

Christa Cotton

Founder & CEO,
El Guapo



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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When it comes to New Orleans' cocktail culture, Christa Cotton has made waves since her arrival 11 years ago. After acquiring the El Guapo trademark in 2017, she has overseen the brand's growth through its cocktail bitters, syrups and mixers by forging partnerships with household names such as Costco and Neiman Marcus. El Guapo's clients also include Total Wine, Whole Foods and World Market and can be found locally at restaurants and bars. The products are sold in 42 states and three countries currently.

Cotton is now overseeing the conversion of the former BellSouth building at 3300 Gravier St. in Mid-City into El Guapo's new brewery. And with contracts underway in Georgia and Tennessee, her company is poised for rapid expansion in 2022.

Where are you from, and how did you get to New Orleans?

I grew up in Leesburg, Georgia, which is very near Albany, Georgia. The population is 2,600, and when I graduated from high school I went to Auburn University and Hurricane Katrina hit my freshman year. So I spent a lot of time helping my parents restore coastal properties that had been decimated by the storm. My father owns a large commercial real estate company that had several properties in and

around the New Orleans area, so I had a love for New Orleans. I knew I wanted to live here, and ultimately I helped my parents establish a distillery during the last half of my college career. Once I graduated, I knew that I wanted to learn about market strategy and market research, so I got a job at a firm here in New Orleans, and as soon as I got my diploma I got in my U-Haul and moved to New Orleans.

How did your distillery begin and evolve?

I started working when I was in middle school, doing random projects for my dad at our family real estate business. Then that sort of grew into managing his conventions in Las Vegas and in other places. Then I helped my father open Georgia's first legal distillery since prohibition. It's called 13th Colony. My brother, Max, actually runs it to this day. So when I left that, and I wanted to learn more about marketing and market research, is when I came to New Orleans and really got into the strategy side and research side of accounts, and everybody that I worked with (had) a hospitality focus. My main accounts were (with) the Louisiana Office of Tourism. Once I got to (New Orleans advertising agency) Trumpet and started working with hospitality accounts, I realized that I really wanted to marry what I was doing for other accounts but get back on the brand side and do something similar to what I was doing for my family's distillery in Georgia.

So the trademark for El Guapo was up for sale, and at first I really thought that I was too busy and overwhelmed with other things going on in my life. I, you know, wasn't planning on pursuing this, but after talking to my parents, my dad said, "If you don't do this, I'm going to," and that's really the push that I needed to set up my own LLC, acquire the trademark and get started. So that was in July of 2017, and here we are almost four and half years later with a very different business, a larger business that now is growing by building our own bitters distillery.

You talked about how you were kind of waiting for the trademark to open for El Guapo. What did that name kind of mean for you, and why did you choose it?

A lot of people think of New Orleans as a French city, but there is actually Spanish colonial architecture all over the French Quarter. And (El Guapo) means "the handsome," which is actually a great name to have in a bar environment. After talking to a bunch of people and really thinking about different ways to market this, I decided to stick with the name and go with the apothecary look and feel with the bottles because we are a New Orleans brand. I did rebrand, new logo, new labels, new style of doing things, but the name was preexisting.

How do you see the brand expanding outside of COVID-19 whenever it ends?

You're here in our building today, and you can hear the tape and the pallet wrapping going on behind me. This is the largest order that we've ever shipped, and we're launching three of our products in World Markets all across the country. So it's 258 stores, and it's our first nationwide launch of anything, which is really exciting, but it has been a long road. It took us three months to manufacture this, so I think as we install the brewing system and the bottling line and we get our processes filled up, it will be easier for us to take on more clients like this. But I do think you'll start seeing us in more and more accounts all across the country. I've had friends that are in New York and New Mexico or California, and they get so excited when they see it on store shelves. I get text messages from long-lost friends and people that I graduated high school with. They don't necessarily know the day-to-day or what I'm doing, but when they see it they recognize it and know that it's something that I've been working on. So it is really cool to finally be at the point where they see it "in the wild," as we like to say, and get really excited about it.

You mentioned some of the challenges that you had early on with people backing out and COVID-19. Would you say that you've had a support system throughout all of this?

I come from an extremely entrepreneurial family. When I was five, my dad started Victory Real Estate, which is the family real estate company. Having that support system behind me and that cheerleading section that's always there to answer questions, talk through decisions and help me as I think through this process has been really helpful. I went through Idea Village's IdeaX Program, and I'm one of their

most recent graduates. We finished that in May 2021, and Idea Village did a great job of introducing me to mentors here in town that could also help me that have more experience and have been where I am before in their career. One of those people is Corey Tisdale. He is the co-founder of BBQGuys, which is based in Baton Rouge, but he has extensive experience and knowledge in shipping and logistics, which is something that we've struggled with. Working with him has given us the ability to scale faster than we would have without having a mentor to walk us through the process.

You were a part of another program with Goldman Sachs. How did they help you?

Right after Neiman Marcus, I had my daughter and we knew were at a point where we needed to move to another building, but we weren't quite sure how to do that, we weren't quite big enough, we didn't know if we could afford it and we knew we needed some help. So I went through the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program at Delgado Community College in 2019. While going through that program, I got my business certification, and that's actually how I landed my deal with Costco. I did that accelerator program first, and it gave me a good foundation. It helped get the ball rolling and help realize that we don't just want to be a local company. We wanted to be a regional company and eventually a national company, and I wanted more education, honestly. After that, I applied for the Tory Burch Foundation and a Foundation Fellow, which is a national program, and Tory chooses 50 female entrepreneurs around the country every year. She offers expense education in every aspect of running a business, and it's very focused on scaling and growing revenue, so that changed my life. Being

a part of the Tory Burch Foundation gave me connections to people that I never thought I would have available to me. It really kind of set me on this path of trying to figure out how to get to the next step of manufacturing and automating all of our processes. From that point, I decided to apply for Idea Village, actually around this time last year. They have been great at telling us that it's really all about scaling, and we do have a scaling business here. Going through the Idea Village was more of an advanced accelerator, I would say, but they taught me a lot and they're a big part of how we're able to be in this building and growing as quickly as we are.

What kind of advice would you give up-and-coming entrepreneurs?

I would say that mentors are so, so important. Find people, maybe not even in your category, but people that you rapport and good relationship with and ask a ton of questions. You don't know what you don't know, and there's no stupid question. Be sure to seek advice, and also be looking around and doing as many tours and informational interviews with people as you can. I travel a lot to different accounts in cities for El Guapo, and in nearly every city that I go to I tour at least one food or beverage manufacturing facility because I'm always looking for ideas. Who's doing what well, and how can I apply that to my business? Find mentors, always be curious, and really focus as much as you can on growing your product. You can't wait forever to put something out there, so when you've achieved your MVP (your minimum viable product), put it out there and start making revisions and tweaking it as quickly as possible to get it to be a product that people want.



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