



>> PIR (Phoenix International Raceway) then with Pelican Brands Imports," he says. It all ended up paying off, with their first batch of 3 Amigos being bottled just in time for Cinco de Mayo, 2006.

According to Gonzalez, the reaction was great, but they got lost in the crowd. "With the market being flooded, having a great tequila isn't enough." Kowtowing to the consumer in merchandising is often a necessary evil. Ultimately, 3 Amigos decided that appearance may be the culprit, so they changed their bottle five times—noticing a rise in sales with each tweak to the label, bottle shape, and so on. Let's face it, we're a country obsessed with packaging. Welcome to America!

And speaking of America, Gonzalez had one more thing to add—so take note all you Dos Gringos ball cap wearers out there. "In our experience, it's the women who have the biggest balls when it comes to drinking the tequila. They represent a good majority of our sales," Gonzalez says with a chuckle. So rethink that Michelob Ultra next time, boys.

Another company may ring a bell, since they were the subject of their very own profile within the pages of *JAVA* a little over a year ago. Cruz Tequila, the extremely well-crafted brand from Joseph 'Pep' Katcher ('el presidente') and Todd Nelson (vice president).

According to both Katcher and Nelson, business is a boomin'. After the boys achieved



their goal of year-over-year growth of 305 percent, the "Cruzaders" are sitting pretty it would seem, and that's not even considering that they have garnered nine international spirits awards over the last three years. Aside from expanding and developing their bar, restaurant and liquor store partners, it would appear their "Let the Good Limes Roll" campaign was a success. "Pouring over 11,000 Cruz tequila and Coimetreu margaritas at a single restaurant chain within a month, it was clear we had solid success on our hands," exclaims Katcher.

As a result, Nelson points out, "we have continued to increase production to support this campaign and our expansion across North America."

Cruz' popularity in Phoenix (for the sake of this story, anyway), only serves to back up the claim that tequila consumption is almost growing faster than the agave plants can be harvested. Of course, yummy, quality tequila, with expertly crafted "flavor profiles" plays no small part in Cruz' success.

"Tequila consumption has steadily increased over the last ten years as consumers have found the simple pleasure of pure, 100-percent agave tequila. We were looking for the best then we set out to create it. This goal has been the driving force behind Cruz tequila producing exceptionally high quality products," says Nelson.

"Americans are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their understanding of



Left to right: Local tequila brands 3 Amigos, Cruz and Roger Clyne's Mexican Moonshine.

tequila. Like wine, tequilas can vary greatly in quality, flavor, aroma and taste. The growth in the category and the growth of Cruz tequila are driven by those consumers looking for something unique or special," says Katcher.

As for Phoenix becoming a major tequila hub, Nelson has some thoughts.

"With Arizona being so close to the border and many of us vacationing all over Mexico, we have a great base of informed consumers in this state. Most Arizonans recognize that quality can only be achieved if the product is 100% blue agave and won't settle for less. Also, people in our state are becoming savvy about seeing through marketing hype. It's not about celebrity endorsement—it's about quality."

Of course, it doesn't take a Don Draper to understand that an enthusiastic consumer is what makes any given product synonymous with any given area or region. "Arizona's sophisticated tequila drinkers also know that elephantine, mass-produced, heavily-marketed national brands are often inferior to small batch, artesian products like Cruz tequila," states Nelson.

So the big question to our friends at Cruz: Can Phoenix become the tequila hub of the Southwest?

To that, Katcher has a more calm response—less to do with how local companies such as his are making it a reality—taking a more “why not?” attitude. “Why just the Southwest?” he asks rather incredulously. “Look at everything Phoenix has going for it. It’s the fifth largest city and one of the top vacation destinations in the country. We have a rich Hispanic cultural heritage and share a border with the only tequila producing country in the world. We have 300+ days of sunshine, and who doesn’t enjoy an ice cold margarita on a sunny day?”

Nelson’s explanation takes more of a business angle. “Absolutely,” he says plainly with regard to Phoenix as the Southwest’s tequila hotspot, but he is inclined to bestow the honor on the entire state. “Phoenix knows tequila. It’s very much a part of this city, no argument. But let’s not forget about the rest of the state. Cruz has great support in Tucson, Flagstaff, Yuma, Havasu, Payson, Bisbee, and so on. In fact, we are proud to report that our tequila can be found in over 950 locations statewide.”

Dan Jellum (“el Jefe”) is “manager of the project” as he puts it, and father-in-law to Roger Clyne (of Peacemaker fame), whose name adorns the bottle of his superior, 100% blue agave Mexican Moonshine, another premium Phoenix-based tequila. One of the biggest distributors in Arizona, Alliance Beverage Distributing Co., is their distributor, almost guaranteeing that there will be a bottle of the stuff wherever you go.

Roger Clyne’s Mexican Moonshine and I made our first introduction up in Prescott in a bar on Whiskey Row, and upon el Jefe’s advice, I took it with lime. Long story short, take it from me, this ain’t no flavor profile approved and signed off on by Roger Clyne in exchange for his name emblazoned on it. This was really, really, good stuff. Don’t let the moonshine moniker fool you—there is very little burn to speak of and any bite it has got is more like the gentle bite on your lower lip during a kiss.

“Would I like to see Arizona as a hub—sure I would. I’m not in the industry as much as some of these other guys, but I agree with Pep [Katcher of Cruz],” says Jellum, taking a more chill position. He does remark however that it’s certainly hard to ignore all the new premium tequilas coming out of the Valley. “Premium, meaning not the kind of stuff these people are accustomed to,” which in itself is something Phoenix is doing more of every year. “It’s a great place to kick back and enjoy a Margarita, so why not? Why not have the great tequila to go with it be local? People drink some of the new stuff and are surprised when they don’t need salt and lime. It’s good stuff.” A laid-back guy with a Lebowski-esque disposition, this is about as close to a market analysis or prediction as you’re likely to get from him. So we’ll just take it as is and shrug. In the words of Pep Katcher, “Why not Phoenix?”

It’s as good an answer as we can think of. ■

Phoenix Tequila Festival
Saturday and Sunday, December 11 and 12
www.phoenixtequilafest.com

AGAVE MADNESS

Phoenix’s Burgeoning Tequila Scene

By Mark Fink

When I think of Oxnard, California—traveling north of L.A. on the 101, an unremarkable stop, really, on the way to wine country—I think of strawberries. It’s the town that the strawberry built. According to the U.S.D.A., Oxnard’s strawberry output accounts for about 85% of the national total—all from this little town. Other places, if they make you think of anything, it’s usually something indigenous.

Think Wisconsin and ... cheese, right! Or, say, Maine and world-class lobsters. Come to think of it, there are, even areas that are known for things that don’t necessarily come from there—just something that, along the way stopped and thought, “now this I like.” And from that point, people began associating it with that region. I guess when I think of, say, Santa Fe, I think of a place that boasts more high-end art galleries than almost anywhere—perhaps even rivaling New York City. Speaking of the arts, indie rock seems to feel just as at home in Austin, Texas as the Frito pie. These are all wonderful things that can be found or made almost anywhere (if you’ve never hooked up with a Frito pie, do so, then thank me). Thing is, for one reason or another, they just plopped down and declared themselves at home.

You may be wondering what my angle is. Well, in case you haven’t noticed, our *modus*

operandi here at JAVA magazine is to somehow manage to fit the Valley and all of its surrounding land into every issue. There’s a pattern here, and staying true to that, my local angle for this story just happens to be tequila. Not made here—the agave fields are primarily in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. Stuff’s got to be shipped over. So it’s not from here, per se. But, the point is, locally-based tequila brands seem to be popping up all over the place.

Entire restaurants are taking shape around the ritualistic joy of drinking tequila. Fox Restaurant Concepts has the upscale Blanco Tacos + Tequila in Scottsdale. There’s also Cien Agaves in Scottsdale and Canteen Modern Tequila Bar in Tempe, to name a few. Phoenix’s Barrio Café has a selection that’s as dynamic as its James Beard Award-winning menu. All this is to say nothing of classic establishments like Via de los Santos in Phoenix with its 100-plus selection of tequilas, and La Pihata in Phoenix who, since 1980 has been pouring from its selection of around 300 100-percent blue agave tequilas. And there are plenty of other terrific taquerias with their own eye-popping selections that dot our map like prickly pear.

If you’ve noticed the surge in tequila and tequila-themed restaurants—as well as an overall increase in plain old imbibing of the better

stuff, more often sipped neat, not necessarily as part of a margarita—it’s because Phoenix is beginning to embrace tequila like never before.

Elias Entertainment’s second annual Phoenix Tequila Festival, sponsored by Luna Malvada, Roger Clyne’s Mexican Moonshine, Dos Gringos, Fry’s, Garcia’s restaurant and Budweiser among others, is being held this month at the U.S. Airways Center. This celebration of distilled blue agave making its home right here in Phoenix is no accident. It’s not like the Olympics—we didn’t lose out to another city like, say, Cleveland. It’s got to be Phoenix, right? It’s our thing.

The growing popularity of tequila has helped ebb the fear and intimidation many people have about the firewater. According to the Distilled Spirits Council, a Washington-based industry group, tequila sales have risen four percent since 2008. That may seem like a small number, but it translates into roughly an additional \$1.65 billion for the tequila companies. And to back up the claim that Phoenix is turning into a big player in the tequila industry isn’t just “Whistlin’ Dixie,” let’s look a little closer.

Sorry to report, there just isn’t enough room to discuss every local tequila brand here. To see some of the best contenders, make your way down to the U.S. Airways Center December 11th or 12th, from 1 ’till 5 p.m.



Above: The annual Phoenix Tequila Fest takes place at the U.S. Airways Center December 11th and 12th.

(www.phoenixtequilafest.com). There, you can take a taste of everything from warm añejos, to lusciously prickly reposados, to deceptively soft blancos and much more. Also, given the time of year, it won't take a genius to know that there'll be no shortage of super-premium, etched glass-encased, top shelf tequilas, just in time for Christmas—for the discerning drinker on your list. The Festival entry price tops out at \$45, but sure as God made little cactus flowers, the hullabaloo will be crawling with specials to pack that arena to capacity.

To sweeten the deal, you can stop by and say *hola* to former magazine guys David Tyda (*Desert Living*) and Rick Phillips (*City AZ*, as well as *Item* for those who remember), who have joined forces to create the Arizona Taco Festival, the Arizona Barbeque Festival and eateraz.com, a daily e-blast devised to keep you abreast of the various goings-on within the culinary microcosm that is Phoenix. Look for the Taco Fest booth at the Tequila Festival.

This will be a bountiful, tequila-lovers playground. Sure, other cities may have their own tequila soirees—think Albuquerque and San Antonio. Thing is, we're filling a whole arena. And why not, when so many of the participants are local? As Ralph Gonzalez, of the family-owned and operated 3 Amigos tequila puts it, "This is Phoenix. It's the wild, wild West, and it's close to Mexico. Why not?" How can you argue with such logic?

3 Amigos is one of the most visible, locally-owned tequilas—due in no small part to their savvy partnership with local heavyweight distributor Hensley, best known for its exclusive distribution of all things Budweiser (and also Cindy Hensley, wife of Sen. John McCain and heir to the Hensley fortune).

Ralph Gonzalez' father and uncles hail from Tepatitlán, Mexico. Half of them decided to come up north to the States, the other half opted to stay in Mexico. His father and two uncles began farming in Arizona 40 years ago. His other uncles continued to farm and cultivate agave down in Mexico. "My family used to farm for a major tequila company—I can't throw out the name, but it was known as one of the first major tequila brands. Well, they ended up selling out and not caring as much about the

quality of the agave, so they stopped buying from us," bristles Gonzalez.

The upside was that, as Gonzalez puts it, "all the while we were taking notice." There was an opportunity to do something themselves. "We kind of nosedived into it knowing mainly the agricultural aspect of agave, then we got a hard lesson in the form of marketing," he says with a slight chuckle of embarrassment. It basically came down to "knocking on doors."

Gonzalez admits a deep and serious learning curve. The first order of business was to find a chemist, which they did. Then they handed one of their uncles the title of "manager of operations" in Mexico.

With 5000 acres of family-owned agave fields in Los Altos highlands of Jalisco, Mexico, the only decision for the Gonzalez clan was whether to contract out their land to a major company or continue to work it themselves, just as generations of their family had before. It wasn't as much a sentimental decision as it was a decision to maintain the integrity of their product. When you run your own fields, you can decide to harvest as many or as few acres at a time, depending on the readiness of the agave, which is affected by many variables.

"We started knocking on doors," Gonzalez remembers. Eventually, we teamed up with >>