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Sammy Hagar, the Encore

The famous rocker, wine lover and spirits enthusiast has expanded his ventures

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Sammy “The Red Rocker” Hagar has been one of rock music’s most prolific artists and an inductee into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, with 25 platinum albums and a Grammy. He is perhaps best known for his time as the lead singer of the iconic rock band Van Halen, as well as Montrose, Chickenfoot and The Circle.

Earlier this year Hagar, 76, was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and he continues to perform, touring this summer along with longtime bandmates Michael Anthony, Joe Satriani and Jason Bonham in The Best of All Worlds Tour.

A lover of wine, food and spirits, he founded Cabo Wabo Tequila in 1996 (selling the brand in 2010). Hagar now owns a portfolio of restaurants, spirits and beer embracing his Baja beach life and rock ‘n’ roll vibe.

Wine Spectator: How have your wine tastes evolved? What are you collecting and drinking now?

Sammy Hagar: I’ve been around the world 10 times with this, and I always come back to Italian wines like Barolos, Barbarescos and Brunellos. But, of course, I’ll always be in the mood for a great white or a red Burgundy because when they’re right, they’re right. Period.

WS: Is what you look for in wine related to what you look for in spirits?

SH: I look for different things in a wine and a spirit. A wine is so elegant on the nose. You smell it; you pair it with food. My favorite wines are almost too much to drink without food to accompany them. There are just too many tannins and acid, like in the Barolos.

On the other hand, spirits are about the mouthfeel and the smell to some extent, but you can’t really take a big whiff of a high-alcohol tequila or Cognac without burning your nose. So, it’s just a different thing than with wine. I enjoy my spirits in small quantities.

WS: Any plans to get into wine? What would your dream wine look like?

SH: My dream wine would be something like a Vega Sicilia Unico. I think that’s one of the greatest wines ever made. But, no I don’t think I’ll ever make a wine. I usually say “never say never,” but in this case, I will say it, because if something has my name on it, it has to be the best on the planet. I could never make a wine that’s better than a DRC wine like Montrachet or a Romanée-Conti, and I won’t make an inferior product.

It’s just like my music: If I didn’t think I could sing as well as the other performers out there, I’d be apprehensive about going out and singing. I wouldn’t make a record if I didn’t think it was as good as anything else out there. So, as long as I’m performing, creating things, etc., I will only put my stamp of approval on something I think is worthy.

WS: What feeds your curiosity about the way things taste and smell?

SH: I’m naturally curious about just about everything, especially tastes and



Guy Fieri (left) and Sammy Hagar

scents. I’m fascinated by all the different tastes and scents around us. It’s how you build a library of references in your head that you can refer back to when you’re creating new tastes or products of your own, or how you can remember the little intricacies that set a great wine apart.

WS: Is your Santo Tequila (a partnership with restaurateur Guy Fieri) an evolution of Cabo Wabo?

SH: Santo is a culmination of everything I learned from my early days with Cabo Wabo Tequila. Back when I started Cabo Wabo, there were no other celebrity spirits brands. You couldn’t find 100% agave pure tequila made the old-fashioned way in the U.S.

I relied on the distiller and the farmers down in Mexico to give me an amazing education in the art of making tequila. I worked closely and hands-on with them and learned everything from the barrels and the aging process to how to trim an agave plant, plus cooking it twice. I learned all the insights and steps that many producers skip because it’s too expensive. I brought [everything I learned] to the creation of Santo Tequila.

WS: Tell us about Santo Mezquila.

SH: I came up with the idea of doing the first ever tequila-mezcal blend, Mezquila, because there was this wave of popularity for mezcal happening and, to be honest, I didn’t want to make something that would compete with my first child, Cabo Wabo. So I was initially going to do a mezcal, but after spending a couple of weeks down in Oaxaca tasting every possible rendition of mezcal, I realized ... I’m not really a mezcal kind of guy. It’s just too smoky for me. I wanted to make something cleaner, so I made something in the middle, a hybrid of pure tequila and mezcal.

I went down to Jalisco and Juan Eduardo Nuñez, who is one of the legendary distillers down there, told me that there was no such thing as a Mezquila. So I told him, “Let’s invent it!” It took us about a year of really experimenting to get it right. But we found just the right blend that showcases the rich agave flavor with just a hint of smoke.

WS: Tell us about Beach Bar Rum (a partnership with rock icon Rick Springfield). Where does rum fit in the landscape of spirits to you?

SH: To me, rum is more of a fun afternoon type of cocktail. Those really aged dark rums are interesting but that’s not part of what I’m trying to do. I like a clean, white rum. White rum has never really been considered an “elegant” drink but I’m trying to elevate that perception. Our latest platinum formula is perfect for mixing. I also have Red Head rum, which is infused with macadamia nuts and is as good as anything you’ll ever taste.

WS: You also got into the RTD game with Sammy’s Beach Bar Cocktails.

SH: I am shocked by how that category has blown up so quickly. Once again, I wanted to make the best one out there so I made Sammy’s Beach Bar Cocktails with high-quality, natural ingredients. I worked hard to perfect every flavor. That’s always been my M.O. □