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BON APPÉTIT

GETTING TEQUILA STRAIGHT

*Super-premiums are made to sip and savor*GRADES OF TEQUILA: [BLANCO](#) · [RESPOSADO](#) · [ANEJO](#)

Once known as a coarse and fiery spirit that needed to be combined with fruit juice and sugar in order to be palatable, tequila has become respectable — and not just in the sunny states that border Mexico, but all over the country.

Despite its macho image, tequila has no more alcohol than Scotch or any number of other spirits. And like them, tequila is distilled from fermented plants. Scotch is made from barley, bourbon from corn and rye, rum from sugarcane, and tequila from agave. Though it is often mistaken for a cactus, this tough-skinned plant with pointed, barbed leaves is actually more closely related to the lily.



There are some four hundred types of agave, but tequila is made from only one — the blue agave (so called because of its silvery blue leaves). It flourishes in the dry, mineral-rich volcanic soil on the hillsides near Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco state.

The plant is harvested when it has reached a height of about four feet, which takes around ten years. Its heart — which resembles a pineapple and is called a *piña*, the Spanish word for that fruit — is baked (transforming the starches into sugar), then ground, shredded and washed with water. The resulting juice is fermented and distilled to produce tequila, which is named after a small town in Jalisco that is a major producer of the spirit.

Only the best tequilas, the so-called "premiums" or "super-premiums," are made entirely from blue agave. Many ordinary tequilas — inexpensive, primitive, hangover-producing types that are blended into pitchers of [margaritas](#) — contain as little as 51 percent blue agave sugar combined with 49 percent fermented and distilled sugar syrup.

In 1978, the Mexican government established Norma Oficial Mexicana (NOM), a kind of Appellation Contrôllée, to regulate every aspect of tequila. According to its rules, tequilas distilled from 100 percent blue agave must be labeled as such, and premium varieties have to be bottled in Mexico (much of the cheap stuff comes to the United States in tanker trucks and is bottled here.).

NOM also assigns every tequila to a category, based on age and color. Clear, fresh-from-the-still tequila is called *blanco* and is sold as "white" or "silver"; unaged tequila that has turned pale amber from a dose of caramel is called *joven abocado* (which roughly translates as "bottled when young") and is sold as "gold"; tequila that has aged in oak for at least two months and up to a year is called *reposado*, meaning "rested"; and tequila that has spent at least a year in oak is called *añejo*, or "aged."

The *Bon Appétit* Tasting Panel sampled more than 30 premium tequilas. One of the most remarkable things about them is their individuality: They have nuances and unique characters, as fine wines do. We did not try any from the category of *joven abocado*, which is not used by the makers of premium tequilas. As these "gold" tequilas are given "age" by the addition of caramel to unaged spirits, they are relegated to the low end of the market.

BLANCO

The best blanco tequilas are lively and clean with brisk spices. They are delicious on the rocks with a squeeze of lime or as part of an exceptional margarita. Some of them are on the crisp, dry side — almost a sort of aromatic vodka; others tend to be spicy and rich.

The leanest of the bunch was **Distinkt Platinum**, a clean, lightly spicy spirit with a silky texture and a crisp, elegant finish. This one would add an interesting twist to a [martini](#). Equally dry but a bit spicier was the **Chinaco Blanco** and the lively **Silver Patrón**. Tequila giant Jose Cuervo has an attractive entry in this category called **Dos Reales Plata**, which is fleshy and rich with a creamy texture. We liked the tones of new leather and vanilla in the **El Tesoro Silver**, but our two favorites were the **Herradura Silver** — which impressed us with its elegance and a floral, lemony bouquet — and the **Porfidio Silver**, which delivers an amazingly lush, tropical nose and a long spicy finish. The range of these tequilas was surprising, especially considering they have had no aging at all.

REPOSADO

Even though it is only a few months, the time *reposado* tequilas spend in oak smooths and shapes the young spirits and gives them finesse.

The driest reposado was **Cazadores**, which has a brisk, lemony aroma and a sophisticated, herby flavor. **Jose Cuervo Tradicional** is a clean, fresh and lovely version with just a touch of sweetness to round out the flavors. We really liked two fruitier reposados, the **El Viejito** — smooth and spicy with a long finish — and **Sauza Hornitos**, which was lush and smoky with hints of vanilla and honey. Our number one choice was the venerable **Herradura** — it offers flavors of oak, spice and orange peel in a superb, long-lasting tequila. Reposado tequilas are excellent sipped on the rocks or neat.

ANEJO

The añejo category is the most crowded and the most interesting. These tequilas are at home in a snifter or on the rocks and can be used interchangeably with small-batch bourbons, single malt Scotches or fine brandies. They come in a wide variety of styles, from the brisk, smoky, tobacco spice of **Patrón** to the fruity, oaky intensity of **El Tesoro**; from the toasty, peppery elegance of **Herradura** to the lush vanilla spice of **Centinela Tres Años**. There are even a couple of the better añejos — **Sauza Tres Generaciones** and **Sauza Conmemorativo** — that are not made from 100 percent agave.

One of the best añejos was **Jose Cuervo La Reserva de la Familia**, a dark, complex, limited-edition spirit made to commemorate the company's 200-year anniversary. It has the elegance of fine [cognac](#). Our other favorites were the three from **Porfidio**, a small Jalisco producer with a German-born distiller. Their **Single Barrel Añejo** is sold in a great-looking handblown bottle with a green glass cactus inside. The tequila itself, which is aged in small barrels for a minimum of two years, is lush and complex with layers of oak, tropical fruit and spice. You do, however, have to pay for quality; these tequilas ring in at about \$75 per bottle.

— Adapted from an article by Anthony Dias Blue, *Bon Appétit*, October 1995

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