The Power of Poblano

After 90 years and two generations, the family-run Poblano Hot Sauce is as strong as ever (literally).

BY VANESSA BARCHFIELD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MECKLER

It's one of those instantly recognizable Tucson icons: A woman with bare shoulders and braids, wearing a sombrero as she holds her chile high. It's the Poblano bottle, of course—"The Sauce Supreme."

During the seven years I lived in Austria, on each visit back to Tucson, my suitcase grew increasingly heavier on the return as I crammed more and more of those classic bottles of green Poblano into any empty space I could find. When I ran into other Tucsons abroad, I realized I wasn't alone. A lawyer in Vienna eschewed suitcases altogether and had his parents ship him a case of the sauce; a musician friend of mine toured Europe all summer with Poblano in his backpack.

The first bottle that made the journey with me from Tucson deep into central Europe in 2007 had a label announcing Poblano's 83rd birthday; by the time I moved back home earlier this year, that number had climbed to 90.
Ninety years that the neon green hot sauce has been tempering Tucsonan’s scrambled eggs and quesadillas, right? Well no, not exactly. Just as Tucson is a very different city today than it was in the Model T days of the 1920s, Poblano is a very different company.

In fact, in 1924, it was neither called Poblano nor was it a hot sauce. When Poblano’s founder Nicolas Segura went into business in Tucson, his first venture was a restaurant. “My parents came from Mexico to Tucson in 1920, in search of a better life,” said Nicolas’s son and the current owner of Poblano, Oscar Segura (or “Big Oscar,” as I was told to call him the first time I phoned the company). Nicolas, who had been a taco vendor at a train station in Mexico before coming to the United States, opened the doors of his restaurant in September of 1924. “Other than El Charro, it was the only Hispanic restaurant around.”

The story goes that the restaurant was the first in Tucson with “folded” tacos on the menu. It was there that Nicolas eventually began serving a hot sauce made of chilepin peppers and vinegar, a recipe his father in Mexico passed down to him, to accompany his tacos. “The sauce was so good, people started telling him he should bottle it and sell it to stores,” Oscar said.

But language barriers and, presumably, family obligations—Nicolas and his wife, Angelita, had five sons and three daughters—kept him focused exclusively on his restaurant through the 20s and 30s.

“It was in the 40s that he closed the restaurant and started packaging his salsas,” Oscar said. Nicolas funneled those initial batches of his hot sauce into empty Miller Beer bottles. “We all helped,” Oscar said, “the whole family. My brothers, Johnny, Nick, and Georgie, and myself, we did the packaging. But eventually Nick joined the Marines and Johnny joined the Army, and then Georgie followed suit. I would help after school but then I joined the Army as well.”

While his sons got older and started their own families and fought in wars abroad, Nicolas’s salsa business kept growing. He and a rotating cadre of close family members managed most of the operations, but the one outsider who played an important role in Poblano’s early days was a man named Bill Pinder. “We called him Chile Bill,” Oscar said.

Chile Bill and Nicolas’s youngest son, Gilberto, handled distribution, placing Poblano bottles on the shelves of grocery stores in Tucson and, eventually, in larger chain stores around the state. Poblano’s business remained fairly steady until 1985. “I was 51,” Oscar said. “I worked then as a cashier at Fry’s but still helped my dad with the business.”

In March of that year, Nicolas, who had been suffering from kidney problems, was hospitalized at St. Mary’s. “We had just ordered a fresh batch of jalapeños. We cleaned them. Then they needed to be ground. But only my father knew the exact recipe,” Oscar said.

Nicolas was released from the hospital on a Friday and spent that weekend in the Poblano factory with Oscar, his second youngest son. “He showed me the exact method for grinding and

Oscar Segura, or “Big Oscar,” holds the reins at Poblano Hot Sauce today, continuing the legacy his father, Nicolas, began 90 years ago.
mixing. He did the first barrel. The second barrel, I did. Everything was very secret. He told me: 'What you see here, don't tell anyone else.'" Nicolas died a few days later.

In many ways, the Poblano Hot Sauce Company of today hasn't changed much since the '40s. It remains an entirely family-run business. Oscar himself has five sons and two daughters. "My son Oscar and daughter Tammy decided to work with me. Then my wife joined, too."

But now, Oscar said, he's less involved in the business. Like his father, he's plagued with kidney troubles. "I have to get kidney dialysis three times a week. I'm there from 10 to 2—there are two needles that draw and recycle my blood. It's that machine that's keeping me alive," said Oscar, who's now in his late 70s. "I can't risk getting contaminated, so [my son] Javier de-stems and grinds the jalapeños. I do the administration and paperwork. My family, they do the packing and distribution."

Oscar said after Food City placed an order last year for 600 cases of hot sauce, he called his daughter Angela and her husband, Bobby, to ask for help with the labeling. "They were working so hard. She asked me, 'Can I take some?' I said 'M'ija, you're part of the family. Take what you want.'"

Poblano also remains available almost exclusively in Arizona. It's on the shelves of Food City, Fry's, and Safeway. If it's not on your table at the Cup Café, just ask for some. Although he's long eyed the larger markets of San Diego or Los Angeles, Oscar said he's never been able to find the right people to take his product further afield.

If customers outside of the Arizona state line want Poblano, the Segura family ships to them directly. While I'm sitting with Oscar in his one-room factory in a South Dodge business park, a restaurant in Kansas City calls to place an order for four gallons of the green jalapeño sauce. "We had a gentleman in New York City. He was a part-time movie actor who had been in some Westerns at Old Tucson. He bought 10 cases of our salsa ranchera and sold them on the sidewalks of New York for a while. But then he got more into the movie business and had to stop."

But probably the most important way Poblano remains true to its origin is its very composition. "The green jalapeño sauce hasn't changed at all; it's still my dad's original recipe," Oscar said. He's vague when I ask if he's already passed down the recipe to one of his children, as his father did to him.

What he's not vague about is the size of his company and the
direction he wants it to move in. “We sell 175,000 cases each year and are growing bigger all the time.” He’s on the lookout for a new facility to house his still-blossoming business. “We’re checking out a place on Main Street and Speedway now. This is just too small,” he said, looking around the room. It’s cramped with empty bottles waiting to be filled and labeled, with barrels holding the jalapeños, spices, and mustard that marinate together over the course of several days.

Before I leave the Poblano factory, Oscar opens the barrels for me to sniff the four distinct sauces his company produces. There’s the green jalapeño, the red jalapeño, the so-called Mexican hot sauce, and salsa ranchera. My eyes tear from the spices.

So what is it about these Poblano sauces that makes us Tucsonians resort to excessive measures to ensure a bottle is always close at hand?

I think it’s actually quite simple: They taste like home.

Poblano Hot Sauce. 3250 S. Dodge Blvd. 520-519-1330.

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