

Calle 23 Origins & the Birth of the Limited Edition “Criollo”

In the old-town of Guadalajara is a square called *Nueve Esquinas* – ‘Nine Corners’ – that encapsulates everything Sophie Decobecq loves about Mexico. It has a bustling yet tranquil atmosphere, punctuated by the sounds of children playing around the fountain and thick with the hum of live music and mariachis overflowing from the *birrierías*, the restaurants that serve the traditional goat stew – *birria* – that is a regional speciality of Jalisco. The colours are bright and vibrant, and a calm exhilaration permeates the whole scene, enticing and inviting. It is a wonderful place.

Halfway up the wall of one of the *birrierías* is a defunct old street sign, identifying a road that no longer exists. It is above eye level and blends in subtly with the wall behind it, so is easy to miss, but its dated appearance combined with the fact that it is there at all gives it a shabby charm: there’s something enjoyably quaint about signage that has outstayed its relevance or utility. This is the sign that Sophie spotted during a laid-back lunch with some close friends, when every part of her tequila was finished, other than the name.



As a snapshot of a moment and of the Mexico that Sophie loves it was perfect, and so the obsolete sign for ‘23rd Street’ found new life as the name of Sophie’s tequila: Calle 23.



Sophie has been in Mexico for over 17 years and now lives a short walk away from the square and the sign.

The Creation of Calle 23

Sophie is a French biological chemist specialized in fermentation. She gets a posting to Mexico back in 1999, falls in love with the country and with tequila, decides to make her own for personal use and ultimately ends up exporting it to the whole world.

Beyond that is a treasure trove of geeky delight, as you would expect when someone with Sophie's background develops a passion for something.

Right from the conception of her tequila, Sophie brought an expertise to her new passion that led her into the agave fields with a stack of petri dishes and a needle.





Sterilising the needle – primitively but effectively – with a cigarette lighter she gently scraped different parts of the agaves to collect wild yeasts native to the fields, which she then incubated in her petri dishes.

Once these cultures had developed she began separating the yeasts: taking sections of each petri dish, transferring it to a new one and incubating again, then repeating the process, progressively having fewer strains until each yeast was isolated in its own dish. Having decided on highland agaves as being perfect for the tequila she envisioned, she then set to work fermenting batches of cooked agave with different yeasts and combinations of yeasts.

This gave Sophie & her team a number of suitable bases to distil and she began making different tequilas with them, blind-tasting the results until finally they arrived at the blanco they wanted, bursting with the distinctive flavour and aroma of cooked agave.



At the same time, she tested and blind-tasted between *autoclave*– and *horno*–cooked distillates, settling on the former. She would at first have preferred a *horno* for the appearance and the romance, but through strict blind-tasting she discovered that the result she wanted was best achieved through *autoclave*.

The blanco was then put into old ex Jack Daniel's casks to create reposado & añejo. Sophie always uses old casks, as the character she looks for in all her tequilas is that of agave, of the aroma she fell in love with on her first visit to a tequila distillery.

During this ageing time, Sophie had carried on experimenting and had found a different set of yeasts that made a blanco that she preferred, meaning she had two blanco tequilas. She thought to blend the – still very tasty - first production in future batches and therefore followed to taste that first tequila in barrels.

This is when she realized that she preferred her initial blanco as a Reposado after eight months. Leaving both versions in the casks to create two añejos, her preference was different again: she preferred the second blanco as an añejo, after around sixteen months in barrels.

The result of this is that Calle 23 team effectively makes two blanco tequilas, differentiated by the yeast strains they are fermented with. One of these is released as the blanco, and also put into cask to become the añejo; the other is all put into casks and becomes the reposado. This is a unique approach in the whole of tequila.

A New Arrival

For 15 years the blanco, reposado and añejo have been the whole Calle 23 family, but over time Sophie has kept a notebook of various ideas and experiments she would like to do.

From visits to the agave fields of *Los Altos* – the highlands of Jalisco – she had noticed plants known as *criollos*.



These are blue agave, but of a type that remains at a smaller size even when fully mature; they are occasionally in whole fields, occasionally just in part of a field, and are usually just combined with the rest of the crop. Watching them being harvested she discovered they have a distinctive aroma and are sticky to the touch, indicating high sugar content. Immediately the idea of a tequila made exclusively from *criollos* came to mind, which she wrote down in her notebook.

This was all but forgotten until a couple of years ago when she became pregnant with her son. Wanting to mark the occasion with a special tequila to celebrate her new arrival she began rifling through her notebook where – amongst ideas for yeasts, cooking methods and ageing – she remembered the blue agave *criollos* and the idea of a tequila made only using these special plants. There was some difficulty in convincing her team that this was a good thing to do – or even whether it would be any different – so, characteristically, Sophie did a blind-tasting of blue agave alongside *criollo* blue agave. That, ultimately, was enough to persuade the doubters and so Calle 23 Criollo was born: a single batch, utterly unique, one-off tequila.

This being a unique release, Sophie wanted to make every part special. The bottle is hand-blown, and the liquid is bottled at a higher strength than usual. Sophie's preferred strength – decided by blind-tasting, of course – was 49%, but as the water was added little by little during the dilution phase the tequila tasted so good at 49.3% that she stopped there.



Serendipity also played a large part in the beautiful label. At a tasting that overran (by a few hours) Sophie met the brother of an artist, Rose Guerrero, another French lady with a passion for Mexico. Rose's artwork is rich in Mexican symbols and imagery and was exactly what Sophie was looking for, so she asked Rose to create the hand-drawn design.

The blue agave and the smaller *Criollo* are on one side; a snake – an important symbol in Mexican culture – carries a penca stolen from the latter. A rose – the artist's name – nestles alongside another important Mexican symbol, the skull. On the other side the swallow, symbolising new arrivals, carries an image of Mayahuel (the goddess of agave) on her wings and wears a necklace announcing the two arrivals: an agave for Tequila Calle 23 Criollo and the letter 'A', for Abel: Sophie's son. Framed by all these images is an old street sign, with a shabby charm, which will be familiar to anyone who has looked up at the wall of the *Birriería las 9 Esquinas* in the old town of Guadalajara.

