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SPIRITED AWAY

What connects an A-list Hollywood director with the national liquor of Bolivia, now available exclusively in Mayfair? Steven Soderbergh gives us the lowdown

BY JONATHAN WHILEY





Film still from *Che*

Madrid, June 2007. The dog days of summer are yet to arrive and Steven Soderbergh is in the mood to party. The Oscar-winning director is hosting a start-up soirée ahead of shooting *Che*, his epic two-part biopic about Marxist revolutionary Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara.

The film, starring Benicio del Toro as the grizzled guerrilla leader, will become one of the 55-year-old’s most challenging projects. Critical acclaim didn’t translate to box office success and it recouped only half of its budget. The experience scarred American-born Soderbergh – whose films have grossed more than \$2 billion and include the likes of *Traffic*, *Erin Brockovich* and *Ocean’s Eleven* – and is still defining his career a decade on.

Enter stage left, Singani. The national spirit of Bolivia, dating back to 1530 when it was distilled in the Bolivian Andes, Soderbergh was given a bottle by his Bolivian casting director at the start-up party. “It had never been exported outside Bolivia and so what he ended up doing is buying a bottle on the black market in the Bolivian quarter in Madrid and smuggling it in,” he says.

They cracked open a bottle, serving it on the rocks. “It was one of those moments of coming into contact with something that you know you’re going to have a relationship with,” says Soderbergh. “I’ve had it happen with movies, I’ve had it happen with music, books, people. First I was like: ‘Wow, the bouquet of this is really interesting, very floral.’ Then I tried it and thought it was very active, complex on the palate, and then it just, like, vanishes. As a straight vodka drinker I was struck by the fact there was no second swallow.”

Soderbergh poured another glass immediately and began asking questions. “My immediate concern was whether we could set up a mule train to supply me and a couple of other people for the rest of the shoot,” he says. “We ended up, for the six months that we shot the film, creating this supply chain that followed us

everywhere we went from Spain to Puerto Rico to Mexico to Bolivia.”

By the end of the gruelling shoot, the crew didn’t want the love affair with Singani to end. They suggested Soderbergh become an importer to the US. “Not quite knowing what that entailed I said: ‘Why not, sure.’” A lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive process followed, working alongside the largest producer of Singani in Bolivia – a fourth generation family-owned estate. After four and a half years of refinement, Soderbergh’s Singani 63 was finally born.

“They have three types of Singani that they make in Bolivia; a white label, a black label and a triple distilled version, which is amazing,” he says. “They agreed to create a label for me specifically and the difference between their black label – which is their high end Singani in Bolivia – and the 63, is only the Casa Real estate grapes. It’s a sort of tighter cut of their black label.”

It has proved such a hit that last year Soderbergh flew to Santa Cruz in Bolivia with his daughter to launch his ‘63’ version. “Really weird, yeah, but kinda cool,” he says. “The thing came full circle.”

The London market is now firmly in Soderbergh’s sights with Manetta, the 1930s-inspired bar at Flemings Mayfair, the first in Europe to serve the spirit. “The conversation started about a year ago,” he says. “They reached out to us and said: ‘We really think we know what to do with this’. I don’t have any plans beyond what we’re doing in the UK and we are focused on London specifically.”

Soderbergh is in fine form on the launch night at Flemings Mayfair. He is holding court in Manetta, dressed in a smartly-cut stone suit and cradling a tumbler of his clear spirit distilled from the white Muscat of Alexandria grape. He is a cool, charismatic presence – just the right amount of Hollywood A-list. We find a quiet spot in the bar and revisit the making of *Che* a decade on. “That was a project [*Che*] that I really felt that if I was who I presented myself to be,



“My immediate concern was whether we could set up a mule train to supply me for the rest of the shoot”

that had to be done,” he says. “There are a lot of people who told me it would never get done and that I was wasting my time.

“When I insisted it could only be made in Spanish that added a layer of people saying: ‘You are definitely not going to be able to get that made. There is no way’. It just made no sense to me to make a movie about an anti-imperialist in the language of the imperialist. It didn’t make any sense. It was tricky. I see movies all the time that I know must have been more difficult to make than *Che* was... it was just a test of will.

“There were two ways to look at it. You could either lean into it and sort of get off on how difficult it was and embrace that and kind of enjoy that. Or you could be run over by it. There were people on the movie that ended up as roadkill. They got crushed. It altered me. I came out of it a different filmmaker. I think a better filmmaker. There was no way to get through it without reducing everything to its absolute essence. There just wasn’t time to do anything fancy. I really came out of it thinking: ‘That is kind of how I want to be now on everything’. It really changed me.

“You can look at my approach before and after that film and you can see a very clear break and a desire on my part to really strip things down and make them simpler. As challenging as it was, and frustrating as it was at times, I had to do it and it was an absolutely critical step in my evolution as a filmmaker.”

Time has given Soderbergh perspective; now he recognises that the scars from making the movie had a pattern. “They were the creative equivalent of tattoos in a way,” he says. “They were actually a part of me that would always be there and I could now reconcile myself with and realise the value of.” He says the same is often true of relationships. “My mom was – how I

describe her? – a free thinker. A difficult person to be close to in a lot of ways. She was somehow not quite tethered to this earth. For a long time, I felt I was more like my dad. My dad was an academic, he was a workaholic, he was extremely bright and a creative person, as was my mom. But I was closer to him, I got more attention from him. There were six people in the family, but he was a more traditional parental figure than my mom who was very elusive.

“It wasn’t until I was well into my 30s that I began to understand that I was actually a combination of both of my parents. The linearity that I inherited from my father, which gave me my focus and my drive, was crucial, but my mother’s abstract, non-linear approach to everything was also a really important ingredient to my creative life as well. There is no universe in which my mom could hold a normal job. It just wasn’t possible and I realised that I couldn’t either.

“I shared the same kind of sense of confinement that she had about all traditional roles and normal jobs. It took me a while because our relationship was sort of hard to define. I felt the same way about *Che*. In the immediate aftermath of it 10 years ago, I was ambivalent about it. The experience was hard. There were things about the movie I was happy with and things about the movie I wasn’t happy with. I didn’t know how I felt about it. It took me a while to process what had happened and extract the positive things.”

Singani was one of them. He says it was a “lifeline” during the filming of *Che*. “It was the trickiest shoot I have ever been involved with and it gave me – you sound like a total alcoholic when you say it – a sort of reward at the end of the day.”

Singani 63 cocktails are available exclusively at Flemings Mayfair, 7-12 Half Moon Street