

CABO LIVING®

CELEBRATING 35 Years OF Cabo Wabo

Jorge Viaña shares his story and reflects on the journey of the last 35 years.

*~by Ardith Stephanson | photos courtesy of Cabo Wabo
& Francisco Estrada~*







When the stars align, a dream can come true. As they celebrate their 35th anniversary, Jorge Viaña and Cabo Wabo Cantina are proof of that. He had a dream, and the stars aligned to make it happen — although they were rock and roll stars, and not those in the night sky over Los Cabos.

Now more than three decades and plenty of hard work later, Jorge can reflect on the coincidental meetings that led to lifelong friendships and the birth of Cabo Wabo Cantina, now a cornerstone of Cabo San Lucas and the Los Cabos area for over three decades.

Cabo Wabo Cantina is in many ways synonymous with the Cabo lifestyle, and in

fact helped put Los Cabos on the map. The bar can take some credit for the popularity of the area, as rock star and part owner Sammy Hagar wrote a song about it, created a tequila, and talked about it at countless concerts with Van Halen and later in his solo rock career. He's still talking and singing about it.

When it all started, Cabo was like the

Van Halen song: *"A sleepy town, south of the border..."* Not anymore. Soaring popularity drives more tourists to the area every year. Now the cruise ships dock and passengers disembark, joining others heading straight to Cabo Wabo Cantina. Fans of all ages enjoy live music, grab a bite to eat, have a "Waborita" and buy a t-shirt. Many hope to catch a glimpse of someone famous, or line up for one of Sammy's October birthday bashes.

Sammy, Jorge, and Marco Monroy are the partnership trio behind the success of the Cantina, which all started with a chance meeting between Jorge and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. Jorge worked at the Twin Dolphin, back when Cabo had one paved road and few hotels. Keith was staying at the hotel, and appreciated that Jorge could speak English.

Keith decided to get married in Cabo, and asked Jorge to arrange his bachelor party. The simple wedding at Finisterra was big news, since The Rolling Stones are a big deal. When Sammy Hagar, then the lead singer for Van Halen, read about the wedding in *People* magazine, he decided he wanted to visit Cabo. He also stayed at Twin Dolphin, and it wasn't long before he met Jorge.

"Sammy came to me and asked me to drive him to town after work," Jorge tells the story. "Sammy says let's go have a margarita. Back in those days you could park anywhere, so we went to the Giggling Marlin, to have a margarita. Then I said I have to go to work. Sammy said you just finished work. I said I

have two jobs, because I'm saving money. I hope to open a bar someday."

Back then, Jorge was splitting time between the Twin Dolphin and Alfonso's Restaurant, and didn't even know who Sammy Hagar was. That changed when Sammy became a friend, and tried calling Jorge several times from California. Jorge's wife didn't speak English, so she used to hang up.

"One day a guy shows up at the door, and my wife signs for a package," Jorge says. "I open it, and it's a box with an answering

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(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | *OPPOSITE PAGE:* Fans waiting in line for Sammy Hagar's Birthday Bash. *Jorge Viaña with Sammy Hagar.* **THIS PAGE:** Jorge Viaña, Michael Anthony, Sammy Hagar, Alex Van Halen and Eddie Van Halen.



machine. A note with it says: 'Jorge, hook this up, Sammy.' Next day my wife says, that crazy guy who phones you all the time, he left you a message. It said, 'Jorge, call me collect, I want you to come up to the States.'"

Sammy arranged for Jorge, his wife, and two daughters to travel to San Diego for a Van Halen show. They were invited to the private post-show party where friends and family gathered for a meal (Mexican food, of course) and a chance to meet the band.

"This is the first person I met in Cabo," Sammy told everyone, or so the story goes.

"He works at two jobs and wants to open a bar. Well, guess what Jorge. We are going to open a bar in Cabo San Lucas."

The dream was quickly becoming reality, and Jorge had to put his feet on the ground and get to work. He found a property for the bar — the current location — and then had to find architects to design the renovations. He got five architects to draft designs, which needed to include a store, a restaurant with a patio, a small kitchen, a bar, storage and of course a stage.

Sammy reviewed the designs with Jorge

(BELOW) | John Entwistle with Jorge Viaña. Slash, Jorge Viaña, Alice Cooper, Marco Monroy, Sammy Hagar and Rob Zombie. Joe Satriani and Sammy Hagar.





and they chose the design by Marco Monroy Jr., who became a partner in the venture, along with the other members of Van Halen. The now famous Lighthouse out front of the building was part of the original design, but the rock stars didn't read the specs very well.

"During construction, Eddie Van Halen alerted Sammy, telling him I was spending too much money," Jorge says. "So Eddie, Alex, Sammy, and Michael sent a roadie to check up on me. Not an engineer or an architect. A roadie shows up with a big satellite phone. He calls them and says

'Sammy. You guys don't have any idea what this guy is doing. You guys are thinking in square feet and he's building in square meters.' "

Of course the plans would be in meters in Mexico, which operates on the metric system. The footprint of the bar ended up being three times bigger than what the members of Van Halen thought they had planned. As it turns out, that's a good thing,

(ABOVE) | THIS PAGE: Chriss Angel, Michael Anthony, Toby Keith, Sammy Hagar, Chad Smith, Ted Nugent and Vic Johnson. Taylor Hawkins and Jorge Viaña. Sammy Hagar, Emeril Lagasse and Matt Sorum.

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(ABOVE) | Sammy Hagar and Kenny Chesney. Bono and Jorge Víaña. Michael Anthony and Sammy Hagar.

as it's often filled to its maximum 750-seat capacity, or turning people away, especially when Sammy comes to town.

Today's Cabo Wabo Cantina is much the same as it was 35 years ago, although the rest of Van Halen sold out to the three remaining partners shortly after the bar opened. A few changes were made to the original design, like moving the stage location, and building a bridge that musicians cross to enter the stage from the dressing rooms.

"That was the best idea in the world, to have that big beautiful stage," Jorge says. "It has given us a lot of memories, lots of rock stars, and movie stars, and musicians from all over the world have played on that stage."

In the beginning, however, it was hard to get people in the door. Then Sammy's birthday bashes created momentum. The first was held in 1992 without much fanfare. By the second year, fans were lining up. Now the bashes are so popular that tickets are handled with a random drawing process, including this October when Sammy will celebrate his 77th birthday with two shows at Cabo Wabo.

There are some other milestone decisions that helped Cabo Wabo Cantina enjoy success, like the inclusion of a store to sell shirts, mugs and other Cabo Wabo souvenirs.

Back in 1990, the bar had a grand

opening handled by the rock and roll industry, and that included shirts and other concert-type swag, in true rock star fashion. Jorge didn't even know what to answer when Van Halen's producer asked how many shirts to make. Those tees sold out quickly, and the adjoining store sells plenty of souvenirs with the distinctive Cabo Wabo design. In fact, the idea of selling "swag" has been adopted by many other bars in Los Cabos.

Another draw is the rock stars who show up to play — those who are booked and promoted, and those who take the stage unannounced. Iggy Pop played the first New Year's Eve, Alice Cooper did a live album at

the Cantina, and of course when people hear Sammy is in town, they line up down the street. Three house bands play every night, so live music is key to the bar's success.

The grand opening in 1990 also featured a few cases of a special tequila made by Casa Patron. That led to Sammy's idea to make Cabo Wabo tequila, which was successful and added to the brand's popularity. The group Campari bought the tequila in 2007.

Another boost to business was when Marco suggested they advertise on cruise

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(BELOW) | Cabo Wabo Tequila and Sammy's Beach Bar Rum. Bobby Weir and Jorge Viaña. Jerry Cantrell, Sammy Hagar and Vic Johnson at Sammy's Birthday Bash.



ships. They placed an ad in the books that are in guest rooms, and suddenly people were getting off the ships and asking “Where is Cabo Wabo?”

It hasn’t always been smooth sailing, however. Not long after the opening, the Gulf War hit, which impacted tourism. Like the rest of Los Cabos, Cabo Wabo Cantina has weathered the storm of hurricanes, financial crises, and the global pandemic. Jorge attributes a dedicated team of staff, great food, and a welcoming atmosphere to the success. It’s not *just* about the rock stars, as witnessed by the changing clientele.

“We have the Van Halen fans, the Sammy Hagar fans, the Cabo Wabo fans, and the

tourists,” Jorge says. “When I get out of the car some of the tourists say, ‘Sammy, Sammy,’ and I say ‘I am not Sammy!’ People come to see the Cantina who don’t know Sammy, and don’t know the other ones in the pictures. Younger generations haven’t heard of Aerosmith, or Montrose. It’s amazing.”

And what about that distinctive name? In the early days of their friendship, Sammy and Jorge passed by a gentleman wobbling down the street, victim of one too many tequilas. Sammy quipped that he was

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| (BELOW) | Jorge Viaña, Chad Kroeger and Toby Keith. |







Jorge Viaña and
Sammy Hagar.

“We have grown so much, and we have a perfect place... I personally go very often, I like to meet people, talk to people. I don’t see myself retiring any time soon...”



“Walkin’ the streets, doing the Cabo Wabo” — a play on the word wobble — and the concept was born.

After 35 years, don’t count on the Cabo Wabo Cantina fading into the sunset, however. As the song says: *If you go there once, you’ll be there twice.*

“We have grown so much, and we have a perfect place,” Jorge concludes. “We still have lots of energy to work on it, to do more things. We are not a place where we are just sitting and waiting for people to come in. I personally go very often, I like to meet people, talk to people. I don’t see myself retiring any time soon. The same with the partners Marco and Sammy, we have a lot of energy. We have more fans of the Cantina and they are still going to show up.

“The Cantina is my life, it’s something I dreamed, and something Sammy helped me to do, and Marco helped me to do. When you put in the seeds, these are the flowers that grow.”

El Fin!