TEQUILA AFICIONADO

ISSUE 40 APRIL 2023





ON THE COVER BAJARRIBA TEQUILA

Life is meant to be lived to the fullest while enjoying Bajarriba Tequila with friends, family and reminiscing about those great times spent on a white, sandy beach in Mexico.

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WHY WE DO IT

It was just about a year ago when a guy who was part of a brand spanky new tequila tagged Tequila Aficionado in a Facebook Post. It seems his dream was to be on the cover of Tequila Aficionado Magazine and his intent was to manifest that cover happening. I responded to his post and, not long after, the team tasted his tequila and loved it. One Brand of Promise Nomination (and win) later, and here's Rico Austin with Jay Nance and Bajarriba Tequila on the cover of Tequila Aficionado Magazine. Everyone here at Tequila Aficionado has their own reasons for doing what they do, but mine has always been to see the underdog win. As long as people keep making quality tequilas, we're going to give them a platform to introduce them to the tequila drinking public. Thank you for doing what you do by buying small brand tequilas and reading Tequila Aficionado Magazine!

Lisa Pietsch

PUBLISHER TEQUILA AFICIONADO MAGAZINE

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• Garnish with 3 espresso beans.

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Bajarriba Tequila and The Legend of El Viejito

Written and Photographed by M.A. Mike Morales



In November of 2022, I accompanied the owners of powerhouse startup brand, Bajarriba Tequila, on a whirlwind three-day trip to the Highlands of Jalisco, Mexico. What follows are my experiences of witnessing the culmination of their dream come true.

As with most friendships during this Internet Age, I first met Rico Austin on Facebook. At the time I was heavily researching anything tequila related on the web. That's when I discovered Rico's book, <u>My Bad Tequila,</u> published in 2010.

Since then, and after many years of communicating off and on several social media



platforms, I finally met Rico in the spring of 2022.

Rico had just flown in from his home in Arizona for a quick morning meeting with a local Southern California distributor, <u>88 Spirits</u>. He then stopped by my home office to drop off two sets of bottles of his latest and most daring venture, <u>Bajarriba Tequila</u>.

He, along with two other main partners, collectively known as Tres Cabo Amigos (the three had forged a friendship while living and vacationing in Cabo San Lucas, Baja Mexico), had just created the brand and were gearing up for a late summer/early fall roll out.

A Gimmicky Bottle

Rico Austin, an affable guy with the energy of a hummingbird, a radiant smile and signature dark Ray-Ban sunglasses, looked exactly like his author profile headshots on his books.

With a certain downhome charm, he handed me two oversized bottles of blanco and reposado tequila that he had brought with him,



carefully wrapped in bubble wrap, on the flight from Phoenix. He proudly described it as the map of Baja California but flipped upside down and painstakingly designed by his wife, Connie.

I'll admit, I sensed red flags. The last thing the world needed was another overly sweetened tequila sitting on shelves behind locked glass cases in every major liquor store chain in America. The bottle was intricately illustrated and Rico assured me that the juice inside was different.

A Catchy Name

As Rico explained it to me in an email:

"The name Bajarriba was originally the third Cabo Amigo's idea, Miguel Hill (aka Michael Hill). We all three played around with the name, as well as my wife, Connie Austin."

"We decided that the single word BAJARRIBA looked much cleaner and concise and Connie liked how it looked on the bottle when she was working on the design."

Rico continues, "BAJARRIBA loosely translates to 'bottoms up.' *Baja* is below or under and *Arriba* is up or above. So, when you turn the bottle upside down you are pouring or sipping out of Cabo."

Partner, Jay Nance explains, "Since the name Bajarriba is made up and there's no word like it, we are at the top of all search engines when it's Googled or searched–added bonus!"

The Amigos subsequently trademarked both the bottle shape and the name.

Rico was right!

A few weeks later, Tequila Aficionado's founder, Alex Perez, and I met at his home bar and recorded several Sipping Off the Cuff reviews. Needless to say, we were both pleasantly surprised by both the plata and reposado expressions.

You can see the plata review at <u>https://bit.ly/bajaplata</u> and the reposado review at <u>https://bit.ly/bajarepo</u>.

It was only after having dissected Bajarriba with Alex that the thought occurred to me that perhaps Rico and his partners really had the makings of a successful tequila brand.

I Know That Guy!

In early September 2022, Rico reported that he and Jay had just returned from a quick five-day business trip to Guadalajara and Atotonilco El Alto, Jalisco, Mexico, to check with their vendors on corks and artisans for their bottles. This was no easy feat considering most brands were experiencing severe post-pandemic supply chain problems.

As part of their trip, they spent a full day at Tequila El Viejito (NOM 1107) where Bajarriba is distilled and bottled with el dueno (owner), Juan Eduardo Nunez Eddins. Also involved in this lengthy 6hour meeting was El Viejito's Plant Managerand Bajarriba's distiller-Ingeniera Karina Rojo, as well as Susana Mendoza, the Plant Manager at Tequila El Viejito's bottling facility in Guadalajara.



Juan confessed to them (and later on to me) that 4 of the top 5 positions at the family owned Tequila El Viejito are filled by women. Nunez believes he has the best *person* (not woman or man) for each job. In addition, each of these ladies have had several years of tenure with the company.

Over pleasant conversation about family and friends, and a traditional Mexican lunch with plenty of El Viejito tequila, Rico proudly showed Juan the two aforementioned reviews of Bajarriba on



YouTube.

As Rico tells it: "Juan said that he recognized Mike from other things, (probably his many videos) and asked 'Who is that guy? Do you know him?"

Rico filled Juan in on who I was and concluded, "...and he likes tequila every bit as much as we do."

The next thing I know, Rico arranges for me to join him, his wife Connie, and partner, Jay

Nance for a quick 3-day trip to Jalisco in November 2022.

In-flight Lament

In one of the tightest itineraries I've ever seen (one that would make a travel agent turn green with envy), Rico took care of every single detail down to the minute.

Flying in from LAX, I met him, Connie and Jay at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix. (Michael Hill, the third Cabo Amigo, would not join us on this trip.). From there, we would take a late flight into Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla International Airport in Guadalajara arriving just before midnight local time.

Once comfortably in the air, Rico and I lamented the lack of any tequila on the drinks menu of just about every airline in the industry.

Overhearing our conversation, one senior flight attendant said vehemently, but somewhat humorously, "Oh no, we can't have that! The other flight attendants would drink it, dance on tables and then they wouldn't show up for work the next day."

When we pointed out that the beverage/cocktail menu included scotch, vodka, wine etc., she



responded, "Tequila is a whole different kind of magic."

Rico and I had to admit that she wasn't wrong.

The Abandoned Streets of Guadalajara

After disembarking the plane and going through customs, the four of us ambled outside to the fleet of curbside taxis awaiting their last fares of the evening. Once we secured one and loaded our carry-ons, we were taken directly to our hotel, the <u>DoubleTree</u> in the heart of Guadalajara's Historic District.

Amazingly, the entire ride took approximately 20 minutes from the airport. At that hour of the night, all the freeways and the city streets were completely devoid of traffic. Rico and Jay, who had just visited only a few weeks before, had never experienced such a short taxi ride.

Usually, a trip from the airport took more than an hour in Guadalajara's infamous day-long traffic jams. Under the light of the almost full moon and the intermittent traffic signals, the narrow streets of the Centro Historico were eerily haunting.

Other than a few sporadic homeless people sleeping under the DoubleTree's ancient archways, not a soul could be seen for blocks.

Los Dos Cabo Amigos + One

Early the next morning, the Centro Historico came to life. Teeming with young students headed for school, *turistas* (tourists) and businesspeople, I couldn't help getting caught up in the excitement of the next leg of the tour.

Rico's itinerary had us visiting the sites of the colonial Distrito Historico including the

Metropolitan Cathedral and squares (zocalos) a short walk from the hotel. We were joined by Rico and Jay's other partner, Carlos Chacon Mendoza and his lovely wife, Raquel.

Literally the eyes, ears and "boots on the ground" in Mexico, Carlos is such an integral part of the Bajarriba story that in gratitude, he was made a minor shareholder by the main partners.

Boisterous, flamboyant and articulate, Carlos demonstrated as



much zest for life as Rico. Between the two of them, there is enough dynamic energy to light up the entire Historic District of Guadalajara!

Carlos arranged to have a couple of photographers/videographers shoot photos and video for about an hour as the three of them roamed the squares and many fountains. This would most certainly be a must see for all of us-truly a once in a lifetime experience.

The photo and video opps went without a hitch. Dozens of digital photos along with deft drone shots of Rico, Jay and Carlos surrounded by the purest examples of neoclassical architecture in the Historic District are sure to make a stunning background for future Bajarriba documentaries and sizzle reels.

Ahead of schedule, there was enough time for a coffee flavored popsicle with the photographers and a light brunch at an outdoor juice bar and cafe. Careful of our agenda, we sauntered back to the DoubleTree in the warm autumn Jalisco sunshine past fountains, museums and statues.

From Design to Debut

Ms. Susana Mendoza, El Viejito's Plant Manager at the bottling facility, had arranged for a van to pick us up at around 2:00pm at the DoubleTree to take us to the El Viejito bottling plant in Guadalajara. Afterwards, we would be shuttled to the Hotel Real de Cervantes in Atotonilco El Alto to be closer to the El Viejo distillery for our next day's visit.

On the van ride over, I sat next to Rico's wife, Connie, a pensive blonde with a somewhat



rebellious and creative rock and roll edge to her. This was Connie's first trip to Jalisco, and the meticulously detailed Bajarriba bottle was her handiwork. She admitted that the challenge of crafting the clever vessel drove her to become involved in the project.

Working from a concept by Michael Hill, who at one point had his own tequila brand bottled in the shape of the fabled El Arco (Arch) rock

formation at Cabo San Lucas, she labored countless hours after working her day job as a graphic designer. Through several iterations, the final composition of the Bajarriba bottle was ready for its debut.

This would be a momentous occasion for the Cabo Amigos and their wives. Graciously orchestrated by El Viejito's Juan Nunez Eddins, we would witness Bajarriba Reposado Tequila being bottled, sealed, boxed and palleted for shipment by the all-female staff. This was to be the first load of product to be exported to the United States.

Bottling the Dream

Making our way into the El Viejito bottling plant, we climbed the narrow stairwell from the office to the warehouse where the medium sized bottling facility was located.

Rico and Connie walked into El Viejo's facility with boxes of pastries that they had purchased earlier that morning for the ladies of the bottling line as thanks for all their hard work and dedication.

After recording the memorable bottling, boxing and palleting of Bajarriba, we headed back upstairs to the main offices of El Viejito for a sit-down meeting with Juan and his staff. Several bottles of El Viejito and 1937, the family's house brands, were filled from the office's "infinity" barrel, laid out on a long meeting table and poured into Riedel tequila glasses.

While each of the partners and their wives took a few minutes to describe their experiences of witnessing their dream come true, I took the opportunity to briefly interview the owner, Juan Eduardo Nunez Eddins.

Verbal Tennis

Flanked by two of his office staff, Susana Mendoza and Yahana Medina, Juan and I had a lively conversation.

As a young man, he pursued his own entrepreneurial interests for several years. Afterwards, he returned to help



his uncle and father run El Viejito. He has been with the company ever since.

Volleying back and forth in both English and Spanish (Juan had been educated in the United States and spoke perfect English), most of our discussion is off-the-record, but we touched on a few subjects of interest:

The current prices and scarcity of mature agave on the open market; the unsustainable race by the Tequila Industry to outpace vodka in the United States; the sudden uproar by younger

drinkers about the use of additives in tequilas; tequila tasting techniques and the proper glassware to use; Juan's dislike of the term "master distiller" and how he much prefers to use the title "ingeniero" (chemical engineer); and finally, the proliferation of celebrity tequila brands (a subject Rico and the others bristled at its mentioning).

To be fair, two brands that are distilled at El Viejito–<u>El Bandido Yankee</u>, owned by former NFL player James Robert Morris and NHL Hall of Famer Chris Chelios, as well as Santo Tequila owned by celebrity chef Guy Fieri and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, Sammy Hagar (his second go-round)--are, of course, celebrity owned.

However, Juan's admission that he consistently turns down even more movie star money spoke



volumes to me. I'll touch on specifically why a bit later.

Juan turned the tables on me and asked how I got started with Tequila Aficionado. To my chagrin, he confessed that he had been aware of me, the website and now, the magazine, for as long as he's been at the helm

of El Viejito.

I won't bore you with the little details of our shuttle to the <u>Hotel Real de Cervantes</u> in the town of Atotonilco and our dinner and karaoke adventures that evening. Suffice it to say that I hoped to continue my discourse with Juan during our visit to El Viejito the next day.

Atotonilco El Alto

Up early the next morning, I couldn't wait to get to the legendary and mysterious El Viejito distillery.

But first, we waited for Alex Niegemann and Mariana of Buen Augurio Films, the photographer and videographer who had documented the Guadalajara leg of the trip. They would do the same here in Atotonilco and then follow us to El Viejito in their car.

Again, the young photographers took even more priceless material for the upcoming documentary and sizzle reels. Stunning shots of Rico, Jay and Carlos, as well as breathtaking never-before-seen drone video of the vibrant main square and elaborate gazebo in front of the San Miguel Arcangel church.

On the walk back to the stylish and quaint Hotel Real de Cervantes to meet our shuttle to El Viejito, I had the chance to talk briefly with Carlos Chacon's wife, Raquel.

As individuals, Carlos was energetic and offbeat while Raquel was calm and centered. Having been married for several years, she had long ago come to embrace and support Carlos' entrepreneurial and buoyant spirit and wouldn't have him any other way.

Raquel seemed to live vicariously through Carlos' escapades and he found comfort in her quiet

strength. They truly embodied the notion of yin and yang for each other.

As Carlos and Rico forged ahead of us, I noticed Jay lagged behind taking in the sights, sounds and colors of the street of Atotonilco.

I turned to Raquel and commented that between the Cabo Amigos, Jay, a semi-retired seasoned businessman, seemed to take on the role of the voice of reason. She agreed that Jay was much more serene in his demeanor.

Despite the American partners' diverse personalities, it wasn't until I got a sneak peek at a rough cut of their upcoming



documentary that I discovered that the common thread that bound them together was their similar midwestern upbringing.

In my experience, this was a good sign if the Bajarriba tequila brand was to flourish in the competitive and cutthroat spirits industry.

Under The Radar

To be honest, I knew very little about Juan Nunez and Tequila El Viejito. Over the years, we had reviewed a handful of tequilas produced there like <u>Karma</u>, <u>De la Tierre</u>, <u>Aguila Select</u> and <u>Mico</u>. It had otherwise been a quiet producer.

What was constant, however, was how much each brand owner loved and respected Juan and the family behind El Viejito.

The Search Is Over

So, how did Tres Cabo Amigos select El Viejito as their home?

Once their bottle concept was



solidified, the long, unsuccessful search for the right tequila distillery had turned up no qualified candidates. It was then that longtime friend, <u>Jim Riley</u>, offered a suggestion.

As Rico tells it, Riley asked, "Rico, have you been out to see Juan Eduardo Nuñez of Tequila El Viejito?"

Rico responded that he had never heard of Juan or his distillery.

Jim said "You need to go and visit Juan!"

Jim Riley, one of the original founders of <u>Azuñia Tequila</u>, had been instrumental in both Rico's "My Bad Tequila" and "<u>BAJA LOCO, 4 Racing Days and Tequila Nights on the NORRA</u> <u>Mexican 1000</u>" books, and was a trusted friend and advisor.

In April 2021, Rico made plans to visit Juan Nuñez and his management team including Master Distiller, Karina Rojo, at El Viejito with the Tres Cabo Amigos. Upon arrival in Guadalajara, Juan had arranged a van to pick them up at Carlos Chacon's home and drive them to Atotonilco El Alto for the day.

Rico continues: "I had a good feeling about the ranch as soon as I saw a large Mexican flag waving high above the agave fields belonging to Tequila El Viejito and the warm welcome we received from the gorgeous grounds and those who were employed to work in this heavenly spot."

"Juan and his dedicated team all greeted us and we were offered refreshments, then given the grand tour and finally we were about to be introduced to the most refreshing, pure tasting agave juice I've ever had."



Outside at a huge round wooden table that seated about twelve under a large covered patio, the Tres Cabo Amigos were served samples of El Viejito's quality tequila.

Rico recounts: "After tasting both the Plata and Reposado, I looked at Jay and I looked at Mike and their eyes were dancing as were mine and we all knew at that moment, our long, arduous journey of what seemed like a never-ending search was over."

"I got up from my leather chair and walked over to where Señor Juan was seated, stuck out my right hand and stated, 'If you will have us, this is the tequila we want!""

Juan reciprocated, and the two hugged warmly.

The Legend of El Viejito

Founded by Juan's grandfather, Don Indalecio Núñez Muro in 1937, Tequila El Viejito had celebrated 85 years of producing tequila in May of 2022. Continuously exporting tequila since 1964, and one of the founding members of the CRT (Consejo Regulador del Tequila) in 1994, Tequila El Viejito remains committed to sustainable and organic tequila production practices.

When you consider the history of tequila making in the Highlands, you'll realize that Tequila El Viejito has as much pedigree as the Don Julio, Sauza and Camarena families.

Juan is the third-generation member of the family to proudly pilot the 100% Mexican-owned company considered the first tequila distillery in Atotonilco El Alto.

As a young boy, Nunez recalls seeing his grandfather dressed in a suit, tie and hat each day for work at the "fabrica" (factory). Don Indalecio commanded the respect of everyone with whom he came in contact, including other tequileros.

Juan related that in the old days, there was no competition among tequileros. Competition between brands existed only in the media and on the store shelves in the US. Like neighboring farmers in the Midwest, it wasn't uncommon for tequileros to borrow heavy equipment or to ask for help from each other when needed.

Judging from our conversation of the day before at the bottling facility, Juan Nunez struck me as being cut from the same cloth.

Roaming Tequila El Viejito

Our shuttle arrived at the El Viejito distillery just in time to witness a large load of mature, ripened blue agave pinas being delivered. Two burly men with axes were busy slicing and quartering the pinas to be loaded into the brick ovens.



For the next 40 to 45 minutes, every one of us took digital snapshots of the pinas, selfies in front of the pinas, selfies with each other, short movie clips and, in Alex and Mariana's case, professional photos documenting the auspicious occasion.

Making our way further onto the well-manicured grounds, we ran into

the fabled wooden round table where the Tres Cabo Amigos had their first meeting with Juan and his staff. Sitting by himself, Nunez watched as each of us wandered in wonder.

Looking like a man who had witnessed this scene several times during his career, he seemed unphased by it all. The partners, their wives and I all claimed our chairs around the table and asked permission to explore the distillery and barrel room.

"We don't have any formal tours," said Nunez, "but please, feel free to look around." Then, he added, "I have nothing to hide." His last comment was conveyed as a man opening his home to guests rather than as someone who actually had something to hide.

We probed the distillery in reverse order starting at the rear of the buildings that housed barrels aging future reposado, anejo and extra anejo expressions. Rico was anxious to show us where Santo Tequila (Fieri and Hagar) had personal barrels of their juice reposing. It was also where the first barrel of Bajarriba anejo waited patiently to be unsealed in the future.

Rico and Jay proudly patted the barrel identified by the spray painted Bajarriba name. I noticed that the barrel lid was unmarked, so I suggested that the partners sign their names on it with a marking pen. It was a rite of passage that I had observed several times before. Once everyone had their turn signing the barrel, the partners kindly asked me to do the same. Naturally, I did.

From there, we drifted to the distillation area and then upstairs to the fermentation section taking pictures along the way. Finally, we reached the shredding sector which had finished for the day.

Luckily, there were still chunks of baked and fragmented blue agave left over on the machine's conveyor belts.

I instructed each member of our party to grab a chunk or wedge of baked agave as we marched back toward the round table where Juan and Susana sat patiently waiting. Unfortunately, Ingeniero Karina Rojo would not join us that afternoon since it was a scheduled day off for her. Snacks, tequila, water and soft drinks had already been laid out on the table by the friendly wait staff.

Upon my return to the patio, I conceded to Juan that I had finally understood what everyone I had spoken to over the years had meant about their admiration of the El Viejito family. I also expressed to him that I sensed a coziness and warmth that intrinsically permeated the grounds

and facilities. Juan thanked me for my heartfelt sentiments.

Once snifters of Bajarriba were generously poured, I advised everyone to dip their baked agave into the liquid and then sip the tequila off the pieces. This action would firmly imprint the



aroma and taste of baked agave into their memory.

It was a tasting technique that was shared with me by one of my mentors early on, but it was one that Juan had never seen. Rico nodded approvingly.

Verbal Tennis, Part 2

As fresh tortillas, carnitas, chips, nuts and other fare, as well as ample pours of Bajarriba tequila were served, Juan and I continued our discussion from the previous day at the bottling facility. And, as with the preceding conversation, most of the subject matter was off-the-record.

At one point, I asked Juan what his procedure was when helping a client select a flavor profile. That's when he mentioned a comment that I'd made the day before about tequila profiles.

Specifically, I said that there were several ways to tweak the recipe, but there was only one way to make tequila. Juan divulged that unlike other producers, he didn't make tequilas in varying degrees of lackluster characteristics.

While Nunez agreed with my original determination, he stated, "Naturally, I'll give the client what he wants. But I only know one way to make tequila–and that's quality." Then, he added firmly, "It's my only standard."

The integrity of Juan Nunez and the staff of Tequila El Viejito is the intangible, yet indelible, ingredient that is missing from almost all mass market tequila brands.

Again, I won't bore you with the van ride back to Guadalajara to the <u>Hampton Inn</u>. Or our predawn shuttle to the airport. Instead, I'll share this:

An Open Letter to Bajarriba

Estimado Damas y Caballeros ...

Now that I've had a chance to decompress and process the events of this past week I would just like to say that I am so happy and grateful to have been a witness to the launching of Bajarriba Tequila at the historic Tequila El Viejito.

Despite it being a whirlwind visit to Guadalajara and Atotonilco, each moment was filled with vibrant experiences for each of us.

To see the true joy on your faces when your instantly iconic bottles came off the bottling line and onto the pallet is a feeling that I'll never forget.



From the photo opps at the plazas in both Guadalajara and Atotonilco, to my thought-provoking conversations with Juan, and even the impromptu cigar and karaoke night at Eufemia was more fun than anyone should have.

Roaming through the distillery with all of you I finally understood why so many of the brands that I know that are produced there have such a high regard for Juan, the staff and the family at El Viejito.

From the bottom of my heart I want to thank all of you for allowing me to tag along and experience the sincerity and creativity among all the partners and friends involved in Bajarriba Tequila–and for handing me the highlight of 2022 on a silver platter.

I can't wait to see what the future holds for Bajarriba tequila and to behold the continuing legacy of Tequila El Viejito.

Final Thoughts

During my 23-year career with Tequila Aficionado Media, and now consulting on agave spirits, I've witnessed many tequila brand owner's dreams in various stages of development.

There have been several brands and owners that I've grown close to over the years that have met

with untimely demise for one reason or another. Some catastrophes were unavoidable. Others, I'm not so sure about.

I've often observed how rare it is to have the "perfect storm" of elements all lined up to propel a tequila brand to victory. As they say, only time will tell.

But I get a sense that there's an atmospheric disturbance over Baja Mexico. My suggestion is that you sip quality Bajarriba tequila and stay safely in the eye of the storm. A full-blown Category 5 may be brewing.



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