

El Norteño

Texas' new beef jerky brand, El Norteño, might seem like an overnight sensation, but the journey to bring this brand to life and to Texas convenience stores has been over a decade in the making. With a healthy measure of persistence and inspiration from across the border, humble beginnings have led to big results as El Norteño is poised to become a go-to beef jerky brand for Texans - and Texans know good beef jerky when they taste it.

El Norteño's roots lie in two very different places - a drafty basement in rural Wisconsin and the bustling, colorful streets of Guadalajara, Mexico. Scott Hare, one of the brand's founders, perfected the craft of seasoning and drying meat, hanging jerky in his Wisconsin basement and giving it away to friends and family. After a couple years of "market research," Hare knew his recipes were getting better. People were constantly asking for more and were excited when he announced a new flavor or style of jerky.

That passion for crafting excellent taste, combined with the satisfaction of seeing people genuinely enjoy his jerky is what drove him to look beyond Wisconsin and seek inspiration from friends living South of the Border.

"I wanted to take everything I learned about making great jerky and do something totally different, a flavor and style no one else was doing, but I didn't know what that would be," says Scott Hare.

That all changed during a late night dinner with a couple of friends from Mexico. Long after the plates were cleared, Hare sat with his friends in a Mexican restaurant, discussing their meal and riffing about the power of unique flavors and how food brings people together. One of his friends made a comment about "the taste of home" and how he often missed flavors and styles that originated in his home country of Mexico. That's when the lightbulb went off. "We were on a plane the next week to meet with Mexican friends in Southern California and that's really where the journey to bring El Norteño to life began."

The team met in Los Angeles and later traveled to Guadalajara and went to work, focusing their attention on a much-loved style of meat snack called Cecina. Cecina (pronounced Suh-See-Na) is thinly-sliced sheets of beef, dried using air and sun, lightly salted and seasoned and sometimes rubbed with oil. Cecina first appeared in Mexico in the 1500s, brought over from Spain and is designated as a geographically protected flagship product of the province of León.

In Mexico, many Cecina recipes and methods have been passed down from generations. Thinly slicing the meat, typically made from the inside rounds of the beef cow, takes considerable skill and an incredibly sharp knife.

"I spent a lot of time sharpening my knife," adds Scott Hare.

After twelve months of travel back and forth, sharing samples and a whole lot of taste testing, the team was



convinced they had crafted an authentic, delicious snack that paid tribute to the true homestyle nature of Mexican Cecina. The name El Norteño (The Northern) was chosen to pay homage to the Norteño music culture so popular in Northern Mexico and throughout Texas and parts of the Southwest.

Taking the new brand El Norteño from home kitchen to Texas shelves would require a lot of dedication and a little bit of luck.

After several more years of growth and development, one of the early founders of El Norteño, Austin-resident and serial entrepreneur, Justin Jahnke was out on a sales call when he happened to sit down next to the right person at the right airport in Oklahoma City.

Jahnke sat down next to a brand scout for one of the world's largest beverage companies. The two began talking which eventually lead to El Norteño's acceptance into an Austin-based brand accelerator program called SKU. (www.sku.is)

SKU's mission is to grow and strengthen high potential brands and set them up for successful acceleration into the marketplace.

"I really just wanted a cold beer, but luck was on our side and the scout lead us to the SKU program," says Justin Jahnke of El Norteño's lucky break.

The 14-week intensive program wrapped in June 2017 and El Norteño has been blazing a hot trail since. Prior to acceptance into the SKU accelerator, El Norteño joined TFFA and exhibited in the "New and Now Block" at the annual Southwest Fuel and Convenience Show. That show would lead to a variety of key connections and relationships including an introduction to broker Dax Martinez - an industry veteran with more than 25 years under his belt.

"I enjoy working with new, sort of emerging brands that are just slightly off-center and El Norteño fit that bill. And it tastes great," says Dax Martinez of his working relationship with the company.

Based on great flavors and unique positioning, El Norteño is showing up in more and more Texas c-stores each week. Moving their headquarters to Austin and continuing to work with partners from Mexico, new flavors have been added, including what the El Norteño team is considering their future star - Mango Habanero Beef Jerky.

The team has also partnered with designers from Monterrey, Mexico. Brothers Mauricio and Alan DaVilla of La Mano Agency created El Norteño's new look, grounding the concept in the Northern Mexico and Texas music scene. Specifically, the designs (featured on the front cover) are based on The Texas-Mexican conjunto, a genre of música norteña that grew out of the cultural links between Texas and northern Mexico at the end of the 19th century, after German settlers introduced the button accordion.

Each flavor of El Norteño jerky and meat sticks is represented by a band member playing an instrument found in a Norteño band and each member has their own unique back story.



“We wanted to ground our brand in Tex-Mex and Norteño culture and flavors we love. We can say with confidence we are proudly different and not just another me-too,” adds Justin Jahnke.

The journey to bring El Norteño to Texas has been one of passion, taste, luck and connecting powerful cultures together. Just like the original conversation that sparked the idea, the goal of El Norteño is to get Texans excited about unique flavors and to truly satisfy with the taste of well-made beef jerky.

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