



The New Spirit of Latin America



An Interview with Tom Higbee and Thomas Aabo,
Founders of New World Spirits and Creators of Solbeso

EDITORS' NOTE As Founder and original distiller of Solbeso, Tom Higbee's passion for product and category innovation continues to flourish. Solbeso is the most recent innovation in a career that spans 25 years in brand development where Higbee consulted with companies like Diageo, Pepsi, and Unilever. Higbee is a graduate of The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and Penn State University.

Originally from Copenhagen, Denmark, Thomas Aabo arrived in New York City in 1998, joining the rapidly expanding world of start-ups, initially in technology, but never losing his passion for hospitality. After a decade starting and growing mobile and Internet-focused ventures in New York and San Francisco, he joined forces with Tom Higbee to start a quest for innovation in beverages.

COMPANY BRIEF *New World Spirits* (solbeso.com) is a New York-based incubation and importation company with a mission to create exceptional new-to-world brands. Their first brand, Solbeso, is an entirely new class of spirits and the world's first created from the fresh cacao fruit.

What is Solbeso and how did it come about?

Higbee: About five years ago, we were in Latin America working on a chocolate project unrelated to spirits. As part of the exploration, we joined local farmers in the field to harvest the cacao. The farmer's job is to knock the cacao pod from the tree, crack it open, and remove the fruit, separating the bean from the fruit because it is the bean that is used to make chocolate. The fruit is a by-product of this process. Interestingly, the fruit has a wonderful citrusy flavor, like a lemon-lime sorbet. It's delicious. The locals eat the fruit and drink the juice, but the vast majority of it is thrown away simply because it's too perishable to take to market. It also ferments quickly, making it difficult to work with as a juice. This was our eureka moment: If it ferments, it can be distilled. Imagine, this vast waste of fruit – more than four million tons a year globally – could become an entirely new revenue source for the farmers. Very quickly, we built a makeshift still in the heart of Peru and created what was to become the world's first distillate from cacao fruit.

Would you talk about steps you took to get to the next phase after you had this idea?

Higbee: We never thought about creating a new category of spirits. We simply wanted to get the product to market to see how consumers and the trade would respond. The curious thing about Solbeso is it contains trace amounts of theobromine – the natural stimulant found in



Tom Higbee



Thomas Aabo

chocolate that enhances mood and energy. We knew we were on to something. The challenge, of course, was in sourcing the juice at scale: There was simply no infrastructure to collect and process the juice. The farmers were just throwing it away.

Aabo: So we set out to build partnerships with local growers in Latin America that shared our vision. We also enlisted folks like Clay Gordon, a U.S. cacao expert, to help expand our network from Peru to Ecuador, and later to the Dominican Republic. We gained support and much needed investment from executives at Diageo, ABInBev, Brown-Forman, and others, eager to participate in an innovation unlikely to be developed within their own organizations. Along with Master-distiller Dave Pickerell of Makers Mark and WhistlePig, we began building a scalable production protocol and infrastructure. We ended up building our own distilleries in the jungle with local partners like Fernando Crespo – and now have three facilities producing in Latin America.

Higbee: Importantly, we had to work within the farmer's system because their main interest, and source of income, is the cacao bean. Once that cacao pod is opened, we have less than a day to get the fruit into a proper fermentation process. To do this, we have to innovate at every stage: The collection process; how we ferment; we even custom-built our distillation equipment to achieve the consistency and quality people taste today. It took nearly three years, but we now have a fully scalable infrastructure that provides hundreds of farmers with the tools and training necessary to make more money in a sustainable way. We're making a difference in these communities, which is an important part of New World Spirits' mission.

How do you cut through the noise in the spirits industry and build a brand?

Higbee: We see craft spirits following a similar trajectory to the craft beer movement. What does a

millennial consumer want these days? In the world of spirits, they're looking for a great story, authenticity, and the ability to discover something new. The great thing about Solbeso is it comes with 3,000 years of history. Before the advent of chocolate, the Mayas and Aztecs made a beverage out of fermented cacao fruit called The Drink of the Immortals. Solbeso is a modern distillation of this original fermented drink. It's a great story that connects past to present and is something we love to share with cocktail enthusiasts who are eager to discover something new.

Aabo: We actively work with brands and partners who share our passion for Latin culture, heritage, and quality. This includes launching Solbeso in the countries where we produce. We want the locals to experience Solbeso for themselves and for visitors to share in that moment of discover.

Are there variations of this product?

Higbee: Solbeso No.1 is our signature product. It's an 80-proof base spirit with a singular taste. There's really nothing else like it: It starts with a floral aroma and light citrus taste that's creamy in feel and clean in finish. You'll notice hints of honey-suckle on the front and more of a toasted caramel on the back. The locals drink it on ice, but it's great in a wide variety of Latin drinks – like the margarita – and has the flexibility to extend into classic cocktails like the Solbeso Negroni.

Aabo: Similar to grapes, there are many different varieties of cacao. Each has a corresponding effect on taste, which is further subject to changes in climate, seasonality, and terroir. This creates an opportunity to release single-origin expressions and variations on blends. Right now we are especially excited about a barrel-aged Solbeso we'll be introducing in limited quantities as soon as next year.

Is New World Spirits eager to bring on new categories?

Aabo: We believe there continues to be opportunities to deliver novelty with authenticity. Solbeso is definitely in this mold. Right now, our focus is to make Solbeso a global brand because we believe it has a story, heritage, and taste that is universally appealing. That said, New World Spirits has the infrastructure and experience to create other products from cacao and other commodities in the region.

Higbee: The American palate has evolved rapidly over the past 30 years. This has created a world of opportunity for those who want to create new tastes and experiences. Our ambition is to be at the forefront of this movement, by introducing quality products, sustainably sourced, that have a great story to tell. ●