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The Tequila Monster

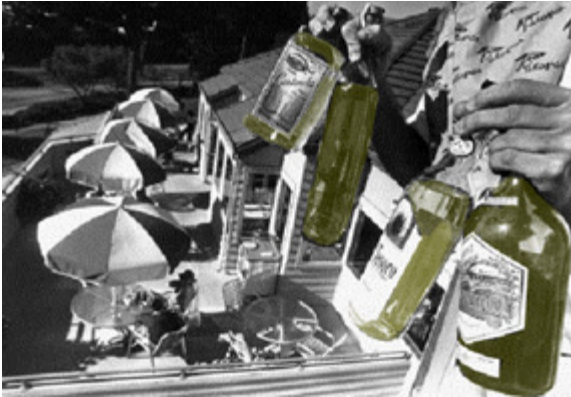


Photo by Erin N. Calmes

Some Like It Hot: Handsome but headless Palapas bartender Rob Wall displays a selection of the restaurant's hotter-than-jalapeño fine tequila line.

Too many heavy drinkers get all queasy with hangover flashbacks at the very mention of tequila, but they haven't tried the good stuff--yet

By Gordon Young

Trust me. A frat party--or any other social gathering where guests are likely to throw up in the hibiscus before the night ends--is the worst place to learn about the charms of tequila. Downing shots of inferior-grade Mexican petrol to the strains of "Louie Louie" with your fellow rent-a-friends is an insult to the creation that author Tom Robbins once described as "the liquid geometry of passion," not to mention an affront to your brain cells and your self-esteem.

Then again, tequila and intelligence have never been close friends in this country. Booze hounds love to use cheap tequila as an excuse to act a fool. I once had a roommate who polished off a bottle of bad tequila and fashioned an elaborate knot around his treasured bowling ball with a long

stretch of twine. He then tied the other end to the back of his rickety blue Schwinn and started doing laps around the block. He was having a great time until the Black Beauty lodged in a storm drain--the ultimate gutter ball--and he somersaulted his way into the Tequila-Haters Fan Club.



Here's a few [local saloons](#) that serve up the good stuff.



Tequila, to put it bluntly, was something to get you hammered. The salt and lime routine was nothing more than a stylish ritual created to hoodwink your taste buds. Most people didn't know *good* tequila even existed. With due respect to José Cuervo--the manufacturer that has dominated the U.S. market--for a long time you simply couldn't get fine tequila in very many places outside Mexico. Thankfully, that's beginning to change. Tequila, according to no less an authority than the *Wall Street Journal*, "is growing up." More importantly, the drinking public's taste in tequila is maturing as availability increases.

The liquor industry, facing declining sales in other product lines, has embraced well-made tequila as a sophisticated, high-quality spirit suitable for sipping and savoring in much the same way it cozied up to single-malt scotch and small barrel bourbons a few years back. Premium tequilas, with high prices and fat profit margins, now account for a growing share of the approximately five million cases of tequila sold in the United States annually.

"Tequila sales are on the rise because of new super-premiums that have attracted consumers looking for quality and unique taste," *Nation's Restaurant News* enthused earlier this year. "Buyers are learning that a top-grade tequila can be as satisfying as a fine cognac."

Importers are bringing dozens of obscure, handcrafted offerings into the country, and upscale restaurants and bars are stocking up. Left At Albuquerque, a Palo Alto eatery, already offers more than 100 different tequilas. "The response has been very good," says Left At Albuquerque owner Duke Rohlen. "We have a couple of customers who come in every day and try a new tequila. It sort of makes you wonder what their lives are like, but it shows you how devoted some people are to tequila."

Rob Welsh, the bartender at Costa Brava in Santa Cruz, points out that the customers downing tequila these days don't fit the stereotypes. "It's definitely an older crowd drinking the really good tequila," Welsh says. "It's

not a college trend. All the students are out doing shots of Jagermeister."

Praying to the Agave God

Of course, some aficionados knew the merits of tequila long before the marketing teams made it trendy. Tommy's Mexican Restaurant on Geary Boulevard in San Francisco is the closest thing to a tequila shrine in America. Barring a trip to Mexico, it has been the perfect place to get in touch with the essence of Aztec for the past three decades. Tommy's isn't a chain. The proprietors don't wear hokey sombreros or sing happy birthday to customers. They don't yell *Olé!* when they deliver the food to your table. And they don't mess around with rot-gut tequila or powdered margarita mixes. In order to fully appreciate the tequila emporiums springing up in Santa Cruz and the South Bay, I decided to head for Tommy's for a little schooling in the art of tequila drinking.

Tommy's was closing up shop around 11 the night I arrived for an after-hours drinking session with 30-year-old Julio Bermejo, the tequila *experto* whose father, Tomás, opened the place a few months after Julio's birth. Without even trying, the 63-year-old Tomás has the look a lot of Bay Area hipsters strive for: black-framed retro glasses, a dusky blue cowboy shirt unbuttoned far enough to reveal a white T-shirt and a decidedly large, gleaming crucifix on a gold chain. The cross gave him a vaguely ecclesiastic air as he blessed the handful of drinkers at the small wooden bar with a smile and a handshake. He then exchanged a few words in Spanish with Julio and called it a day.

Julio looked comfortable behind the cozy, dimly lit bar in a cream-colored *guayabera* and jeans. The restaurant's darkened dining area surrounds the bar, giving it the appearance of a well-appointed cave. A graduate of UC-Berkeley, Julio makes trips to Mexican tequila distilleries three or four times a year to sample products, talk to manufacturers and augment his private stock. Although he can't sell them, Julio often treats his friends to amazing tequilas available only in Mexico. On this occasion, he's fresh from a recent journey south of the border that included a side run to Havana for his other passion--Cuban cigars.

To understand what makes the tequila selection at Tommy's so impressive, you have to understand the agave plant, a species whose name is derived from the Greek word for "noble" or "admirable." There are more than 100 varieties of agave, a plant closer to a lily than a cactus. Specifically, tequila is distilled from *Tequiliana weber azul*, more commonly known as the blue agave. Each sword-like, silvery blue leaf is tipped with a single thorn and equipped with sharp, menacing ridges along each edge. The plant seems

intent on protecting its sweet, starchy *piña* or "core" that is cooked and robbed of its fermentable sugars to make tequila.

According to Mexican law, 51 percent of the alcohol in a bottle of tequila must come from the fermented sugars of the blue agave. To save money, the lower-quality tequilas rarely exceed the 51 percent threshold. The best tequilas--including most of the four-dozen available at Tommy's--are distilled from 100 percent agave. A good rule of thumb is that if it ain't 100 percent agave, it carries a 110 percent chance of delivering a hangover that will make your eyes ache.

"For most people, their first experience with tequila is a tragic one," Julio says. "That's because they drink the cheap tequila sold in most bars and grocery stores. That stuff's poison. It's paint thinner. I'll show you how real tequila tastes. We can stay here until 5 in the morning and you won't even come close to a hangover."

Inner Rings of Heaven

Julio ignited a Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No. 2, savored it a moment, and started lining up bottles of silver tequila on the bar. This clear, unaged variety--also known as *blanco* or "white"--typically goes straight from the still to the bottle. Silvers offer the most discernible, unadulterated taste of the agave and form the groundwork for a distillery's entire line.

The first silver to hit my shot glass belonged to Herradura, a venerable distillery that produced the first registered 100 percent agave tequila imported to the United States. The blue horseshoe on the label promised good fortune for the rest of the night and reminded me how lucky I was to sample Herradura's dry, crisp flavor accented by a hint of citrus.

The lesser-known Pueblo Viejo Blanco was next. The ugly label indicates the distillery is more concerned with making good tequila than marketing. It looks like the miniature version of a placemat you'd find at a sorry gringo taco joint. Who cares? At \$4 a shot, Pueblo Viejo is a wonderfully smooth bargain and leaves you with the sweet, distinctive taste of agave in your mouth.

The smoke from the contraband Cuban *puros* was getting thicker as I moved on to Patrón Silver, a brand at the forefront of the tequila boom. Unlike Pueblo Viejo, Patrón is packaged in what is touted as a "hand-blown glass decanter" (even though there's a seam along one edge of the bottle) that will cost you 40 bucks a pop. The silver deliciously mixes a trace of mint and pepper before giving way to a sweet finish. But I have to stand by

my taste buds. The less expensive Pueblo Viejo--tacky label and all--was a touch smoother.

After Julio said goodnight to his older sister, Elmy, and turned up the salsa on the sound system, he introduced me to El Tesoro Silver. A few days earlier, I had spoken to Bob Denton, the man responsible for bringing El Tesoro to the United States. Denton entered the tequila pantheon by importing Chinaco to this country in the early '80s. For a long time, Chinaco was the only 100 percent agave from a small distillery you could find, but when supplies began to dry up, Denton needed another to take its place. With his partner, Marilyn Smith, Denton journeyed to Mexico to find a new distillery. For a long while, it was not a happy excursion.

"We spent nearly two years looking, but we just couldn't find what we wanted," Denton explains. "We found a lot of people giving us fairly decent tequila, but they usually added a little flavoring or a little color. I never heard that little voice telling me, 'This tequila is real.' "

Denton and Smith were about to give up when they discovered they had scheduled a meeting with a man whose distillery wasn't even open. "I wanted to take out all the frustration and anger of not finding what we wanted on this guy for wasting our time when he wasn't even making tequila," Denton says. "Then he told me about a friend of his who made the tequila we were looking for."

The friend was Don Felipe Camarena. Without electricity or profits from exports to *el norte*, he was running the small Tapatio distillery founded by his father in the high plateaus of Arandas in the rural Los Altos area of Jalisco. After seeing the beautiful underground cellar and tasting the tequila, Denton and Smith knew their search was over. In the early days, Denton sold El Tesoro by the bottle in the United States and moved about 3,500 cases a year. Jim Beam now distributes it, and sales are expected to top 20,000 cases in 1995.

"Life is just too short to drink cheap crap," Denton says flatly when asked why more and more people are buying super-premium tequilas. "People are now becoming sophisticated enough to apply that concept to tequila. It's been an evolutionary process."

However, the process used to make El Tesoro has *not* evolved much over the years. Don Felipe starts with what are widely considered the most flavorful agaves in all of Mexico. The absence of electricity rules out a crushing machine used at most distilleries to extract the juice from the agave. Instead, both the juice and the agave fibers are fermented in the early

production stages at Tapatio. And instead of distilling to a high proof and diluting with demineralized water, El Tesoro is distilled to approximately 80 proof and then bottled. The result is an intense agave flavor--fruity, floral and smooth.

Patrick Moore, who stocked Palapas restaurant in Seascapes with fine tequilas for almost five years before his present stint across the road as Sanderling's head barkeep, dubs El Tesoro Plata his favorite. "It is just the freshest tasting tequila I've ever had," he says. "It really captures the essence of the agave."

El Tesoro is the only variety Don Felipe sells in the United States, but it's not the only tequila he makes. Julio has his own private stock of Tapatio Blanco--sold only in Mexico--that he brings back from his trips. He may let you sample it for free, but he can't legally sell it to you. Like El Tesoro, Tapatio Blanco offers an explosion of flavor, but its sweetness seems to linger longer than that of its American cousin. I liked it better, but its flavor might have been enhanced by the knowledge that I couldn't buy it unless I crossed the border.

It was getting close to 2am, and Julio was eager to forge ahead with my initiation. I had lingered over the silvers long enough as I sat and listened to tales of border checkpoints and smuggled cigars. I passed up other great possibilities--including Chinaco Blanco, which is becoming more widely available once again--and waded into the *reposado* tequilas.

Rested Hell-Raisers

A *reposado* is a tequila that has "rested" or aged from two months to one year in oak tanks or barrels before bottling. A flavorful mingling of fruity agave flavor and a touch of the subtle taste of oak make a fine *reposado* a delicate balancing act in a bottle. The peppery bite of a silver is smoothed over and often replaced with a slight hint of vanilla or spice. *Reposados* are silvers that still know how to raise hell, but aren't so obvious about it.

Julio returned the various silvers to their spots behind the bar, took a puff of his Bolivar Belicoso Fino, and poured a Pueblo Viejo Reposado--a dry, peppery liquid that obviously opted for the taste of the agave over the woodiness of the oak barrel that had held it. Things got much fruitier with the Centinela Reposado that came next.

I finally found the oak flavor in two offerings from Herradura. The first was the Herradura Reposado made prior to November 1992, before the distillery went with newer oak barrels and longer aging periods. Side by

side, the older and the younger Herradura *reposados* obviously have the same blood line, but they are far from identical twins. The slightly smoky aroma of the pre-'92 mingles with the familiar herbaceous qualities of the agave to produce a slightly bitter taste that lingers on the tongue. The newer version of Herradura Reposado is smoother and offers an oakier taste.

There are plenty of other *reposados* Julio could have offered next. He stood behind the bar with his back to the increasingly loud cronies sitting on the black barstools behind him, contemplating whether a taste of Sauza Hornitos Reposado was what I needed or if Cazadores Reposado or Cuervo Tradicional Reposado would be better. He grabbed a bottle of Real Hacienda Reposado, spun around and quickly poured a shot. He wore a smile (like the rest of us) and commanded me to take a deep whiff before I drank.

I obliged.

Julio's judgment had been unerring. Each selection had been as intriguing and complex as promised. I trusted him. But this splash of Real Hacienda he seemed so proud of smelled, well, nasty.

"Umm," I mumbled, trying to be polite. "Interesting."

"Interesting?" he countered, his grin widening. "That's the mustiest, underwear-cilantro-barbecue sauce-B.O.-smelling thing I've ever smelled. Thank God, it tastes a hell of a lot better than it smells because it smells like old underwear."

With an endorsement like that, who needs a marketing campaign? As we basked in the afterglow of Julio's critique, we were interrupted by a sharp pounding above our heads. Julio's sister Elmy, who lives in the apartment upstairs, apparently had better things to do at 3:30 in the morning than listen to us wheezing and laughing. The salsa music got turned way down and the *reposados* went back behind the bar. It was time to settle down and get serious. Time for the *añejo* tequila.

Good as Gold

Añejos are the heavyweights of the tequila world--the golden-hued, mature older brother of silvers and *reposados*. By Mexican law, *añejos* must be aged for at least one year in government-sealed oak barrels. But like all spirits, age doesn't automatically make a good tequila even better. The give and take needed to strike a balance in *reposados* is sometimes tilted in favor of oak at the expense of the agave in *añejos*, often with unfortunate results.

"In certain premium añejos, the origin of the spirit--that sweet agave fruitiness--is not overshadowed by wood," Lucinda Hutson writes in her definitive book *Tequila! Cooking With the Spirit of Mexico* (Ten Speed Press, Berkeley). "Some *añejos*, however, are dominated by the flavor of oak, with hard tannin and astringent qualities, or are so overwhelmed with vanillin, wood chips and other flavorings, apparent to the nose and upon taste. One asks, where is the flavor of tequila? The quality and condition of the barrels, the condition of the cellar and the storage of the barrels all influence the color and flavor of the tequila. An *añejo* at its finest is not unlike a memorable cognac; at its worst, like a harsh and cheap brandy."

Unsurprisingly, El Tesoro Añejo achieves an impressive balance, retaining the essential quality of the agave augmented with vanilla and oak flavor. Real Hacienda Añejo still retains a peppery bite that tells you this is a refined tequila, not a quirky single malt. If upscale packaging were all it took to sell a premium tequila, Porfidio would give José Cuervo a run for his money. Each bottle of Porfidio Single Barrel Cactus Añejo contains inside a green glass cactus tipped with red flowers. The tequila is pungent and robust with a peppery bite that isn't eclipsed by the oak. *Wine Enthusiast* magazine liked it enough to give Porfidio the highest rating for an *añejo*.

At the other end of the spectrum, Herradura Añejo made after November 1992 tilts decidedly toward the oak, as does the Chinaco Añejo. I found it a welcome change that added an elegant richness to the flavor of agave. The nose is incredible, and *añejos* should be enjoyed from a brandy snifter to take full advantage of it.

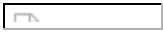
The clock was ticking toward 5 in the morning, the conversation had turned to Julio's encounters with Shining Path guerrillas in Peru. As the final Monte Cristo No. 2 burned out, it was obviously time for a little fresh air. We emerged from Tommy's and discovered the dawn breaking over San Francisco. The morning light illuminated St. Monica's, where Julio went to school for eight years. He mentioned that the priests at St. Monica's are some of his biggest customers. It's good to know the tequila shrine has their blessing. I said my goodbyes and headed, on foot, for a friend's apartment.

By the way, no hangover.

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