

# Cruz del Sol

Arizona's Burgeoning Tequila Brand

By Mark Fink



It's been said elsewhere that tequila ought to enjoy the same sort of refined ubiquity as, say, single malt scotch or the brightest vodkas. The only bum that suggestion leaves is in the mouths of some who've gotten themselves swept up in tequila's warm, often gente, embrace: that, if tequila were to be delivered to a table without the darting eyes and the "are you sure about that?" glances it typically gets, everyone else would get it. And, for many, the delusion that you are one of a very exclusive group that truly understands something (Wico fans from way back, stand up and be counted, everybody getting it is a very scary prospect).

But more and more producers of tequila, along with some of the slaves to its hidden pleasures, want people to get it. Or, rather, they want people to end their long, lumpy relationship with the tequila they thought they knew—and swap spit with something new. Well, it's something that may seem new, but has been there all along: That bottle that sat next to the Cuervo Gold, that you thought might have been some kind of strange aperitif made out of leaves, actually turns out to be some of the best stuff on earth: clean, cool, ultra-premium and super-premium tequilas—the kind you probably don't want mingling anywhere near a mixer and a bottle of triple sec. And to those who know it best, this stuff is pure, bottled love. You may have noticed that it is starting to appear on both sides of the gold stuff, as well as lining the shelves above and below.

Of course, ultra- and super-premium tequilas have been around for years now, and for much of that time, they haven't been very hard to find. They were there; problem was, Americans tend to stick with the proven labels come hell or high water—Budweiser over some of the great German or Mexican pilsener-style beers, Smirnoff over the Chopin, Bertoli over the countless other superior olive oils.

But you can't really expect people to swap whatever cheap "mixto" (we'll get to that in a minute) they're accustomed to for a bottle of \$60 Don Fulano or Asombroso overnight—especially if they don't really know all that much about what they're drinking in the first place. Unfortunately, tequila happens to be one of the most casually consumed, yet misunderstood, liquors. Plenty of people don't even know what good tequila is.

Lucky for us, Arizona seems to breed mucho interest in the stuff. We live in a tequila

culture, a tequila city, where agave plants grow unnoticed in parking lots, when they're not being used as landscaping. The stuff practically comes out of drinking fountains at ASU, all that aside, we Phoenicians are probably some of the more tequila-savvy drinkers, and are flush with options nearly anywhere we go thanks to a pervasive Hispanic influence, along with our desert south-west culture. This opportunity has attracted to Arizona its share of entrepreneurs looking to stake their claim in the world of tequila. While no one can actually make the stuff here outright (Mexico's Consejo Regulador del Tequila A.C., or CRT), we've very stringent laws surrounding the production of their most famous export, which stipulate that it can only be made in the state of Jalisco and some other, very limited regions, a tequila producer can set up shop in Arizona and ship the juice over from Mexico.

Friends (and ASU alumni, incidentally) Joseph Pep Katcher and Todd Nelson (El Presidente

greenhorns when it comes to business, either. Pep owned an import/export company after returning to the Valley from gigs on Wall Street and the Chicago Board of Trade, and now he and his brother own a commercial and residential contracting company. Nelson's business pedigree is nothing to sneeze at either, as head of business development for a consumer lending company out of San Diego.

Like all tequila stories, theirs began simply, just a few friends knocking back a bottle. "It was four years ago, and we were at his house," says Pep, gesturing to Todd. "And we were drinking a bottle one afternoon, a good one, and someone made a comment about the bottle, that we could do better—make a better tequila than the one we were drinking." He refuses to say which tequila inspired it all—which, given the fact that they are probably his competitor now, is sporting of him. "So Saulo goes inside and calls his cousin Ramon in Jalisco and asks what

can pull when you're making tequila, we started to catch on. But it was a learning process," he cedes. A big part of that curve was their insistence on developing their own "flavor profile," which Pep confesses took a full three years. "Where the agave is from, how you cook it, how you squeeze the juice out of it, all of those things will ultimately affect what becomes the flavor profile." They both agreed that it was crucial to start entirely from scratch, profile and all.

And as it turned out, if taking the time to develop their flavor profile was their first big challenge, it would eventually prove their biggest payoff, too. "There are a lot of companies out there that manufacture a flavor profile and more or less put it under different names," Todd says with a faint tone of embarrassment. The CRT lists 901 registered brands from 128 producers. So how does this all work?

"They subcontract it," he says. "There are maybe fifteen hundred actual tequilas out

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and El Vice Presidente, respectively), of locally owned tequila label Cruz del Sol, did just that. Guided by a simple "we can do better" philosophy, and the two—along with Pep's brother Saulo—set out to create a tequila that would leave that brainy burn of youthful regret behind, where it belongs. Along the way, they've created something that stands as a testament to the rewards of knowing better.

Sitting in the W Hotel lounge in Scottsdale, they give the impression of two drinking buddies, though they've long since leapt past that Hawaiian shirted, party animal instinct their ASU past suggests.

Approaching middle age, both men are well dressed, exceedingly relaxed (Tequila is a depressant, not a stimulant—a common misconception that Todd objects to) and effortlessly professional. If they ever did body shots off the hipbones of a stripper, it doesn't show. After all, the tequila business is, well, serious business—and these two take theirs seriously. They're no

it would take if we wanted to make our own tequila. He says, "I work in the industry. I know lots of people, why don't you come down and I'll introduce you." Later that very night, says Joseph, they had a business plan and an idea of what they wanted. "A month later, the three of us took off and went to Mexico, and that was it," he says plainly.

Well, that wasn't it, exactly. There was a lot of jargon-heavy, high-science stuff between their jaunt down Mexico way and in the Cruz bottle. But that was all it took for a few guys to start making their own tequila, just like anything else, though there was a sizeable learning curve to get around when going from drinkers to doers.

"We didn't understand the complexities that go into making a really good tequila at first," admits Joseph. "I mean, we knew early on that we wanted something a little smoother than anything else as we really started to understand

there, and there are probably only three or four hundred active producers. There are some producers who use up to forty different profiles, and they just bottle it under one name and ship it off, bottle it up and ship it off. It was very important for us to start from scratch. We didn't want to create or sell anyone else's tequila."

And they certainly haven't. Cruz Repasado ("rested," meaning aged a minimum of two months, but less than one year), their sole offering as yet, is a remarkably clean, soft and sweet tequila, best enjoyed the way Pep and Todd are here at the W—which is to say neat, preferably in a proper vessel—either a narrow shot glass called a caballito (which is how our pretty waitress is serving it) or the CRT-approved Overture tequila glass by Riedel. No matter how you take it, this repasado is going to

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Above: El Presidente Joseph Pep Katcher presides over a heap of agave plants.

>> "Tequila novices? 'Why not?' says Pep. 'But it's so good, you don't even need the training wheels (i.e., salt and lime). He's spot-on. It's that good, and tastes nothing like the scrubby, sugary swirl you've certainly crossed paths with at some point in your life. As Todd says lovingly, 'When you can drink it room temperature...' Amen to that.

After a limited release just last year, along with a launch party at Magnium's Cigar Wine & Liquor in Phoenix, Cruz made fans right out of the gate. The awards followed, netting the repasado the Silver and Gold Medals at the San Francisco International Spirit Competition in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Cruz has been garnering great word-of-mouth ever since. Magnium's owner, Amar Patel, reported selling out of the first four cases he initially ordered in a day, and David Kent, beverage director at Scottsdale's Westin Kierland Resort and Spa, was quoted as saying that it was one of the superior tequilas he'd tried.

"I love Cruz," says David M. Johnson, "and I think the Hemmosis Katcher-Saulo and Pep—are fantastic, important and shrewd. They work hard locally to present their prestige brand in the market, which they care so much about," he says. A self-described "tequila impresario and flag-waver," Johnson has a 20-year career as a sommelier under his belt, and as much time as a trade person and broker in the wine and spirits business. Hailing from southern New Mexico, Johnson says he's always been drawn to Mexico's mystical agave elixirs.

As far as Johnson is concerned, Cruz' impressive success from the word go may mean that people are finally ready to take tequila more seriously—a good thing, considering its almost cartoonish reputation: fratboy revelry, practically doing a handstand over your toilet, those bad, bad Rocky Point experiences of the past, not to mention countless Mexican stereotypes—even Justin Timberlake. God help us. "Justin is launching his own tequila '501,'" Johnson groans. "Look for it in the bargain bins of your local liquor store in a year when it doesn't move," he snorts dismissively. (He's reluctant, however, to disparage Sammy Hagar, owner of Cabo Wabo—offering that "when the Red Rocker was hip and rockin', he did a bunch of tequila.")

Of course, people have been buying premium tequilas for years now, often without even knowing it. But while buying a premium tequila like, say, Tres Generaciones is certainly a good thing, it's still produced by one of the major brands—Sauza—so it is, in many people's minds, a safe bet. That's not the progressive tequila consumption some are hoping for. However, Johnson really educated consumers that there's such a thing as good tequila. "Most major premium brands are just fine," continues Johnson. "Flat out bad? The really cheap 'mixto' brands loaded with brown sugar. Stay away from those," he begs. As Pep Katcher laments, "The cheap stuff really rings my bell."

But when smaller, boutique tequilas are moving bottle after bottle, as is the case with Cruz (as well as another local producer, Tres Amigos, incidentally), this suggests that the general public's attitude toward the stuff may finally be shifting—away from the tried-and-true and toward the more adventurous—those hand-numbered bottles and lovingly created flavor profiles the Cruz boys push about. Fear not, enthusiasts (and their more enthralling cousins, the paristas): it's doubtful that the public is buying top-shelf tequilas just to get wipped on sippy margaritas. After all, you'd have to be mighty foolish to spend \$65 on a bottle of anejo ("aged" a minimum of one year), only to drown out each drop with triple sec and Rose's lime. Says Johnson, "I hate when people use Rose's lime. Would it kill a lazy bartender to squeeze a couple of Mexican key limes?" Todd and Pep echo that sentiment, going further by stressing their disdain for triple sec, instead suggesting agave nectar to sweeten a cocktail.

Whatever the case may be, tequila is enjoying an unprecedented resurgence. Pep Katcher points out that, for the first time, Americans guzzled and sipped more tequila than any other country, including Mexico. The numbers are pleasing for anyone who's felt all alone in their true



Above: Vice President Todd Nelson with Pep's brother Saulo Katcher.

appreciation of tequila. According to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, sales of ultra- and super-premium tequila have increased 28 percent since 2002, and as of 2009, 2,000 brand names of tequila have been registered.

Does this mean people, at long last, are getting it? Perhaps. Whether it's cheap mixto or not, the data indicates they are drinking it and that's a fact—for better or for worse. And while some, like David Johnson, aren't so sure tequila will take its place next to vodka as the spirit of choice for millions anytime soon, as Pep and Todd hope it will, Johnson does hope nonetheless: "I want tequila to take its rightful place as a true spirit of Mexico and the Americas," he says, admitting that despite its diversity when it comes to suiting the moods and activities of people—it may surprise some that not only does it pair well with Mexican food (Johnson insists Asian food is an "amazing match for tequila—that same diversity is nowhere near vodka")—I think vodka is overrated. But can you really see someone say, "I take a silver tequila and Red Bull?" Truly, it would be enough to make the Red Rocker weep.

But it's here, it's always been here, and it always will be. As for Cruz, the little repasado that could is now available in all states, which is quite something for a few guys on a simple mission to do better than some bottle they shared four years ago. They've already fielded offers from distributors in Norway, France and the Philippines, and Canada is in the works.

So while producers such as Pep, Saulo and Todd pour their hearts into each and every bottle they ship, and flag-wavers like David Johnson continue to espouse its wonders, tequila's image will improve with every sip for those who dare its reputation improves with every bright-eyed morning, sans pounding head and bloodshot eyes. But for the time being, fine tequila's warm, refined pleasure will remain right where it's been all along: with those who get it. ■

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