic vessels which leave no taste.

Porfidio's South African agave spirit on the other hand is the result of a reproduction of our distillery in Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, Mexico with added improvements. This product has been launched out of the necessity to diversify into a more stable political environment outside Mexico with the same climatic conditions, which are conducive to the production of the blue agave plant.

Suave-Agave: What made you choose Puerto Vallarta for your distillery's site and how many bottles are produced there in any given year?

I chose Puerto Vallarta as the site of the distillery based upon its ideal climatic conditions which are conducive to making the very best Super-Jalisco agave spirits.

Just as with wine, the terrain and the soil are important and the closeness to the sea levels out differences in temperatures between nights and days, resulting in a superbly aromatic agave. Porfidio was the first to plant blue agave on the Pacific coastline.

I have repeated the same pattern in choosing a site in South Africa by planting our blue agave plantations close to the sea.

I would also love to expand our Puerto Vallarta Facility and plantations, if Mexican politics permits me to do so.

Suave-Agave: Do you have any last words or comments for our tequila aficionados?

Porfidio has been subjected to many evolutionary pushes by Mexican politics over the last years. Actively and conscientiously engaging in this evolution process is always to the long-term benefit of any product. Thus Porfidio is in the ongoing process of evolving from a traditional super-premium tequila of Mexican origin into a super-premium agave spirit of Mexican as well as international extraction.

Not so many years ago wine production was limited to European turf; in the course of just a few decades it has evolved into Californian, Australian and Chilean varieties. Tequila is currently undergoing the same natural progression, which is obviously accelerated by the present political export constraints in Mexico.

Suave-Agave.com thanks Ponciano Porfidio and Destileria Porfidio for their time and effort involved in this interview. Please email Questions@Suave-Agave.com for prices or other general inquires about Porfidio. Thank you!