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The Untold Inside Story of  
the World's Most Successful Tequila

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THE  
PATRÓN  
WAY

From Fantasy to Fortune—Lessons on Taking  
Any Business from Idea to Iconic Brand

ILANA EDELSTEIN

WITH

SAMANTHA MARSHALL



NEW YORK CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO  
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***Dedicated to:***

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Anyone who doesn't have a dream of their own:  
follow the one you love and experience  
a joyful personal metamorphosis as you help fulfill  
his or her passion. It's an extraordinary leap of faith that  
could result in the journey of a lifetime.  
You'll never know unless you jump in with both feet.

# Contents

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Foreword by John Paul DeJoria

Acknowledgments

**PART I  
R&D**

CHAPTER 1  
**Out of the Blue**

CHAPTER 2  
**A Brief History of Tequila**

CHAPTER 3  
**The Taste Test**

**PART II  
BRAND BUILDING**

CHAPTER 4  
**Hollywood Star**

CHAPTER 5  
**By the Seat of Our Pants**

CHAPTER 6  
**The High Life**

**PART III  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

CHAPTER 7  
**A Rude Awakening**

CHAPTER 8  
**Loose Ends**

CHAPTER 9  
**Patrón Today**

APERITIF  
**Marking the Patrón Way**

Notes

Index

# Foreword

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PATRÓN HAS ACHIEVED iconic status as a brand, with its own celebrated culture and millions of loyal fans in more than 100 different countries. Everyone knows it by name and by its distinctively designed bottle with the world's very best tequila inside. Patrón has been featured in almost 200 hip-hop, rap, country, and pop songs, and is universally celebrated as a symbol of the finest that life has to offer. But until now, some of the story of how it came to be has never been told. Anyone who has ever tried Patrón tequila will be fascinated to learn some of the love, adventure, and turmoil that went into the early creation of this singular spirit. Some even surprised me.

I first met Ilana in 1989, the same year I started Patrón with her life partner, Martin Crowley. Not only did she possess an immense personal charm and beauty, she clearly had a powerful combination of business savvy and creativity. Ilana was already successful in her own business, and her quiet confidence and intelligence added a level of class, sophistication, and credibility to many things in Martin's life.

Ilana was there day and night for so many aspects of this incredible adventure, whether it was creating a celebrity rodeo event that people are talking about to this day, or orchestrating the most unique party the Santa Monica Air Museum has ever seen. Living and breathing the Patrón dream together with Martin, she was so much a part of the Patrón story. Seeing Martin and Ilana in their element together, some might think they could be "Mr. and Mrs. Patrón." Even the way this couple played together was very unique.

Ever the incredible hostess, Ilana came to symbolize the generosity of spirit that is the Patrón lifestyle. Martin and Ilana lived to make every moment memorable. Their home was beautifully decorated, where no detail was too small for their attention, from the party invitations to the exquisitely handblown glasses that served up the vintage wine and tequila.

Their parties were legendary. I should know. My wife, Eloise, and I attended many. We graciously excused ourselves by the time things got too wild, but we always took away with us a feel-good buzz from the amazing food and stimulating conversation, which we enjoyed with Patrón. And we always woke up the next morning feeling great, with the happiest of memories. I will leave it to Ilana to tell you some of the stories about what happened after we left.

Patrón redefined the way people drink tequila. We created a connoisseur's ultrapremium brand in a category where none existed before. It was never about unhealthy excess. It was about celebration. Some of the way Ilana and Martin entertained made you love life and feel more connected to the world. It brought out the best in all of us.

We all contributed in developing and introducing Patrón to the world. Created in Mexico, then headquartered in the Caribbean, and made a world brand, together Martin and I took the business to a level we never imagined possible in those early days. Martin was the creative genius behind Patrón the product and its unique presentation. But, together, Martin and Ilana were part of Patrón's early beating heart.

Ilana did so much for Patrón behind the scenes, from the nuts and bolts of setting up operations in the early days to the creative flourishes of designing the Patrón Girls' costumes; from conceiving major promotional events to training staff and personally answering every e-mail from our customers. She had a way of taking the edge off Martin, enabling him to present his best self. Whether meeting



with factory owners or with world leaders with Martin, Ilana was our brand's constant ambassador. Everyone recognized her, and the life she lived was emblematic of Patrón.

Ilana tells her story with grace, compassion, and intelligence. This is no ordinary business memoir. This story is a romance full of drama, intrigue, beauty, and heartbreak. It is unfortunate that Ilana was left out of many things she deserved. Not that she has ever once complained ... she is so super cool about that.

Throughout these past two decades there have been many, many highs, and a few lows. But there's something in this book for everyone, from devout lovers of our brand to students of our industry, and business in general. You'll come to understand the commitment and passion that go into creating and shaping an authentic brand that's truly an industry game changer. You'll learn about the trailblazers who made it happen. You'll experience it all through the memories and views of Ilana. And while I don't always share in Ilana's memories or views, I'm sure you'll be deeply touched by the selflessness and humanity of this magnificent woman.

This talented lady has produced an enthralling account of the early days of putting together and building a spirits brand from scratch. In this book, you will learn her perspective of how it started and became the world's number one ultrapremium tequila as well as one of the world's most successful brands ... PATRÓN!

Peace, love, and happiness.

JOHN PAUL DEJORIA  
Cofounder, Chairman of the Board,  
and a proud owner of Patrón Spirits  
International AG

# Acknowledgments

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John Paul DeJoria (cofounder and owner, Patrón Spirits Co.): Thank you for everything we've shared over the last 24 years ... all the fun, encouragement, support, enthusiasm, love, and magic you bring everything in your sphere. It is a huge endowment to all of us. Thank you, JP, with humility and enormous gratitude.

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Noah, Caidyn, Casey, and Cole Ovsiowitz (my grandnephew and grandnieces): To the most beautiful and precious four people in my life, you fill me up with pleasure and delight, and I learn from you constantly. Thank heavens for you guys. Please know you can count on me always. I love you so much, my angels. (Noah, remember you need to wait until you're 16 to read this book.)

Nina Svele (the best friend anyone could ever have): Your friendship is one of my most prized possessions. Thank you for being your beautiful self and for *everything* you bring to my life ... and it's so much! You've been there with me through it all, and I honestly could not have done it without

you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you.

Ted Simpkins, Steve Wallace, Daymond John, Warwick Miller, Caroline and Tom Law, and Greg Gann: My heartfelt thanks and deepest appreciation for your contributions, not only to these written pages, but for being a part of the amazing rocket ride.

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To the many fans and supporters of the brand, especially the front lines, a huge and embracing hug! And to Martin: Thank you for the ride of my life!

**PART I**

**R & D**

# Out of the Blue

MILES OF DUSTY Mexican roads were getting monotonous. The love of my life, Martin Crowley, was just a few days into his monthly buying trip for his new company, Architectural Products Marketing (APM), and was sourcing exquisitely handcrafted tiles, carved stone, marble, ceramics, furnishings, and other architectural pieces from dozens of out-of-the-way factories and quarries in the countryside. The plan was to bring them back to sell to designers and architects building beautiful homes for the millionaires and billionaires living in Beverly Hills and along California's Gold Coast. APM's customers loved his unique and refined taste, and he was doing a roaring trade.

Martin knew exactly where to find the best artisans in Mexico and was an avid collector of objets d'art. He had an eye like no one I'd ever met and the ability to envision how any piece would work in interior and exterior design and landscaping. He was also a brilliant negotiator and could bargain down the price so that the product was practically being given away. But doing that required him to cover a lot of ground, and he was getting exhausted and lonely. To keep himself company, Martin had found a stone carved statue of a *hotei*—a bald, laughing Buddha with a big potbelly. This particular one had a missing toe, and Martin kept him on the car seat next to him. It must have brought him luck.

Whenever he went across the border, he always hired the same driver, Felipe, a local guy who spoke English well and knew the terrain intimately. Martin didn't speak Spanish, and perhaps that was just as well, because when he did speak to anyone Latino, his English suddenly had a Spanish accent. On this particular day of road travel, the pair found themselves in the mountains of Jalisco, about two hours from Guadalajara, smack in the middle of the country.

Lost in the passing landscape, Martin found himself flashing back to a conversation he'd had with his APM business partner and friend, the entrepreneur John Paul DeJoria, earlier that month. Martin and John Paul, or JP, as he is also known, had been drinking shots of Chinaco Tequila when they began speculating about which tequila the aristocrats of Mexico drank. As two men of curiosity and taste, they had this type of conversation regularly. Martin promised to check it out on his next trip to Mexico, and it just so happened that here he was, right in the heart of tequila country.

If he was going to find the finest tequila anywhere, this had to be the place. The highlands overlooking the valley of the Rio Grande provide the perfect conditions for growing blue agave—a plant from the lily family with a core that looks like a giant pineapple, a *pina*. Harvested and processed a certain way, agave is distilled for the production of tequila. But more on that later.

## FIELDS OF BLUE

Welcoming a distraction, Martin instructed Felipe to stop at every tequila factory along the way to check out its product. They drove through miles and miles of rolling blue agave fields. God knows how much tequila Martin ended up consuming on this day trip. He lost count. But he was sober enough to remember one extraordinary place.

As soon as he entered the factory, he knew it was different. It was rather small and unusually clean with wide open spaces and plenty of light and fresh air. Above all, there was a noticeable sense of calm. The property, situated near the highest point of the region, consisted of sparse old adjoining buildings on the side of a hill overlooking a muddy creek. The distillery had been owned by this family for generations, and they still made tequila the old-fashioned way, exactly as they had for 50 years. The place was a complete throwback. The factory had hardly been updated, and apart from a single customer in Japan, their tequila could not be found anywhere outside Mexico.

Its unique flavor was the result of the high-quality agave that was used and the love, method, and care with which it was made. The only ingredient used was premium *Agave tequilana*—Blue Weber agave—and nothing else. At that time, few, if any, factories produced pure agave. Something would always be added to dilute this expensive ingredient, or shortcuts would be adopted in an attempt to replicate the aged flavor, such as adding oak chips in the barrels to quickly create an oak color and flavor.

Martin took one sip of this tequila and knew he didn't need to visit any more factories. Nothing could possibly top this. He bought a few bottles, wrapped up the rest of his buying trip, and headed back to his funky little guest cottage in Hermosa Beach, California.

## SPANISH FLY

People assume that Patrón has been around forever, but it was late in the year of 1989 when Martin first discovered what led to this liquid treasure.

By then, we had been together only a few months, but it was one of those once-in-a-lifetime love affairs in which you connect instantly and on every level: physically, spiritually, and intellectually. We'd met in our middle years, already established and leading what we'd assumed were rich and full lives. I was a transplant from my native South Africa, having come to California in the late 1970s to pursue a free-spirited, independent life and live close to my cherished sister and brother-in-law, Sharon and Len. After growing up in a parochial community and chafing under the restrictive rules of apartheid, I relished my newfound freedom in America and saw opportunities to flourish around every corner, eventually building a thriving financial consulting firm.

Martin was a native Californian who'd left his broken home while he was still in his teens, seeking adventure in the Peace Corps, racing his sailing boat around the world, and building a small hotel and restaurants. He was a consummate connoisseur and entrepreneur who could turn any passion into a business. Not only did he flow with endless brilliant ideas, he followed through and actually brought them to life. Possessing more drive and focus than anyone I'd ever met, this was a man with an expansive imagination and the extraordinary ability to turn fantasy into successful tangible reality. Finding our soul mates seemed inconceivable to us, since we had lived our lives without giving it one thought. It was the first time either of us had felt so truly and completely loved, and our world suddenly got bigger, brighter, and better in every way.

We'd met through a mutual friend at a wine tasting. Even in that first flirtatious conversation we had, I learned so much from him about wine. Little did we know at the time that sipping only the very best was to be the beginning of a major theme in our life together.

After that first encounter, we were rarely apart. At this point, we were not yet cohabiting, but we might as well have been. When he wasn't at my place on the Marina Peninsula, I was at his. When he traveled to Mexico, we spoke several times a day. He'd been working so hard to build up his business

and recover from a devastating bankruptcy. I'd missed him terribly and couldn't wait to see him again.

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When I walked in the door of his beach house, Martin didn't say anything about the tequila, but he had a gleam in his eye. I could tell he had a surprise for me, but there'd be no getting it out of him until he was good and ready. We had our usual reunion: incredible sex, twice; a gourmet meal Martin lovingly prepared; and a bottle of vintage red wine between us. We were relaxed and happy. It was good to have him back.

When I gently teased him for details about his trip, Martin gave me a sly smile, walked over to his still unpacked bag, and pulled out what looked like one of those dusty old decanters a pirate might have taken a swig from 200 years ago.

"Martin, there's a dead fly in the bottle!" I said, pointing to the deceased insect.

"I know. It's Spanish fly, the aphrodisiac," he replied suggestively.

"Really? Let's get it out. I want to try it," I said, knowing full well it was nothing of the kind.

"Forget the fly, honey; you have to taste this tequila," he said, pouring some into a brandy snifter and handing it to me.

"Please, baby, don't ask me to drink tequila. You know the mere smell of the stuff makes me gag.

It was true. As was the case with millions of others, a night of overindulgence in tequila years earlier had made me so sick that I wanted to die; it was the foulest hangover imaginable, and I never wanted to live through it again. I couldn't be anywhere near the stuff without heaving. Besides, hard liquor wasn't my thing; fine wine and champagne were my preference. But Martin's enthusiasm was infectious.

"Come on, hon. I promise you, this tequila is different. You've never tasted anything like it."

"Okay, but I am definitely not downing all of that."

"No, you are not going to shoot it. Just sip it like a fine cognac."

Reluctantly, I put my lips to the glass. What struck me first was the lack of nauseating, gasolinelike tequila fumes. There was a clean and intoxicating aroma to the liquid. I took a tiny sip, and as with fine wine, I let it linger in my mouth for a moment before swallowing.

"Wow!" was all I could say.

For Martin, that was enough. He knew how much I had hated tequila, so I was the perfect control group for this experiment. His discovery had passed the Ilana taste test with flying colors.

A few years later, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Martin described Patrón as so much more than just a taste; it was an experience: "It's a feeling you get—it's different from drinking vodka or gin. It's more of a psychotropic effect, whether real or imagined."

Martin was able to make his discovery because he was open to what the universe had to offer. His senses were alive, so the moment he tasted the tequila, he understood perfectly the value of what he had found. Many others would have enjoyed a drink, moved on, and forgotten about it, but Martin knew that what he had in his hands was incomparable and that if he felt that way, millions of others would too.

To this day, Patrón is the only spirit I drink, precisely for that reason. Its pure and delicious high cannot be compared to anything else. This is not some high-octane beverage for college kids on spring break. It is so much more refined. No matter how you choose to drink it—mixed as a margarita or sipped straight over ice with lime—you can taste the difference and always experience a cool, smooth finish. The burn that had become synonymous with tequila was gone. Patrón goes down clean and crisp, with no regrets the next morning.

# THE GODFATHER

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We spent the rest of the evening and the early hours of the morning dreaming up ways this product could be marketed. As design junkies, creating and re-creating was something we loved to do together. Suddenly, we had a new project. Martin came up with the name, Patrón. He wanted a word that meant the same in all the Romance languages. *Patrón* means the good boss or godfather, the guy you go to when you want to marry off your daughter. We liked the aristocratic, dignified way it sounded. The word was easy to pronounce, easy to remember, and portrayed the idea of being the master.

We started modifying and redesigning the bottle. Our prototype was a rather crude and somewhat deformed phallic design with an uneven, elongated neck that was at an angle and a glass stopper. Martin and I were enamored with perfume bottles and packaging and had amassed an extensive assortment between us, so we hauled them out of the bathroom and studied their shapes and labels. We were taking the lead from the fragrance industry, which creates a sense of occasion through exquisite presentation. No one had ever spent that much on packaging in the spirits industry—it almost matched the price of the contents—but as far as we were concerned, it was necessary for the exterior to capture and accurately reflect what was inside. The brand needed a handcrafted look that would suggest that the package's contents were precious and rare. If additional investment was required to create a sense of luxury worthy of Patrón, so be it.

I found a green ribbon and tied it around the bottle's neck while Martin sketched possible labels. He had a little golden honeybee among his hodgepodge of trinkets (which I still have) and came up with the idea of using it as an emblem. Bees are magical creatures. Martin and I consciously tried to be in the moment, so “bee in the moment” wasn't much of a leap. It became one of our marketing taglines for Patrón. Purely as an afterthought, the bee also suggested that the contents of the bottle were irresistible, like nectar.

We knew instinctively that the packaging must creatively, truthfully, and precisely reflect the quality and experience of the contents. For Martin, it wasn't just about marketing; it was his life's philosophy. Years later, looking through some old papers, I came across a handwritten note from Martin that perfectly sums up the significance he gave to beauty in all things:

*The divine energy put into a true work of art is captured and then radiates back into the environment. The more beauty we surround ourselves with, the more God's creative energy we are exposed to and can metabolize into our own being and synergistically grow with the beautiful and loving energy.*

He then signed it with a phrase he used repeatedly: “Truth and beauty are lovers.”

Martin knew that design is so much more than just a look. It also has the power to create a powerful emotion in the consumer. It's an approach that makes the difference between iconic consumer brands such as Coke, Chanel No. 5, even Campbell's Soup and just another product that gets lost in the crowd.

Once we were on a roll, there was no stopping us. We were both guilty of succumbing to designer's disease. At one point, after hours of tinkering, we sat back and looked at the little bottle, and Martin turned to me, sighed wistfully, and said, “Wouldn't it be wild if this became the top-selling tequila in the world?”

The only problem was that neither of us knew a thing about the liquor industry.



The next night, we went to dinner at John Paul DeJoria's house in Beverly Hills. People know JP mainly as the owner of John Paul Mitchell Systems. He's the handsome, swarthy guy with the beard and ponytail featured in all the magazine ads, along with his exquisite wife, Eloise, a blonde Texan beauty. But what many people may not realize is that John Paul is a savvy investor with a hand in multiple business and philanthropic ventures. It's as if he has some sort of sixth sense about what will succeed, and almost everything he touches turns to platinum.

In John Paul's words, he was the "bank" in his partnership with Martin. This successful business marriage led to a friendship among the four of us, so we were often at one another's homes dining or partying. One of the few conditions JP asked of Martin was that whatever they did together should always be fun. He understood perfectly that a brand is only as good as the quality of the people involved. He shared our deeply held belief that what separates a good product from a great one are the intangible but powerful forces of the human spirit. For this and many other reasons, I adore John Paul and Eloise.

Martin brought the mocked-up bottle of tequila to dinner with us, with the fly removed of course, and poured John Paul a shot in a brandy snifter.

"Here it is, JP, the finest tequila in Mexico, and I believe with the help of tequila master Francisco Alcaraz, it can be made even better. I don't know what tequila the aristocrats drink now, but I do know what they'll be drinking in the near future."

"Wow. Martin, you're right; this is it!" exclaimed John Paul. "We're partners. Go back to Mexico, get Francisco involved, and buy a thousand cases. Worst case, if it doesn't sell, we'll have the world's best tequila for ourselves and our friends and family."

### **A DEAL THEY COULDN'T REFUSE**

Soon afterward, Martin went back to the factory with Felipe and made the owners an offer. He would make a commitment to their entire production, providing all the bottling and packaging materials, but they couldn't sell to anyone else. We hadn't sold a dime's worth of tequila yet; his goal was to tie up the source. The family owners agreed to his terms. They must have thought Martin was a complete madman, but who would say no to a 100 percent guarantee of sales?

Back in Hermosa Beach, we continued designing. Martin and I bounced more ideas off each other in a creative frenzy, feeding off each other's imaginations as we took one concept and then raised the bar to the next level and the next. We were literally consumed with creating something that would do justice to this superb product. Like proud parents, we pampered and reveled in our newborn. Our efforts were truly joint and completely intertwined; enhancing our baby was our singular goal. There was no competing or even differentiating; we were just two impassioned beings, trusting their intent and creativity and surrendering to everything in the process. As much as we recognized each other's imprint on our progeny, we thrilled and marveled at what the magical mixture of our creative DNA had brought to life.

Little by little, our packaging evolved into the ultrapremium gift look you see on the shelves today. By then, with the help of Ron Wong, a stellar graphic designer and friend, we'd already designed the labels, with wording, ribbons, a booklet, tissue paper, and a box. Ron also created a usable mock-up of

the bottle for us. Fortunately, Martin was able to use his sourcing expertise to find Cesar Hernandez, owner of the only remaining glassblowing factory in Mexico where they still used artisans to handblow each bottle. Perfecting our bottle design was a lengthy process of trial and error. The bottles were made from 100 percent recycled glass, not too dissimilar from the original hive-shaped bottle, with glass stoppers, like true decanters. Later, Martin added the punt at the bottom, as on wine bottles and had the word *Patrón* embossed in the glass on the side.

It was an attention to detail that simply was not done in those days. The liquor giants spent staggering amounts of money developing a new product. They hired “teams” of experts and consultants from every avenue, who essentially “constructed” a product on the basis of their evaluation and interpretation of analyses, statistics, feasibilities, trends, and so on. Charts are used and probabilities are applied, but unfortunately, no amount of time, money, research, or labor will produce a product that possesses soul, personality, a true identity, or any of the essential elements that captivate. Those are intangibles that cannot be bought, manufactured, manipulated, or even faked; they seem to evolve purely organically when intention and desire, honesty and humility, humor and creativity, and passion and fun are all present, balanced, and in harmony.

The same giants sank millions into print and billboard ads that left no lasting impression. One notable exception was Absolut Vodka, which had incorporated art into its bottle design, initially commissioning Andy Warhol in 1986 to create the first of many decorated bottle “collections.” This campaign reflected the premium quality of the vodka, which was its own boutique brand in a market that had long been dominated by corporate brands. Although Martin and I were aware of Absolut’s campaign at the time and admired some of its more clever and beautiful pieces, we were content to operate in our own creative bubble, making sure we didn’t miss a thing in our painstaking bottle and package design.

Friends who came to dine at Martin’s beach cottage could not get over the number of Patrón bottle prototypes we had lining the windowsills and covering just about every flat surface. They oohed and aahed over the design flourishes, and we made a mental note of every single reaction. I wrapped a neon green ribbon around the necks of our favorites, and we edited the selection down until our final design matched our exacting taste and standards, incorporating all the elements we knew our discerning customers might appreciate. During those earliest Patrón parties, our home was our design lab, and we had our very own group of market survey participants who were delighted to give us their feedback.

Next, Martin began the process of trademarking the name and, later, the bottle design—the second trademark ever issued for a bottle design, after Coke. It was an ingenious act of incredible prescience. We also shopped, researched, and procured sources for the labels, the boxes, the ribbons, and every other accoutrement that would elevate this product above everything else that was currently on the market. Martin spent hours on the phone with the makers of those products, first ensuring top quality and then squeezing the price down as far as he could. With so many items sourced from different corners of the world, we began to realize that every penny counted.

It was the first half of 1990, and sales of our first shipment were slow, but momentum gradually started to build. We were at the start of a bad recession, and no one had ever paid \$47 for a bottle of tequila. People laughed. They couldn’t decide if we were being audacious or insane. No one had ever seen tequila presented in this manner. They definitely hadn’t tasted anything like it before. This was top shelf. Martin used to say, “People would always find money for their indulgences, no matter what the cost.” We were in our own bubble. We didn’t have any competitors. No one was doing anything like this, so we weren’t looking over our shoulders; we were simply following our own best instincts.

## BACK TO BASICS

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Tequila has been around since the Spanish conquered Mexico, but it had long since been cheapened by mass market producers. By keeping it pure and using only the finest blue agave, we were simply going back to the basics, making Patrón the way tequila was produced by the conquistadores. We envisioned that Patrón would be marketed much the way a fine cognac or single malt whiskey was sold—to connoisseurs with a discerning palate.

Not knowing where to start, we chose the route that made the most sense to us, romancing and educating what we called the front line: bartenders and club and restaurant owners. Everywhere we went, Martin would carry a bottle of Patrón with us. On a typical evening, we'd walk into a Los Angeles-area restaurant, usually around 5 p.m., before it got busy, and take our place at the bar. We would show the bartender our bottle and ask for two glasses. Martin would pour a shot of Patrón into one glass and invite the bartender to pour a shot of whatever he considered the finest tequila on his shelf into the other glass, which we would pay for. He would then instruct the unsuspecting bartender to sip the tequila, not shoot it. No matter what other tequila was chosen, the immediate response after tasting both was always the same: "Wow!" It never failed.

We did this hundreds of times. Educating the bar staff became our top priority. Tequila had always been a spirit that was consumed to get drunk; it was never considered a refined, exquisite-tasting elixir. We realized we had to reverse an entire population's perception of tequila. It was all about legwork, personal interaction, and pure gut instinct. With those results, it wasn't difficult to arrange on-premise promotions. This is how Patrón was introduced to the world. The odds were stacked against us as no one had ever paid that much for tequila before, much less sipped it. Then again, neither had anyone met the owner of a brand like this.

We eventually got to know the owners and staff of countless bars, restaurants, and liquor stores throughout the Los Angeles area. We arranged for "Patrón Nights," hosting prix fixe dinners that paired dishes with Patrón-based cocktails. These events took place at least a decade before it was commonplace to do tastings and pairings with spirit brands. If anything, this was done only for fine vintage wine tastings.

One of our early adopters, in 1991, was Lula Cocina Mexicana on Main Street in Santa Monica, one of the more popular Mexican places and still a major establishment in that trendy shopping and dining district. We took over a portion of the restaurant and offered a set menu that included a margarita before dinner, Patrón Silver served ice cold and straight up with lime to accompany ceviche scallops, Patrón Anejo to go with mole chicken, and Patrón XO Cafe, our coffee-flavored tequila, to complement a rich crème brûlée.

Martin and I were there to meet, greet, and eat with the 30 discerning diners who packed the event. Lula was thrilled because it brought more customers to her restaurant, and we were happy because it enabled us to introduce our brand in a controlled setting that conveyed the idea that Patrón was a gourmet's spirit meant to be sipped as an aperitif or digestif and to accompany a great meal in the same manner as a fine Bordeaux. The event was so successful that Lula had us back every couple of months and arranged for similar events to take place in the half dozen other restaurants she owned in the area.

But our up-close and personal approach wasn't just for the bars and restaurants. Martin also focused on building a relationship with retailers throughout Los Angeles. We became friends with about a dozen liquor and specialty store owners, socializing and dining with them and receiving their special attention in return. Even though their spaces were relatively small, Martin persuaded them to

put in floor stacks of Patrón: cases of product piled high on the aisle floor to grab the attention of shoppers. The practice is usually limited to supermarkets, which have extra space, so by doing this in the smaller shops we made our brand really stand out. Although we never discounted Patrón, we'd often include some swag with the purchases.

One local retailer, Steve Wallace of Wally's Wine & Spirits, was and is well known in LA for putting together a year-end catalog of fabulous arrangements with gourmet treats, vintage wines, champagnes, and spirits. Steve included us in the arrangements, which was perfect because it directly associated us with only the most high-end products and put in consumers' minds the idea that drinking Patrón was an occasion.

All these relationships helped. We were getting people hooked and creating a following. We helped the front lines of retail establishments, restaurants, and bars create buzz with events and promotions, and they in turn became our best marketers.

With so many boots on the ground, word soon spread about this amazing new tequila. There's nothing like true passion and conviction when you're selling a product. Our enthusiasm for Patrón went viral across Southern California the old-fashioned way: word of mouth. Friends of Patrón genuinely loved this brand. It became the only thing they would drink.

## THE STANDOUT

While Martin and I were promoting Patrón to restaurant and bar owners, John Paul was using every opportunity to introduce it in celebrity circles, and he never went out without a bottle in each hand.

Martin was incredibly fortunate to have JP as his partner. It was through him that Patrón landed its first distributor, Wine Warehouse, based in Southern California. They were small and regional, but the advantage was that until then they carried wine exclusively, so this was the first and only spirit on their books. Rather than being buried among 50 other brands of spirit, Patrón stood out. Turns out, it's exactly what was needed in those early days.

JP's contacts and our own work in the trenches all helped tremendously. There was an undercurrent building in Los Angeles, and the buzz had made Patrón something of a scarce commodity. Within a few short months we ran out of our first shipment. This test run showed us that we could afford to scale up and order as much Patrón as the factory could produce. However, what we did not anticipate was how quickly demand would exceed supply. For an upstart, it was both an enviable and a potentially fatal position to be in. Blindly, we wanted to cover more ground, getting our bottles into stores and bars across the country. No one could have foreseen this predicament, and there was no one to show us the way. Who knew our factory's maximum production capacity would become inadequate so soon? But that was part of the magic. By not knowing how things were supposed to be done or allowing for a little forecasting, we inadvertently turned traditional business practice on its head and figured out a better way.

Sometimes ignorance really is bliss. Of course it's important to know the basics of business, but that doesn't mean you must always go by the book. Don't be afraid to set your own bar. Winners don't limit themselves by an industry's norm. The only way to truly be a breakout success is to block out the noise and listen to your own best instincts.

## VEGAS, BABY

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Never did this clever cluelessness serve us better than on our first trip to Las Vegas.

We went there on a mission, Martin and I. Our goal was to find a hot girl. Not just any kind of hot. She had to have everything: elegance, a winning smile, a lovely face, a perfect arse, and huge, firm boobs. If they were fake, even better. She couldn't be trashy; men and women alike had to look at her with lust.

No, we weren't scouting for a partner in a threesome, not that I was entirely against the idea. This was strictly business. It was 1990, and we were offered a booth that had just become available at the annual Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America (WSWA) convention, the biggest liquor industry trade show in the country and our first convention ever. We assumed that alcohol would be presented much the same way cars were at auto shows, with tantalizing half-dressed women draped all over the place. We needed a gorgeous Patrón Girl to lure foot traffic to our booth and get people to notice us and taste our tequila, because it was only by experiencing Patrón that they could fully appreciate the fact that this was a brand like no other in the world.

Martin got the call only two days before the show was starting, so we had to kick into gear. My first thought was to hire a Patrón Girl and dress her in a classy but sexy outfit. We had some T-shirts emblazoned with "Team Patrón" lying around that I cut up and had my tailor apply onto two tight black Lycra minidresses that were hanging in my closet. The outfits showed every curve and needed to be complemented by the perfect body.

### BOOBS OR BUST

The night before the convention, we met an agent in Las Vegas who took us to every hotel and casino that had show girls: MGM Grand, Caesar's Palace, the Riviera, Bally's... We went from venue to venue when we knew the girls would be on break, interviewing dozens of stunners and having them try on the Patrón outfit. They had legs that went on forever and not an ounce of flab on them. There was just one problem: no boobs. These dancing girls were lithe and beautiful, but they had bodies like teenage boys. It simply wasn't going to work with the dress I'd designed, because the tightness of the Lycra was squashing down what little they had in the chest region and making them flat as pancakes.

By now it was 4 a.m., the agent had long since gone home, and we still didn't have our girl. We were starting to worry. How on earth were we going to make an impact with all these established brands without some bait? Martin and I didn't need to say a word. We were both thinking the same thought: This is Vegas, baby!

There were sexy young things all over the place, and their work shift had only just begun. I grabbed the Yellow Pages, called an escort agency—Desert Foxes—and started interviewing hookers. I could just imagine the expression of the madam on the other end of the line.

"We need a girl to work a convention tomorrow," I explained.

"Oh, yeah? Sure, no problem," she replied, snickering.

"We need her to come over now to try on an outfit to make sure it works."

"Hm... What kind of weird stuff are you into?"

"I'm being serious; it's for a convention," I persisted. "Send me only your most refined-looking

girls and please make sure they have boobs.”

We began interviewing a parade of prostitutes. Some of them were leery of us and came with beefy-looking guys, probably strip club bouncers, for protection. I completely understood. They had no idea what they were walking into. A few of them were sweet and attractive, but under the harsh lighting they'd be exposed to at the liquor show, they had a kind of hardness about them. It just wouldn't do.

## WORKING GIRL

Finally, we met Sammy, the only girl brave enough to come see us on her own. She was a knockout and filled out that dress to perfection. You would never guess her profession. She had it all: class, a naturally seductive beauty, a charming personality, and a spectacular pair of breasts.

Later that morning, Sammy showed up at our booth precisely on time. She was thrilled to be doing something to put food on the table for her two young kids besides turning tricks. I liked her even more in the cold light of day. Though no paragon of virtue myself, I couldn't imagine doing what she did to earn a living, but I was fascinated to learn more about her and the world she came from. She was just doing what was necessary to survive.

Running on reserve energy, I took her into the ladies' room and dressed her. Then I got myself ready, as the two of us would be working the booth together. We carried those dresses beautifully, and the Patrón bee was framed in a green heart emblazoned on our backsides. Well, let's just say they proved to be an enticing invitation to bee in love with the brand.

Everything about our booth was different from the rest. It was right at the entrance, so it would be the first one that visitors would see. We covered our space in the Patrón colors—green, black, mango, and silver—and stocked up with lots of finely made swag to give away. We draped our sampling table in black silk, laying it with fine crystal glasses and beautiful hammered silver vases filled with Casablanca lilies. It was feminine and elegant next to the predictable Bristol board signage and bland displays and presentations of our trade counterparts. In a male-dominated industry, we certainly stood out. But I suspect that's not what drew all those men to our stand. In less than an hour, we were 20 deep with potential buyers eager to flirt with two buxom blondes and have a taste of something new.

## ABOUT LAST NIGHT

By day 2, word had spread about our booth, and the crowd grew so big that it blocked the entrance to the convention. We were giddy with excitement over the way Patrón had stolen the entire show. All of a sudden Sammy pulled me behind the curtain at the back of the booth. She looked horrified.

“What's wrong, luv?” I asked.

“Oh, Ilana, I don't know how to tell you this, but do you see those two men out there?”

I peeked out and saw two nondescript, balding middle-aged guys in suits.

“Yes. What about them?”

“I was with them last night. The two of them—they were taking turns with me. You wouldn't believe what they were into. And now they're going to recognize me. I'm so sorry. What do you want

me to do?”

“Nothing, Sam. Trust me, they’re not going to say anything. They’re married men; I can see their wedding rings, so they will be more than grateful not to be acknowledged. Just be your usual friendly self and pretend you’ve never met before. Believe me, it’s not your problem, it’s theirs.”

The poor girl was practically in tears. She didn’t want anything to jeopardize her new gig. I did my best not to laugh, but the whole situation struck me as absurd. So many of these guys used the trade show as an excuse to party. This was a junket for them, and apparently they took the saying “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” quite literally.

We hired Sammy for events several times after that. On one occasion, we even flew her to Los Angeles. She was that good, and people loved her. She was the first Patrón Girl, and Patrón soon became known for the gorgeous and well-informed young ladies who represented the brand. They had to be polished, personable, and as passionate about Patrón as we were. We found them everywhere: waitressing in restaurants, walking along the street, hanging out in bars, training horses, even working in strip clubs. But they all had one thing—or I should say two things—in common.

As incredible as it seems, we were the only exhibitor with girls; no one else had them. We were the talk of the trade show, and before long the entire industry was buzzing about what we’d done. Suddenly, Patrón Tequila was the brand on everyone’s lips. The next year, everyone had girls working at the conventions.

But it was clear they had missed the point. Liquor marketing still consisted of middle-aged men in suits with rather ordinary cardboard branding. It wasn’t just our girls; our entire presentation was sexy, right down to the display table covering. What the rest of the industry also failed to understand was that by just having attractive girls and no message, they were selling only sex. It got your attention, but once they had it, they didn’t do anything with it. It was a huge lost opportunity. No one had educated their girls, therefore no product information or titillation was being disseminated. But the Patrón Girls weren’t just delicious eye candy; they were true brand ambassadors, using their look and cheeky good humor to attract customers’ attention and then surprise and dazzle them with their encyclopedic and intimate knowledge of the brand.

As complete newbies to the industry, it never occurred to us to do anything else. Having stunning young women promoting our brand, creating an atmosphere of sophistication, beauty, conviviality, and excitement around our tequila, just seemed obvious. After all, cocktailing is supposed to be about being social and having a fabulous time. At least it is with our brand.

Finally, we’d put Patrón on the national map. From an obscure, dusty factory high up in the hills of central Mexico, our tequila was now on the lips of every tastemaker in the land.

We were true game changers. Now all we had to do was deliver.

# A Brief History of Tequila

GREAT BRANDS aren't just born from a vacuum. Understanding their rich history and context only serves to enrich the experience of producing, selling, and consuming an iconic product such as Patrón.

We knew precious little about the origins of tequila before Martin encountered Patrón, but we quickly realized that Francisco Alcaraz, our master distiller at the Jalisco factory and one of the foremost experts on tequila in the world, was a treasure trove of information about a beverage with roots as ancient and mysterious as the Aztecs.

As it happens, tequila is the perfect blend of Old World and New World cultures. Over the course of many dinners at our home in California, Francisco described how hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, the Tiquila tribe from Amatitlan in present-day Guatemala learned the process of boiling and fermenting the agave plant to obtain a ritualistic beverage that was consumed only by religious authorities. In other words, only gods and priests were deemed fit to drink this precursor of tequila.

I was charmed to learn that there is even an Aztec goddess associated with what became the basis of tequila: Mayahuel. A stunning beauty blessed with 400 breasts to feed her 400 children, she defied her celestial family to run away with Quetzalcoatl, the god of redemption. The two hid from her wicked grandmother by turning themselves into the branches of a leafy tree, but she found them and ordered the execution of the newlyweds.

Quetzalcoatl, the husband, somehow survived, but Mayahuel was shredded into tiny pieces by the stars. Quetzalcoatl buried her remains in the earth, from which sprouted the first crop of agave plants. The gods in their continued fury struck down the plants with a lightning bolt. The enormous plant caught fire, and when its spiny leaves were consumed by the flames, leaving only the heart, or *pina*, behind, it oozed with the blood of Mayahuel, an intoxicating and aromatic nectar as sweet as honey that captivated all who came near it.<sup>1</sup> This is the origin of its role in Aztec culture as a ceremonial offering to the gods.

Delving further into the history and origins of tequila for the writing of this book, I was amazed at the goldmine of information that is out there. From almost nothing when we first began our journey with Patrón, there are now entire websites dedicated to tequila, and aficionados who do nothing but blog about the beverage. I've included some of the most fascinating details here, with web references for those who wish to investigate further. As for our goddess, there is more:

It is said that Mayahuel, who is also the Mexican goddess of alcohol, came upon the idea of fermenting the agave by observing a drunken mouse drink agave juice.<sup>2</sup> The resulting magical concoction, which Mexican Indians called octli, later become known as pulque, a vitamin-rich brew widely considered to be the early ancestor of mezcal.

Agave played a huge role in early Latin American society, and not only for its nutritional properties. Evidence of its use has been found in prehistoric burial sites and dates back to 7000 BC. The plant's leaves produced fiber that was used for clothing, rope, and other household items. For this and many other reasons, the plant was named *el Arbol de las Maravillas*, or "the Tree of Marvels,"



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sample content of The Patrón Way: From Fantasy to Fortune - Lessons on Taking Any Business From Idea to Iconic Brand

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