Alumni entrepreneurs launch health-focused cocktail line

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Tomas Crowe, left, and Tim Demirjian are co-founders of Dezo, a ready-to-go cocktail that combines vodka with ingredients like coconut water, acai and Himalayan sea salt.

Tomas Crowe (BSM ’18) and Tim Demirjian (BSM ’18) are co-founders of Dezo, the “world’s first superfruit cocktail.” Both alums say that their experiences and opportunities at Tulane made their entrepreneurial venture possible.

“Dezo is a product of our time and experience in the city of New Orleans,” Crowe says. They co-founded the company with Demirjian’s childhood friend, Marc Kessler.

Crowe and Demirjian both earned Bachelor of Science in Management degrees from

the Freeman School. Crowe said many of Freeman's courses were project- and presentation-based, which gave the aspiring business leaders confidence in making frequent off-the-cuff presentations to investors and partners.

Since Dezo officially launched in the summer of 2020 in Los Angeles, the company has sold over a quarter of a million cans, and the drinks are distributed in California, Nevada and Massachusetts. They have a deal with a large distributor, and people can also order Dezo online in 30 states.

In further evidence of its emerging success, Dezo has attracted numerous partners and investors, including retired Patriots Hall of Famer Richard Seymour and Mike Levine, the co-head of CAA Sports.

Dezo currently sells three canned vodka-based beverages in the flavors of coconut water, cactus water and watermelon. Ingredients are rich in electrolytes and antioxidants.

Demirjian remembers that he and Crowe were seniors at Tulane when they first started thinking about developing a health-conscious beverage so that people wouldn't have to choose between enjoying a vivid social life and being productive the next day. "We started having an open conversation about creating a healthy alternative to sugary cocktails, creating something that was convenient, healthy and something that tasted really, really good. Something that was transparent, so you knew exactly what you were putting in your body. We wanted a functional beverage that allowed us to not have to sacrifice our social life or productivity."

Fast forward to a few months after graduation. They both accepted full-time jobs and were living in Los Angeles, Crowe's hometown. Demirjian had grown up in Boston, and the idea for Dezo truly gelled after he had a conversation with his roommate, who would become their third co-founder, Marc Kessler.

Kessler's family owns the oldest continuously operating tavern in America, the Bell

in Hand Tavern in Boston, and he had experience creating new cocktails. When he told Demirjian about a coconut-water-based cocktail with gluten-free vodka that he made at his family's tavern, Demirjian said a light bulb went off, and he knew he needed to get his friends together.

They lined up ingredients in the kitchen of Kessler and Demirjian's apartment, and made different iterations of drinks, until, Demirjian says, "the drink tasted really, really good. And we all looked at each other, and we were like, 'let's do this.'"

At first, the company was a "5-to-9 job after our 9-to-5," Demirjian says, while they sought investors, developed the formula and landed on a marketing plan. They decided on the name Dezo, which is an improvisation of the French term des eaux, which translates to "of the waters," a fact that they realized only after they had decided upon the name.

"It was a divine, happenstance moment," Demirjian says.

They quit their jobs to focus on Dezo full time and had a marketing and rollout strategy in southern California when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. They no longer could serve samples of their new drink in retail stores. "People were not really willing to try new products from a stranger in a public place," recalls Crowe. On top of that, their distributor laid off much of its workforce.

The three co-founders were thrust into the position of distributing their own product. "We did everything," Crowe says. "We still do a lot, but then it was even more."

Crowe says the company's motto, "Respectfully wild," describes the juxtaposition that is inherent in the concept behind Dezo — of being respectful of your body and having an active social life.

What’s next for Dezo? They have raised nearly $2 million, and the founders are continuing to seek partners as they focus on continued growth in 2022. They are finalizing a couple big partnerships that could be transformative to the company, according to Demirjian. They are looking to expand into new states and develop more flavors.

There’s an old adage about never getting into business with friends. For Crowe and Demirjian, who became close through their fraternity at Tulane and their business classes at Freeman, running a business has brought their friendship even closer together.

“Knowing I get to experience success with one of my best friends,” Demirjian says, “nothing could be better than that.”

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