

the table

Making movies? No, we sell booze

George Clooney sold a brand of spirit for a billion dollars. Can Hollywood director Steven Soderbergh have similar success with his, asks Ben Clatworthy



Steven Soderbergh has a drink problem. Not a conventional one, though. The problem that the Oscar-winning American film director has is getting people to try a spirit they haven't heard of before. "Look, nobody wants to go into a bar and look stupid by ordering something they have no idea about," he says, nursing a glass of *singani* on the rocks. This is the "juice" that he developed such a taste for while filming *Che* that he launched his own brand, *Singani 63* (the 63 represents the year of his birth). Having your own alcohol brand is becoming a cliché in Hollywood. Francis Ford Coppola and Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have their world-class wines, and you can fill a drinks cabinet with celebrity spirits, from Ryan Reynolds's Aviation Gin to Dan Aykroyd's Crystal Head Vodka. To be fair to Soderbergh, though, he was working his side hustle long before George Clooney launched Casamigos, the tequila brand that was reportedly sold for \$1 billion in 2017.

It's 30 years since Soderbergh's directorial debut, the independent classic *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and nearly 20 since he became a player in mainstream cinema, with a string of successes with Clooney — *Out of Sight* and the *Ocean's* franchise — and a double nomination for best director at the 2001 Academy awards (he won for *Traffic*, not *Erin Brockovich*). And for the past decade the 56-year-old has also been proselytising about *singani*, although he insists he's not expecting a billion-dollar payout any time soon. "I'm still at the point where my day job is paying for my night job," he says as we sit in the Bourne and Hollingsworth

Garden Room near Leicester Square, looking out at the panoramic views of the London skyline. That's not to say he's not envious of Clooney, who he jokes is "very aware" of his anger. He understands why people think, "Oh, you only got into this because there's the chance of a big payoff," but insists it's not the case. "I don't want to get bought out. I want this to work as a legitimate sustainable business."

He talks fondly of working with Clooney. "I never in all the time I worked with him ever heard him so much as utter a complaint. George used to joke when we were shooting in Rome on the second *Ocean's* film that he would get elbowed in the face by people trying to get to see Brad."

As for the star's business success, he says: "George is an exceptional person and the trajectory of his brand was unusual. It's not typical that something grows that big that fast. I think he was the beneficiary of a) the fact it's good juice, and b) George's personality and his willingness to be out in front of it."

Also, Clooney launched a drink that most people are familiar with, tequila, whereas Soderbergh opted for a spirit distilled from white muscat of alexandria grapes and produced only in the Bolivian high valleys. It's so obscure that you will probably have heard of it only if you've travelled in South America in your gap year. That said, Soderbergh became acquainted with *singani* in Madrid when Rodrigo Bellott, his Bolivian casting director for *Che*, gave him a bottle of the spirit at a party before the film began shooting in 2007. Faced with a speech in Spanish, Soderbergh sank "two glasses in pretty rapid succession" and was smitten by its flavour, reminiscent of tequila with floral notes.

"I was a vodka drinker, and knowing *singani* is an 80-proof



George and Amal Clooney and, above left, Steven Soderbergh

[40 per cent] spirit. I was initially prepared for what I call the 'second swallow', which is the burn that accompanies hard spirits when you drink them straight. When that didn't appear, then I was really intrigued."

Later that night Soderbergh sought out Bellott, not so much to quiz him about the drink's history, but to establish how he could get hold of it during the six months of shooting in Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico and, finally, Bolivia. "My main question was, 'How do we create a mule train to follow me and the crew on the shoot and keep ourselves supplied?'"

By the time the production reached Bolivia the crew were as obsessed with the spirit as Soderbergh, who began contemplating importing it to America, but it wasn't until five years later, in 2013, after much wrangling and hours of negotiation with the US authorities, that the first 250 cases arrived on his doorstep in New Jersey.

From the start Soderbergh made it clear that, despite his brand manager's wishes, he wasn't prepared to exploit his contact book to promote his drink because he "wouldn't have any friends" if he did. That's not to say that some of them didn't come knocking, especially directors who needed bottles of booze to feature in scenes perceived as controversial (which established brands steer clear of).

"My friends Brian Koppelman and David Levien, who created the show *Billions*, called me desperate one day because they had a scene in one of their episodes where a broker is in his backyard drunk at three in the morning firing an assault rifle at some deer that keep eating his plants. Nobody would give them permission [to use their brand]," Soderbergh, however, happily shipped a pallet of *singani* to the set and was rewarded with such a long close-up that the television network queried whether there was an editing mistake.

The drink also has a starring role in the film *Game Girl*. In one scene Ben Affleck shatters a glass of it on his kitchen table and a bottle of it sits centre-frame for what feels like minutes. It's probably safe to assume that was a favour from the film's director, David Fincher, given that he is one of Soderbergh's drinking buddies in New York. Soderbergh says he's "hooked" on the Beady Library, a dimly lit bar in Tribeca where he regularly drinks with Fincher. "He's

George is an exceptional person with an unusual brand

a good wing man and he's got loads of stories," he says with a smile.

Singani 63 is a collaboration with Casa Real, one of Bolivia's biggest producers, which makes four million bottles of the spirit a year. Soderbergh happily admits that he had little clue about what it would take to launch a spirit, especially one that no one had heard of. A three-hour meeting with a brand-management company in New York before the launch was, he says, "sobering". Still, he is clear in his goal. "As you know, there are fewer than ten staple base spirits that exist... What I ultimately want is to be the next one of those. I want to be the eighth or the ninth. So that [at home] if you have rum, gin, tequila and vodka, you also have to have *singani*, otherwise you don't have a well-stocked sidebar."

Soderbergh's trip to London is fleeting, although he has tackled on a short city break with his wife and a trip to see Magic Mike Live, the stage version of the film, which he directed. Predictably, the movie's star, Channing Tatum, also has a drinks brand, Born and Bred Vodka, in partnership with a distillery in Idaho.

This summer Soderbergh starts work on the new *Bill and Ted* movie and, at least during production, will have to turn his attention back to his day job. He is yet to share a bottle of *singani* with the film's stars, Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter. "It's been such a long process, and there have been so many false starts and promises [with the film]. Until we're shooting, I wouldn't dream of jinxing it by toasting to our production."

"We start next month in Louisiana, where I grew up. I'm definitely going to be there. And at that point we will

The celebrity spirits cabinet

Snoop Dogg

Cuca Fresca cachaca

The lounge rapper and shareholder in the spirits brand says he "has mad love for the Brazilian people and culture" and, particularly, capirinha cocktails. How does he like to drink Cuca Fresca? "Naked." cucafrescaspirit.com

Ryan Reynolds Aviation Gin

How seriously does the Canadian actor take gin production? "The citrus fruits are misted using only the tears of the owner, me." Ryan Reynolds. aviationgin.com

Matthew McConaughey

Wild Turkey bourbon

How earnest is the US actor about his job as the company's creative director? "I want to get my hands in the clay of how we tell the story." Very earnest then. wildturkeybourbon.com

Rita Ora Próspero Tequila

The singer and brand's chief creative partner, right, says she was attracted by the chance to work with the industry's "few

female master tequila distillers". She advises drinking Próspero while listening to Madonna's *Holiday*. prosperotequila.com

Dan Aykroyd

Crystal Head Vodka

What's the symbolism behind the skull-shaped bottle, Dan? "The enlightenment of humankind to the spiritual awakening which can happen in all of us." And we thought it had something to do with hangovers. drizly.com

David Beckham

Haig Club

Although Beckham didn't drink it himself — "being an athlete I've never got into that" — Haig was apparently the favourite whisky of his grandfather. David loves the blue bottle. haigclub.com

