



Punch Drunk

FRANK GUERRERA'S PUNZONÉ ("PUNCH" IN ITALIAN) LINE OF ORGANIC, MADE-IN-ITALY VODKAS WAS BORN DURING ONE SUNDAY DINNER IN HIS HOME. TODAY, HIS SPIRITS ARE RACKING UP AWARDS WORLDWIDE

BY JESSICA JONES-GORMAN • PHOTOS BY VINNIE AMESSE



Frank Guerrera was never really a vodka kind of guy. For Sunday dinners and other cocktail focused functions, he dabbled strictly in wine. But almost a decade ago, as he was prepping for a dinner party, he started looking for a little something different to quench the thirst of his guests. So, he grabbed a bottle of distilled liquor, some blood oranges...and blended.

"I love to cook and experiment with flavors," Guerrera said. "Many years ago, I was cooking Sunday dinner for my family and

wanted to make a sangria type of drink. I had a little blood orange juice in the house, so I blended it with vodka, then added a couple more ingredients and said, 'Wow! This goes well!'"

For every family function and Sunday that followed, Guerrera kept making and tweaking his concoctions. "I toyed with the recipe until the taste was just right," he said. "Some sangria is simply too sweet. That's where the vodka came in. The result was a unique blended cocktail that my friends and family went crazy

for. I started making it and bringing it to parties...people requested it when they came to my house. Then everyone started suggesting that I bottle it."

Guerrera then worked in the world of finance; he owned his own mortgage company and knew nothing about the licensing, merchandising, and production of liquor.

"I had zero experience in this industry," he recalled. "And no idea where to even begin. If you told me five years ago I would own my own brand of vodka, I would have laughed."

But Guerrera did his research, including speaking to consultants and lawyers about development and packaging. In 2007, he founded his own brand; by 2009, he'd formed a corporation.

"I first created the drink recipe just toying with different ingredients from my own liquor cabinet," he added. "But I knew if I was really going to do this right, I had to source the best ingredients in the world, and was going to be sure I had the capabilities for mass production, just in case this thing went mainstream."

To all those ends, he dug deep to discover the origin of the best and freshest ingredients—an effort he believes is key to the product's great flavor.

"I wanted to do this all authentically and organically," he said. "So I immediately started looking into the possibility of developing the product in Italy."

Familiar with the territories of his ancestral homeland, Guerrera naturally looked to the Piemonte region, one of many peninsular oases for food and beverages. It was there his partnership with leading winery Cantine Sgarzi Luigi was established. It took more than six years and an arduous amount of work to break into an industry primarily led by conglomerates, but after paying painstaking attention to every detail of the operation, Guerrera broke through.

"For six years during the formulation process, I was back and forth to Italy working in labs with chemists," he recalled. "We spent an enormous





amount of time developing this brand but I wanted only the best, so that's what you have to do."

Guerrera chose a production facility in Northern Bologna, near the Emilia-Romagna region. He picked a blood orange grove in Calabria, found a farm of fresh lemons in Sicily, and started growing his grapes in the Abruzzo region, which lies 50 miles east of Rome, then chose the name Punzoné, which means "punch" in Italian.

"In Italy, they live before they work," Guerrera explained. "It's all about *life* over there. Everything about them is organic, and that's what makes their products superb... that's why I knew I had to produce there. The name is simply a tribute to where it all started."

In total, Guerrera created three varieties during the six-year process.

Punzoné Originale, based on the spirit-maker's original concoction, is a fusion of ultra-premium Punzoné Vodka enlivened with a blend of red Sangiovese grape sangria and natural blood orange essence from the organic groves in southern Italy. It is a ready-to-drink cocktail, best consumed shaken and chilled as a martini, on the rocks, or as a shot, though some purists take it straight and simple.

His Punzoné Vodka is uniquely crafted in a five-column distillation system from organic Italian wheat grown in the country's northwest, precisely balanced and blended with water from the Italian Alps.

Punzoné Lemoncino is a blend of Guerrera's vodka refreshed with white Chardonnay sangria and natural Sicilian lemon essence.

Every ingredient in all three products is sourced straight from the ground to the bottle and has been certified organic by the United States Department of Agriculture and the European Union, which collectively represents no mean feat.

"These three products really represent what the brand is all about," said Guerrera. "And the



idea that it is completely organic and produced from these sorts of Italian ingredients has really resonated with our customers.”

In addition to being served in bars, restaurants, and clubs throughout New York and New Jersey, the products are now available for retail sale throughout the metro area. Punzoné was also recently picked up by Whole Foods, Corrado’s Markets, and Stew Leonard’s, as well as posh Manhattan eateries Nello and Valbella.

“The response has been incredible,” Guerrero said. “We launched in July and the feedback has been insane. My ultimate goal in creating this was just to see it on the shelf. Now I’m being contacted about product placements and being recognized by industry execs.”

In October, Guerrero accepted the prestigious Five Star Diamond Award from the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences, acknowledging his product in the “Best in Spirits” category. In December, his drink was presented at the Sixth-Annual International Star Diamond Award Ceremony in Cannes, France (Punzoné was the first ultra-premium vodka and organic product to receive this top honor).

The brand also recently announced that Steven Klauber, formerly a senior executive at the storied William Grant & Sons, has joined Punzone as managing director.

Klauber, who has worked on the development of brands such as Glenfiddich and Balvenie Single Malt Scotch Whiskies, Frangelico, and Hendricks Gin, will collaborate with Punzoné on business and organizational development and financial management to help bring the new brand into the next phase of expansion.

“It’s been an overwhelming experience,” Guerrero said with a grin. “I developed this to start a new business. I knew it would be something special but what’s going on is incredible.” •

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