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Sammy Hagar
Continues to Rock
the Spirits World





Santo Puro Mezquila Continues to Rock the Spirits World

By Gael Hees | Photo credit: Santo

In Search of Higher Spirits

Last month, a Robb Report article touted Santo Fino Blanco Tequila as, “an old-world style tequila designed for session drinking.” This is the perfect description for a tequila, launched less than a year ago by two crazy, tequila-loving, wild men, Sammy Hagar and Guy Fieri. This new-on-the-market tequila was listed in “The 20 Best Tequilas You Can Buy Right Now,” rubbing shoulders with two Patron offerings, two Clase Azul tequilas and spirits from tequileros around the world.

Hagar and Fieri consider the development of the Santo brand to be the search for a higher spirit. Creating a tequila they themselves want to drink has been the ride of a lifetime.

On Making Spirits

Hagar loves the world of distilling and spirits.

“When I sold Cabo Wabo to Campari Group I thought to myself, I can never top this,” said Hagar. “Within a year, I called Luca Garavoglia

with Campari and said, ‘I want to make tequila again.’” Since it was not an option with a five-year non-compete agreement, Hagar started making rum, because as he says, “I really just love this business.”

Hagar is still owner of the Cabo Wabo Cantina franchise with locations in Las Vegas, Hollywood and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. He has Sammy’s Beach Bar and Grill locations in Las Vegas and Cleveland, plus two on the islands in Hawaii, where Sammy’s Beach Bar Rum is distilled.

Santo’s first offering was Santo Puro Mezquila, a rich blend of mezcal and tequila—the only blend of its kind in the world. Released in 2017, Santo Puro was a 2018 Silver Medalist at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. Mezquila is the word coined by Hagar to describe this unique offering inspired by a late-night mixing of spirits, food and friends on the Cabo San Lucas beach.

The mezquila/tequila proved to be so enticing it inspired a search to find a distiller that ended with Juan Eduardo Nuñez, a third-generation master distiller with El Viejito distillery in the highlands of Jalisco.

Hagar believes that artists should always work to the best of their ability. “You don’t want the guy to make something special for you,” said Hagar. “A real chef says, ‘I’m going to make yours as good as that guy’s over there, the one I just made.’” That’s exactly what they found in Nuñez.

When the new Santo Fino Blanco was being developed, everyone kept asking how to make it different, make it special. When Nuñez said, “I only know how to make tequila one way, and that’s like this,” everyone stood around, looked at each other and said, “Okay then, that’s what we want.”

“He’s such an artist,” added Hagar. “He’s uppity

and hard to deal with. He's all those things that make you want to break his neck, but you love him at the same time because he will not compromise. He smacked me around saying, 'I'm the real deal.' That's the rap we got when we asked if he could make it better!"

The "real deal" means using hand-selected, 100 percent Blue Weber agave plants that are at least seven years old. In a time when agave is very expensive, in high demand, and difficult to source, Nuñez insists on investing in ingredients of the highest quality. Even older plants have new growth, and the "real deal" also means cutting off up to thirty percent of the plant to ensure that only the sweet, ripe portion of the plant is used.

"Because it is from ripe agave, it doesn't have a bitter aftertaste," Hagar said. "It doesn't taste like dirt, it tastes like a beautiful plant."

They must be doing something right. Santo is one of the fastest growing tequilas in the country. It sold out a six-month allotment in two hours in one state earlier this year and sold almost 200 cases in one night.

On Making Spirits (and Records)

Hagar and Fieri are not in the spirits business because they want to make money, it's because they want to make (and drink) the best agave spirits in the world.

"When you walk into a bar, a liquor store, a grocery store or a restaurant, and you see your product sitting on the back bar or the shelf, man, it's like wool!" said Hagar. "You start calling people over and saying 'hey, that's mine, that's me. I own that little company right there.' It's really a chest beater for a rock star who's been beating his chest his whole life!"

Continuing in this vein, Hagar waxes on about watching people enjoying his spirit products and it being like walking into a store and seeing one's record on the top ten list. "Boom! Right there it's number seven on the charts and you just get all excited."

And then he got goosebumps (or so he said, it was a phone interview after all).

"I'm telling you, I have goose bumps on my arms and legs right now just talking to you about this. I've got them. I'm sitting here looking and thinking, I'm feeling this. It's really true. It feels so good. It's not like an ego thing, it just makes you happy."

Apparently, Fieri feels the same way. According to Hagar, the Santo development team sometimes starts worrying about costs such as the added expense of keeping the product in the barrel for another six months for that extra bit of flavor. Fieri's response? "It doesn't matter. Don't worry, you guys. We're still paying you. We want to make the best in the world—that's the goal."

To Hagar and Fieri, it is worth the wait. It's like making a record. Van Halen didn't rush just to get the thing done and make a bunch of money, he wanted to the best job he could. He wanted to make the fans swoon!

For Hagar it was, "We're going to blow their minds. Oh my god, wait till the fans hear this! Oh! Oh! The fans are going to die when they hear this. This is the way I approach my spirit

business and Guy Fieri is right on the money, the same kind of guy."

On Fieri (and Aging Agave Spirits)

Hagar and Fieri are first and foremost, friends. They were drinking buddies long before Santos, and they drank tequila. Today, they still drink tequila, but also do blind taste tests.

"This is what we do on our own," said Hagar. "We don't do it for the press or anything, we do this all the time on our own. Some new tequila will come out or I'll find one in some small artisanal agave store and we'll taste it and say, 'that's pretty good tequila, but it ain't Santo.'"

In barrels, at right this very moment is the next product offering from Santo. When will it be ready to launch? They really don't know.

"I'm pacing the floor like my wife is in the delivery room," Hagar said. "Hopefully, by the first of the year."

"Having Guy as a partner is like having your own private taster," said Hagar. I've got a pretty good palate, but he's a chef and his nose and his palate are so sophisticated. In an unknown number of months from now when we look at each other and say, 'High five, this baby's ready.' That's when we'll know it's ready."

On the Business of Things

For Hagar, one of the best things to happen in the past year, was when Southern Glazer's Wine and Spirits (SGWS) took on the Santo brand for distribution. Now the Santo spirits and Sammy's Beach Bar Rums are available through SGWS.

"We're with Southern nationally and that just makes it so much easier," said Hagar. "Guy and I couldn't be happier. It really makes a difference to have everything unified. Before we had everything spread out all over the place."

On the Coronavirus, Life and Living

Like multi-dimensionally busy people, Hagar is finding his time at home due to COVID-19 to be an amazing time to relax and regroup. He's spending time helping his wife with the garden, cooking, playing music and walking on the beach.

He described an amazingly "simple" pasta dish he fixed for his wife with homemade sausage, Swiss chard and basil (both from the garden), and stock over linguini. This was eaten on the beach and Hagar sent Fieri a picture and video of the dish and surroundings. Fieri replied, "I want to be you when I grow up."

"I'm a big fan of simplicity, food and writing a great song," said Hagar. "You can be sitting on the beach next to Oprah and Bill Gates, and someone who works in someone's yard. We're all looking at the same view, sitting on the same sand and being touched by the same sun. It makes me happy. You don't have to be rich to do that."

On Giving

"Food banks are my favorite charity," said Hagar. "I visited a food bank recently and there was a family—father, mother and three children—waiting in line. They were fairly well dressed. I went over and was talking to the father who told me he was a gardener and his

wife was a housekeeper. His truck needed new tires and their son was in college and they were trying to support him too. He said a couple of visits to the food bank allow him to pay all of his bills and still put food on the table. That's what this is all about—people feeding people.

Hagar himself helps put food on the table. Over the last 11 years, he has donated \$1,200 to the food bank in every community where he has performed. That's millions of dollars over the years. Plus, he said that with the coronavirus and so many people out of work, he is going to give even more. He also makes community-based donations totaling the profits from all four Sammy's Beach Bar and Grill restaurants.

Hagar does have a vision that when the pandemic restrictions loosen up, he and Fieri will start doing special events where he will perform and Fieri will be the chef. He pictures about 200 or so guests at \$1,000 a plate to support a local charity. Giving back is on his mind—a lot.

On Las Vegas

It should be no surprise that Hagar loves Las Vegas. It was on his list of things he misses because of the pandemic (including playing to his fans and traveling). In his mind, there is no doubt that Vegas will come back full and strong. "It's the party capital of the world, the food capital of the world, the entertainment capital of the world—we can't lose Las Vegas!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I've interviewed hundreds of people for articles over the past fifty years (started in junior high school). I have never enjoyed an interview more or spent time with someone as full of energy, enthusiasm and joy as Sammy Hagar. Writing this article was a true pleasure.

