

LEADING THE LIQUOR SCENE

When Stephanie Houston talks about rum, she means far beyond the distilled drink and more about her rich heritage that makes her liquor brand timeless and unique. Aspiring to be the next billion-dollar brand to come out of Texas, Island Getaway Rum is one of very few producers of dark rum in the nation and makes one of the only no sugar added flavored rums, possibly in the world.



STEPHANIE HOUSTON

CRAFTS A SPIRIT BRAND THAT ENSURES TASTE AND CULTURE GO HAND IN HAND

✍️ *Alán Benítez* 📷 *Courtesy of Stephanie Houston* 📄 *F. Izquierdo*

“**IGREWUP** in the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas, Texas,” Stephanie said. “My single mom worked two jobs trying to make ends meet. [However], she had this saying about how everything always works out in the end. And through that mantra, I really learned how to be independent and [use my] survival instincts.”

In 2016, Stephanie and her partners started the distillery with just \$61K. Since then, the journey has included years of hard work, a global pandemic, fostering relationships and honing in on what they do best, make outstanding rum. Despite having many allies in the Texas Distilled Spirits Association rooting for her brand, lenders were initially not as receptive. Raising capital

has by far been the toughest challenge she had encountered along the way.

“Capital plays a major role when you’re building a brand,” Stephanie said. “It’s all about getting banks to notice us and believe in our mission and that we’re credit worthy. Unfortunately, I’ve had a different experience as a minority [in terms of] credit worthiness. And I think that’s an area where we need a lot of growth.”

Diversity in the distillery industry became a defining factor throughout the whole process, which didn’t feel intimidating at first. However, knowing that alcohol has been a primarily male-dominated industry since the beginning of prohibition did not make things easy.



But her life-long resilience and tenacity reminded her that nothing was impossible.

“BIPOC distilleries make up less than one percent of the entire beverage industry in the US, [and that’s including women],” Stephanie said. “To my knowledge, there are only two Hispanic female distilleries

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in Texas, [meaning] we are the smallest percentage. That sounds crazy when you think about the fact that Latinas create businesses at a rate six times higher than the national average. We are the fastest-growing group of women entrepreneurs in the U.S. We have a lot to offer.”

In order to gain reassurance and empower herself, Stephanie fearlessly sought to expand her reach no matter what. Her plan of action was to tap into a larger network through her family. But it was hard at first because she wasn’t used to asking for help as a child considering she had to become independent at a young age due to her household environment. Fortunately, her family was able to come and aid her and the significance of that moment was the most pleasant surprise in her eyes.

“Late last year, my family stepped in and started helping us raise capital piece by piece over time,” Stephanie said. “I never really even considered asking them, which seems like the most obvious thing. Thankfully enough, they have been able to tap into their networks which are so much larger than mine and that’s amazing. We just can’t do it all by ourselves.”

From there, she focused on forming professional ties with government agencies, which have become a huge source of promotion for Island Getaway. Having bought sugarcane molasses locally in the United States opened the opportunity for her to connect directly with the Texas Department of Agriculture. And to this day, she has successfully been receiving their continued support.

“We have partnered with the Texas Department of Agriculture and last year [they gave us] a \$40,000 grant for marketing,” Stephanie said. “We also intend to apply for an export grant from the State of Texas at the end of this year when it becomes available. We are fortunate to have the support from Nikki Jackson, Project Director of International



Marketing, who believes in our mission and our product, and it has been so well received around the world.”

In the US today, Texas is number one for vodka sales. Stephanie’s ultimate goal would be for Texas to achieve that same title but for rum production, with her spirits included, of course. Along her journey, she learned that her genealogy from the 1400s traced back to some of the indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands, which was a main sugarcane hub. With rum being a sugar cane-based product, she became viscerally tied to the Island Getaway brand because it was naturally

in her DNA. Now, any opportunity she gets to incorporate her heritage into her business, she does.

“[My ancestors] went from the Canary Islands, off the coast of Africa, to the Caribbean, then down through the Yucatán Peninsula and all the way up, making some of the first modern settlements in Texas and Northern Mexico,” Stephanie said. “My family has been in Texas since it was Mexico. My parents are from San Antonio and we’re 100% Mexican American. I love going there every chance I get because I connect back to my roots. It adds to my life and is a compelling way to inspire people about what I’m doing.” ●