

Lights, camera, singani

It was while filming *Che* that Steven Soderbergh first tasted the smooth, spare Bolivian spirit. Soon afterwards, he became a global distributor.

By **Scott Snowden**. Illustration **André Carrilho**

The spirits of South America underpin many classic cocktails. Cachaça, from Brazil, has been in vogue for years (it's the base for caipirinhas) and is one of the most widely drunk spirits in the world. Peru's pisco is frothily popular in the form of pisco sours. Now it's singani, from Bolivia, that is hoping to shake things up.

The cocktail and drinks professionals who gathered in New Orleans this summer for their industry confab, *Tales of the Cocktails*, were joined by a singani advocate of surprising extraction. Film director and producer Steven Soderbergh, who first came across the drink while filming the biopic *Che*, owns global distribution rights to the biggest brand of the drink – a sideline that predates his self-confessed disenchantment with Hollywood. (He told this magazine in 2013: "I've seen a shift in why people go to the movies. They're moving toward an attitude of: I want it all spelled out and tied up at the end.")

Soderbergh recalls his first taste: "During the start-up party for *Che* in Madrid in the summer of 2007, my Bolivian casting director presented me with a bottle of Casa Real singani. He tells me it's the national drink of Bolivia and that he has a family connection to the distillery. I used to be a vodka drinker, which I'd drink straight, on the rocks, but this was smoother than anything I'd had before."

Made from white Muscat of Alexandria grapes, singani is a pomace brandy produced in the Bolivian Andes. First made in the 16th century shortly after the Spanish arrived in South America, singani is apparently christened for a pre-Columbian village of the same name near the mission that first distilled it. The vineyards from which it is made must be planted at an elevation of 5,250ft or higher. Its character and production methods are closer to those of eau-de-vie but it's classified as a brandy for international distribution.



Soderbergh says that after that first sip his "goal thereafter became figuring out how [the casting director] could keep me supplied for the next five months of the shoot – I was that enamoured, that fast. We would literally drink it every night, just with ice, while we were editing. Then a few people started suggesting the idea of importing it."

Soderbergh bought the international distribution rights and renamed the drink Singani 63, after the year he was born. Having shipped 250 cases to the US, he then hired a brand management company. "That three-hour meeting was terrifying," Soderbergh says, "because I got a more in-depth view of what's actually involved in starting to try and get a brand going in New York. I knew we just had to get on with it – you've got to go to one place and start small."

Soderbergh's sales manager got a sample to Jim Meehan, legendary mixologist and the man behind the speakeasy-themed Please Don't Tell cocktail bar in Manhattan's

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bohemian St Mark's Place, famous for being "that one you enter through the phone booth".

"That was the first time I'd ever even heard of singani, let alone tried it," says Meehan. "It reminded me of an elegant Peruvian pisco and when I heard about the story behind it, bringing it in became a no-brainer. It's a very versatile ingredient and we now feature it in a cocktail called the Hanami."

Please Don't Tell is not the only bar in New York using singani. David Kaplan, co-owner of Death & Co in Manhattan's East Village, says: "[South American spirits are] the next big thing. They're very cool and we're seeing some very

interesting producers like Steven Soderbergh, like Pete [Nevenghlosky] who owns Avuá Cachaça [in Brazil], going to the distilleries and finding great things and bringing it into the States."

The feedback Soderbergh has received from bartenders such as Meehan and Kaplan has been extremely positive. "[It's] not anything I ever would have considered when I got in on this, which is what is the practical application of singani for a bartender? Because I was just drinking it on the rocks, and I was never even thinking what else should you be able to do with it. It's incredibly flexible. You can use it to replace vodka, rum, gin, whisky, you can swing it in all these different directions."

Soderbergh notes that the Bolivian climate gives the spirit a clean, spare taste: "You got really hot sun during the day, really cold temperatures at night. I feel like it's pulling out those harsher notes and so that was the thing that stunned me about it. I'm used to drinking hard liquor straight or on the rocks, and this was like, 'Where's the burn? There's no burn.'"

Singani 63 has so far made it to more than half a dozen cocktail bars across Manhattan and Los Angeles and one or two in San Francisco. "Our approach is to go city by city. And so when we've talked about outside of the US, we haven't talked about countries, we've talked about London. That would seem to be the next place."

As they did in the US cities, Soderbergh and his team will look in London for someone with "the right kind of reputation" to frame the Bolivian newcomer "in the right way". In the drinks business as in the film industry, Soderbergh values the luxury of independence: "No one is over my shoulder; we'll go to the places that matter and make sure we do that right. The business model is to get through enough cases to where I'm not losing money. We don't have to do crazy numbers to become sustainable, and that's all I want." **FT**