

The Markell-Bani Story... Just Like Fine Wine

“Can you taste the passion,” Greg says in a melodic tone as he recites the opening line of “Fine Wine”. (The first song on the Markell-Bani Soundtrack) “Is this a story about wine or music”, you might be asking at this point... It’s both, and a whole lot more. The Markell-Bani Story is about lifelong friendship, entrepreneurship, and fine wine.

Greg Markell Lawrence is one half of Markell-Bani Fine Wines & Sparkling Beverages Llc, an innovative African-American owned winemaker based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Greg founded the company several years ago with his lifelong friend and business partner, Sean Bani Yisrael; after a chance discussion over dinner led to the discovery of a micro-winery in the area. The rest is history...

“There hasn’t been a time where I can remember not knowing Greg... He was always there”, says Sean- as he recounts his earliest memories of their friendship. Greg and Sean grew up in downtown Cincinnati’s West End community; an urban area known more for crime, drugs and poverty than for producing innovative entrepreneurs. Thanks to a strong sense of family, educational achievement, and community consciousness instilled by their mothers; Greg and Sean chose an entrepreneurial path. Early on, Greg flourished as a Hip-Hop music entertainer and producer while Sean achieved success as a writer, publishing his own book of poetry. Today, in addition to building the Markell-Bani brand, Greg and Sean maintain their early passions for music and writing.

“What type of wine would you like with your meal”, may have been the question that changed the entrepreneurial fortunes of Greg and Sean forever. Neither recalls quite how the conversation began, but Sean distinctly remembers Greg’s mention of starting a wine company. A few days later, Greg had presented Sean with a profitable business case- based on extensive research on African American Wine Makers, and the wine industry. After reviewing the data and growth opportunity, Sean quickly agreed that starting the venture was a great idea. However, both men knew they would need more than just a “great idea” to make Markell-Bani the world class brand they believed it could become.

“We grew up in downtown Cincinnati, and there weren’t any vineyards around our neighborhood...” says Greg. They knew that educating themselves on the craft of winemaking would be essential to growing a successful company, and that’s just what they did over the next 2 years. Greg and Sean immersed themselves in the wine industry; travelling the world over visiting vineyards, participating in wine showcases, and learning the craft of winemaking. Often the only African-Americans participating in the events, Greg and Sean quickly realized the elite nature of the winemaking industry. “We felt a lot like Tiger Woods early on...” says Sean. Determined to use their African-American heritage as an asset instead of a limiting factor, Greg and Sean pressed forward. “At the time, I was just hungry for success”, said Greg.

The discovery of a micro-winery in the heart of Cincinnati produced the first batch of wine for the young winemakers. Greg and Sean had been invited to the winery to learn more about the process of winemaking and within a couple hours, were draped in aprons and producing what the world knows today as Markell-Bani wine. By the time the first couple cases were produced, they had already been sold to family and friends.

At the time their wine was made, Greg and Sean had not settled on a name for the company. “What name would capture the essence of class, distinction, elegance, success, and upward mobility”, Sean thought. After a couple weeks of brainstorming, Sean called Greg with what he knew would be their brand name. Greg’s response was simply, “it’s brilliant”. A golden crest was designed to accompany the Markell-Bani name and the brand had been born. Within months, Markell-Bani wine was being sold by a local supermarket chain, and demand for the product outgrew the local micro-winery all together. Greg and Sean settled on

a California based winery to continue producing the Markell-Bani wines; which consisted of a Blackberry Merlot, Kiwi Pear Sauvignon Blanc, and Rose'. As wine sales increased, the "great idea" Greg thought of years earlier was truly beginning to materialize into a "great business".

"Then Moscato hit the market..." recalls Greg. Markell-Bani would face their first major setback in the form of the Moscato wine. The African-American spirits market tends to be guided by popular trends, so when an entertainer or athlete endorses a brand or product, demand can quickly shift. Greg and Sean watched their sales drastically recede as African-American wine drinkers began consuming Moscato wine. Nielsen's Senior Vice President of Beverage/ Alcohol Practice, Danny Brager noted "I've been following the wine category for over 10 years... Frankly, I haven't seen anything like it at all." (In reference to the tremendous growth of Moscato sales in recent years) He also noted that the typical Moscato drinker is "Much more African-American... much more Hispanic, much younger, much lower-income, much more female." At this point, Greg and Sean had to quickly decide what to do; enter the Moscato market with a product of their own, or continue to set a standard?

"We are always conscious of the standard we set when presenting our product and ourselves", says Sean. "It's important that we build a brand that's not based on trends, but the quality of the product itself", Greg adds. Markell-Bani would not enter the competitive and media driven Moscato market, and instead produced two new wine recipes named after Greg and Sean's daughters- Demera and Aniyah. In addition to honoring their daughters, the naming convention: Aniyah Rouge (sweet red) and Demera Blanc (sweet white) was a strategic move to create exclusivity in the market and distinguish the Markell-Bani product.

"We took our new wine recipes to a Pennsylvania based winery which produced sweeter grapes to focus exclusively on our primary market (African- Americans) who prefer sweeter wines", recalls Greg. A large portion of the wine and spirits industry is driven by African-American consumption; however, the industry (as a whole) does not market to or support the African-American community through investment nor economic development. Markell-Bani would fill that void by targeting their product primarily at the African-American market to drive economic growth and community consciousness.

With 2018 being their fourth full year of sales for the new wines, Greg and Sean already have their sights on tremendous growth and expansion. The Markell-Bani wines are currently sold in several retail locations throughout the Cincinnati Tri-state area, as well as grocery store shelves at Giant Food Stores in the Washington DC area. To assist with marketing and PR, Greg and Sean retained Flipt Script Media, an innovative African-American owned and operated digital media company to create a comprehensive digital branding campaign. "Markell-Bani falls right in line with our company mission to inform, innovate and inspire through thoughtful content, and provocative imagery, while connecting people with the brands they love, respect, and trust", says a company spokesperson. Each month, Markell-Bani hosts a networking and wine tasting event called Connect, Wine and Dine in upscale restaurant venues throughout the Cincinnati Tri-State area, and recently expanded the events into the Washington DC, and Atlanta metro areas. As wine sales grow and affinity for the Markell-Bani product continues to increase, Greg and Sean know that things will only get sweeter with time- just like fine wine...

Edward Williams, Flipt Script Media

