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Midnight at the Oasis



Photo by Hillary Schalit

Old Salt: Patrick Moore advises us to only go with the good stuff flow.

High-end watering holes specialize in high-ticket tequilas

By Christina Waters

Tequila--what you'd have if you could distill tropical moonlight with the embers of a desert campfire--tastes like bittersweet memories. And some of my most enduring memories are instantly retrievable with that first satiny bite of aged Tres Generaciones or even a shot of Conmemorativo. If you love tequila, you almost hate to see it wasted on that splendid cocktail, the margarita. To discover the slow-sipping pleasure of fine tequila, you have several local sanctuaries that offer a substantial selection.

Palapas Restaurant & Cantina (21 Seascapes Village, Aptos, 662-9000). Perhaps the sweet core of local tequila choices resides at Palapas in Seascapes. Building on a collection started by agave veteran Patrick Moore, current Palapas bar manager Cindy Hay offers more than 35 tequilas to keep both novice and connoisseur very happy. From her tropical-theme lounge, Hay tells us that tequila-wise, "The high end pours would have to include Cuervo Reserva de la Familia and the Porfidio *añejo*," both of which will run you \$9 per shot. They are worth every smooth sip.

"Out of curiosity, our patrons will try one of our special tequilas" Hays says, singling out El Tesoro and Patron Silver. "But mostly, they like Margaritas and for that they'll order Hornitos, which is aged longer than Cuervo Gold. You don't want to get too high end if you're going to dilute the flavor in a Margarita." We heartily recommend that you try Palapas' voluptuous mango margarita--made with Pepe Lopez tequila--for when you want to "dilute" your firewater experience.

El Palomar Restaurant & Cantina (1335 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz, 425-7575). One of the area's most reliable watering holes, the Cantina at El Palomar in downtown Santa Cruz offers you a selection of 27 different tequilas. For bartender Johnny Canalez, one of the finest of those experiences involves Patron *añejo*, at \$5 a shot. Canalez is also a fan of Hornitos in his margaritas. "We sell the most Cuervo Gold in Northern California," he boasts, and that's the tequila that fuels El Palomar's wildly popular house margarita--"unless people who really know their tequilas ask for something else, like Hornitos or Tres Generaciones," Canalez says. Tres Generaciones is, for my money, the cognac of cactus and should be experienced without flavor additives.

Clouds Downtown (110 Church St., Santa Cruz, 429-2000). At the smart new Clouds, sophisticated tequila buffs can sample away from a hefty array of venerable brands like Real Hacienda, Cazadores Reposado, Porfidio, Patron Silver and El Viejito, according to proprietress Christi Caviglia. "These shots range from \$3.75 to \$5.50," she says, "and, naturally, we've got all the mainstream tequilas, too, like Hornitos, Herradura, Sauza and Cuervo." Caviglia admits that the margarita is the most popular drink of the house, and at her own house, too. "Lou and I used to like our margaritas on the rocks, but now we have them straight up served in a martini glass." Which is just how you can have yours at Clouds.

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