

THE SPIRITS BUSINESS

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The road less travelled

Steven Soderbergh's independent spirit

Aye, robot

Cutting-edge tech steps out from behind the bar

Giant leap

The bars set to light up the night sky in 2019



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And... action!

More than your average celebrity-spirits partnership, filmmaker Steven Soderbergh has a deep-rooted connection with his Singani 63 brand, which he is aiming to bring to international audiences. By Amy Hopkins

Maverick filmmaker Steven Soderbergh has never been inclined to take the easy or obvious road. He spearheaded the independent cinema movement in the late 1980s with his feature-length directorial debut, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, and has since built a body of work that spans multiple genres, formats and cinematic styles.

The writer, director, producer and cinematographer has delighted audiences with blockbusters such as the *Ocean's* franchise, biopic *Erin Brockovich* and crime drama *Traffic*, for which he received the Academy Award for Best Director in 2000, as well as stripper comedy *Magic Mike*, iPhone-filmed psychological horror *Unsane* and murder mystery *Mosaic*, an interactive miniseries with its own app.

Now, Soderbergh's curiosity has taken him on a detour from the world of film and into the realm of spirits. In 2014, the auteur launched his own iteration of the native Bolivian spirit singani, titled Singani 63, and billed it as 'a Steven Soderbergh project in collaboration with Steven Soderbergh' – a tongue-in-cheek nod to his deep involvement with the brand.

Soderbergh was introduced to the grape-based drink by his Bolivian casting director while working on the film *Che* in 2008. "I had a very instantaneous positive reaction to it," he recalls, "beginning with its bouquet, which is unique and very floral. As a vodka drinker, this was not something I was accustomed to. And then there was this very active palate, with a lot of notes coming through, and a sort of invisible finish. It seemed to check a lot of boxes, and it felt like a more exciting alternative to what I was typically drinking."

LOVE AT FIRST TASTE

It was love at first taste for Soderbergh, who was supplied with sufficient quantities of the spirit to tide him over *Che*'s six-month filming schedule in Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Bolivia. But, he says: "I certainly was getting wistful about the fact that when I went back to the States I wasn't going to have access to this in any real quantity."

As such, a production team member recommended ("perhaps half seriously") that Soderbergh become an importer for singani, and Singani 63 Inc – a nod to his birth year – was founded soon after. He recalls: "Since I had no understanding of exactly what that would entail, I thought, yeah, why not? People do that all the time – right?" He quickly came to understand the arduous process of registering as a spirits importer in the US – a "lengthy, odd experience".

After securing the necessary licence and figuring out the logistics of shipping from a landlocked country, Soderbergh spoke with a New York brand-management firm about bringing Singani 63 to US drinkers. "This was the point when if I was not going to do this, I would have gotten out," he says. "It was the first time someone really laid out for me what was involved in trying to bring a brand to market." Despite being warned about the necessary time commitment and the fact that such a project was "potentially a money pit", Soderbergh persevered and Singani 63's first account was agreed in 2014.

CV: Steven Soderbergh

Born: Atlanta, GA, 1963

Based: New York, NY

Education: High school ("barely", he jokes)

CAREER TO DATE:

Since receiving the Palme d'Or at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival for his breakout feature, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, Soderbergh has served as writer, director, producer, cinematographer, and/or editor on more than 80 films and television shows. These include *Traffic*, for which he won the 2000 Academy Award for Best Director and, more recently, the films *Unsane* and *Logan Lucky*, and the miniseries/interactive app *Mosaic*.

He was introduced to singani while making his 2008 film *Che*, and founded Singani 63 Inc the following year to import the spirit. Singani 63 officially launched in the US in 2014, and has since launched in Bolivia and, most recently, the UK.



The liquid itself is created by Bolivia's Casa Real, the fourth-generation family-run distillery that commercialised the production of singani around 100 years ago. Casa Real only uses grapes grown on its estate to distil Singani 63, which Soderbergh describes as a "turbo version" of the distillery's high-end 'black label' singani – distilled from estate and co-operative-grown grapes.

Speaking to Soderbergh, his passion for both his brand and the broader spirits industry becomes clear. "One of the most enjoyable aspects of this has been learning about a business that I had no concept of," he claims. "All bars and restaurants are completely ruined for me now. I can't not view any place I enter as an opportunity to find something out I didn't know about before, and that means analysing the back bar, analysing the menu and asking how they arrived at whatever cocktail programme they are laying out for people. So it's impossible for me to just go to a bar and relax now. That's over."

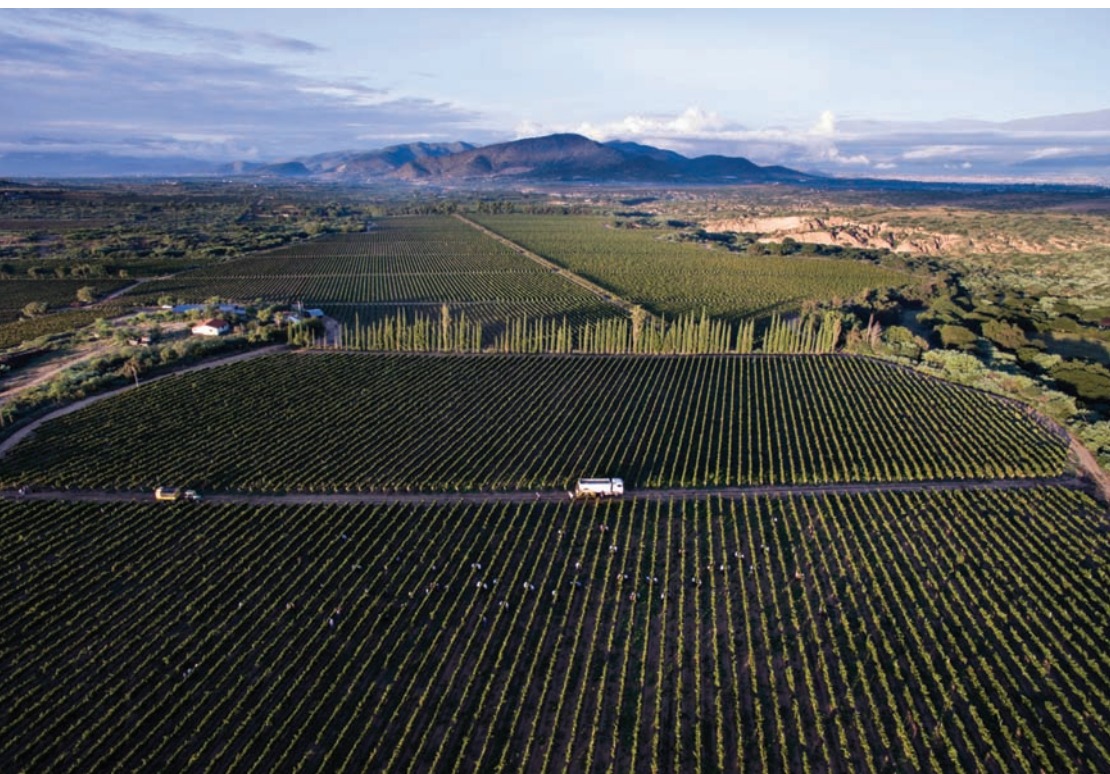
He compares the film and spirits industries, saying that while both are "built on relationships and talent", the latter is "like shooting a movie every day of your life – there's just no break". This echoes the warning Soderbergh was given by actor and Crystal Head Vodka founder Dan Aykroyd. "He said: 'If you're not willing to show up for things, just don't bother doing this –

you have to show up.' And he's really right; you have put yourself out there and talk to people, meet with people, every opportunity you get."

"It's sort of like campaigning for an election that's never going to take place. You have to do it all the time. The competition is so intense and so direct that you know if you're not working on this, the person you are in competition with is and they will just run right over you."

Soderbergh also praises the lack of a "zero-sum attitude" in drinks, which he became "accustomed to feeling in the entertainment industry". He adds: "[For] the people who work

'Crystal Head Vodka founder Dan Aykroyd said: "If you're not willing to show up for things, just don't bother doing this – you have to show up." And he's really right'



The estate in Tarija, Bolivia, where Singani 63 is made...

behind the bar, the business becomes very self-selecting and weeds out assholes. Like, you can't work in a job where you interact with customers and they don't feel good about that interaction – if you can't pull that off, you're not gonna make it; no-one is going to hire you. So the people I've met who are out there in the trenches, making drinks and creating programmes, are all super nice."

The on-trade is where Singani 63 has found its biggest advocates. "We have reached a point in the States where our penetration has been very successful in the hardcore mixology community," observes Soderbergh. "With a small team, we have done a really good job of hitting those accounts and those markets that are considered the top cocktail-culture areas in the country."

GO AFTER THE CUSTOMER

With the support of influential names such as Leyenda co-owner Ivy Mix, Singani 63 has secured around 1,300 accounts in 22 states. From 2016-2017, the brand "grew by 100%", and is expected to "grow probably by 75%" from 2017-2018. "It's starting to take its own momentum in ways that are encouraging," says Soderbergh. Now, he wants to "push beyond the on-trade and go directly after the consumer". Singani 63 has also set its sights on international distribution and recently launched in the UK.

However, Soderbergh believes the growth of his brand will be stymied if its category is

not anchored in law. He claims that since singani has "one of the narrowest criteria in the world", with production specifications even stricter than those of Champagne, its definition should be separate to the broader 'brandy' category. Singani uses only one grape variety – Muscat of Alexandria – which is grown and distilled at 5,200 feet above sea level in a designated 20,000-acre area of southern Bolivia.

According to Soderbergh, consumers will not fully understand or appreciate the category if the US government does not approve its definition. "If someone asks, 'well, what is it like?' And you tell them it's not really like anything, that sounds like me just giving a sales pitch. To have, in this case, the US government acknowledge that it's not really like anything else, which is why it has

'With a small team, we have done a really good job of hitting those accounts and those markets that are considered the top cocktail culture areas in the country'



...and the grapes are picked

its own category, that frames things up for people in a very different way. We spend more time telling people what it's not than what it is, and that's frustrating."

Singani 63 is now working with Leblon cachaça's lobbyists, who successfully petitioned the US government to recognise the Brazilian spirit category in 2013. "That took 10 years," notes Soderbergh. "We are four years into our petition process and I view that as a critical marker in our timeline." His team is in the process of resubmitting the application for category recognition, and Soderbergh is encouraged by the progress being made. "Put it this way, the conversations are continuing," he says. "It could be worse – the door could be slammed and that would be it. But it's still alive and I view that as a positive. I was warned that this is one of the hardest things you can do."

Soderbergh is embarking on an international education mission to introduce drinkers to a complex and largely unknown spirit group. He has already created a campaign centred on the idea of singani being the "new category in town", but will only launch it if and when the spirit's appellation is made official.

Singani's unfamiliar flavour profile and its diverse uses could make his task even more difficult – after all, it's easier to communicate something that can be pigeonholed. But storytelling is what Soderbergh does best: "When it comes to the overarching narrative of a brand, and then from a creative standpoint in terms of how to sell the brand, that at least I felt comfortable with. I know what I like and I know where to go to get ideas for that stuff. So that part at least I wasn't a complete neophyte."



Soderbergh is relishing creating a narrative for Singani 63

Like Soderbergh's films, individuality is central to Singani 63's identity, which interweaves madcap imagery and tongue-in-cheek messages with interesting facts, bringing a 500-year-old category into the modern era. "I wanted the voice of the brand to be specific and I wanted it to be fun," he says. "I wanted to take advantage of the fact that it's just us and we don't have to deal with the corporate attitudes that a lot of brands do. We can be as weird as we like, and I like that part a lot."

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Despite the enormity of the task at hand, Soderbergh is pleased he opted for the road less travelled. He notes: "As difficult as it is to create this narrative from scratch for people, I'm happy at least that it is a new thing and not another version of a spirit that already exists in the minds of drinkers. And I'm not going head to head with companies that have massive resources and infrastructure that I could never compete with."

"The idea of me launching a Tequila... I'd rather be fighting this fight and educating people about something they have never heard of than convincing them that the nth iteration of this staple spirit is something they

should pay attention to. I would rather be in the situation we are in."

Soderbergh's involvement with Singani 63 is more than your average celebrity-spirit partnership, and a Casamigos-style deal is not on the cards. "I didn't get into this to get bought out," he stresses. "There's no version of this brand in which I'm not running the company, creating the content and supervising all the details of how it is marketed and sold."

"Would it be nice to have a partner who could help me with expanding distribution? That would be fantastic. But my goal is to

'I didn't get into this to get bought out. There's no version of this brand in which I'm not running the company, creating the content and supervising all the details of how it is marketed and sold'

turn this into a sustainable business – it's not to cash out."

Soderbergh's daughter now works for the company, enhancing its connection to his name. "I'm as sceptical as anyone about the paid endorsement stuff, but I think people understand now that's not what's happening here."

More than simply a 'passion project', Soderbergh's connection with singani is seemingly a metaphysical one. He explains: "I, by accident, stumbled on a spirit that in the cocktail context seems to operate with the same kind of fluidity that I've been operating with in the film business, where I can be cinematographer, writer, producer, director. I still think it's weird that singani and I seem to share this Swiss army knife quality."

Singani, he claims, is also an egoless spirit that contributes to the "communal experience" of a cocktail. "That's always the approach that I have tried to take in my work. Everything I have witnessed since I began making films was that ego is the enemy of all problem solving and it's the primary culprit in people's self destruction. I have just seen that over and over and over again. So it seems a very interesting coincidence that I hooked up with this particular spirit." sb