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*makers*

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[What's New](#)



## **Meet Doug and Amy Smith**

Exo Roast Co./Bar Crisol is a coffee house and mezcal bar, but its owners Doug and Amy Smith say, to them, it's so much more.

It represents their personal preferences, for full-bodied coffee with chocolate notes and for mezcal that's "50 times more terroir-driven than wine," according to Doug.

It embodies their ideology, to preserve and perpetuate the long held cross-border ties between Tucson and Mexico.

It tells the story of their family life, raising one child in the backdrop of the coffee shop and honing another older child's business acumen in coffee importation and production.

And it embodies their values, forming deep-seated relationships with communities and non-profits in and around Tucson and Mexico that are preserving native plants and traditions, and thoughtfully approaching sustainability and expansion issues.

“It would be hard to separate our business from our marriage,” Amy said. “We really have been married to Exo alongside our own marriage. It’s incredibly embedded in our lives.”

Amy and Doug’s dream to begin a coffee business was a longheaded one, dating back to her youth and his young adult life. Amy was raised in the coffee business of the Pacific Northwest, and while attending the University of Arizona in the ‘80s Doug used to frequent Bentley’s House of Coffee Tea, where he and their other business partner, Chris Byrne, offhandedly talked about one day opening their own.

Then in 2009, after learning how to roast coffee while living in Portland, Doug and Chris’s dream was born. The duo began turning out coffee for various wholesale accounts in Tucson, including Time Market, where Amy recalls first being made aware of Doug’s talents.

“I secretly had a crush on Doug because I noticed the difference in the quality of the coffee,” said Amy. “When I asked what they were doing differently, they pointed to Doug.”



Shortly thereafter, Amy and Doug became an item both personally and professionally. They share a love of academics (both were teachers) and what Amy refers to as “placemaking” or highlighting the region’s abundance and history as a borderland.

“Building connections to Mexico has always been at the center of our mission,” Doug said. “Tucson is a place that we celebrate, the Borderlands is a place that we celebrate and the Southern Arizona to Mexico connection is another thing we celebrate.”

That celebration is on full display at their two locations. They source from Mexican producers to create a product that is reflective of the people who live, and the flavors found within the Tucson Borderlands region. Hence, the reason why their chiltepín and mesquite cold brews, and creosote-laced house margarita are among their most heralded offerings.

But Doug and Amy view their business as more than just a coffee shop that’s

embraced regional ingredients. It's also a place that's inextricably intertwined with the causes they're most passionate about. In fact, on the day I speak with them, Doug, who has his PhD in Environmental Anthropology, is wearing a hat that reads Borderlands Restoration Network, a non-profit in which he sits on the board. The conservation organization's mission is to address watershed and native habitat restoration issues on both sides of the border. He's also a board member of Native Seeds SEARCH, a seed conservation non-profit that's based in Tucson and nationally recognized as one of the industry's thought leaders.

Over the course of our interview, Doug and Amy name four other non-profits they work closely with, all of which advocate for strengthening the local food system or creating community spaces that are more sustainable.

"The mission of the coffee house is to create an approachable setting where we can authentically appreciate Tucson and connect with others," Amy said. "A lot of those connections are with conservation and non-profit networks, and the relationships that we've built over the last decade or so."

These days, Exo-goers are connecting while sipping not just on coffee, but also mezcal, a spirit that Doug is particularly enraptured by. Though their mezcal bar, Crisol, didn't open until 2017, Doug has been interested in the spirit since the 90s.

"I had a chance to see it in its maybe most intense cultural matrix at a patron saint fiesta in the state of Guerrero, where mezcal was circulating among people who were taking part in the revelry, how this was a kind of ritual gesture that bound people together in community," Doug said. "That's the kind of charged situation that is almost beyond description – it's more than the sum of its parts, it's a really transcendent experience."

That scene was on replay in his head over the years, until Doug and Amy

advocated for a portion of Exo Coffee's original location to be re-allocated as a bar.



Today, the mezcal is flowing at Crisol, yet another embodiment of their commitment to partnering with producers from Mexico. Their mezcal program is about more than just sipping on the spirit, however, because each tasting (Doug offers them every Thursday) has an educational component. Beyond painting a picture of the regional relevance of the spirit, Doug, Amy, and their employees share information about mezcal so that patrons understand its vast diversity, cultural importance, and the sustainability issues it faces.

Given their commitment to education, it comes as no surprise that Crisol is one of the most conspicuous businesses at Tucson's Agave Heritage Festival that occurred at the end of last month.

"I think the festival is probably the most important of its kind in the whole world. We bring together scholars, researchers, producers, brand representatives, botanists, geographers on both sides of the border... to talk



about the significance of the spirits, their history, their culture, their geography, and their future,” Doug said. “It’s almost as much an education conference as it an agave industry event.”

As for what’s next for Exo Coffee and Crisol, Doug and Amy say they’re exploring opportunities to import coffee beans themselves, a new facet of their business that their 27-year-old daughter who has experience working for a large roaster, could take the reins on.

And they’re celebrating the one-year anniversary of their second Exo location in a more than 125-year-old adobe home in Tucson’s historic Barrio Viejo. They hope to expand the building’s exterior space by adding a back patio and demonstration garden that they’d like to partner with the local elementary school on for education purposes.

“The development of that location, it’s been a nice slow process – not unlike roasting a good batch of coffee,” Amy said.

“We aren’t the type of business owners that look to expand by having 10 locations. Rather than expand the footprint to other locations, we’d like to maximize the footprint we have,” Doug added.

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