

REUTER

# The worm turns: Cheap tequila is reborn as an upscale aperitif

By HENRY TRICKS  
Readers

TEQUILA, Mexico — It is now sipped as well as slammed and served in cognac snifters as well as shot glasses, and it can sell for up to \$100 a bottle.

Tequila, once known as the most-likely-to-be-avoided drink of party animals and macho revolutionaries, is brushing up its image.

And while most "tequileros" in this farming town are as earthy, weather-worn and prickly as the blue agave cactus from which tequila is made, it is a 29-year-old Austrian with snappy suits and a flair for marketing who is shaking up the industry like an upstart Pancho Villa.

"I'm a rebel in all aspects," Martin Grassl, owner of Porfidio tequila, said as he sipped a glass of his premium tequila that he claims is among the best and most expensive in the world.

Grassl was the first person in the industry who spoke in favor of producing highest quality tequila on a par with any European alcoholic beverage.

erage. I have a quality concept. I produce tequila for people who can spend \$100 a bottle."

While some rivals contest Grassl's pioneer role, there is no question tequila has shot inexorably up market.

More and more women are drinking it, while among men it is fashionably enjoyed with a fine cigar in a romantic throwback to tequila-swinging rebels like Villa, one of the heroes of the 1910-1917 Mexican revolution.

According to industry figures, bottling of premium 100 percent pure agave tequila such as Porfidio doubled to 17.1 million liters in the first 10 months of 1996 from the same period last year. Exports are up almost 75 percent.

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MARTIN GRASSL

Owner of Porfidio tequila

margaritas with cheap tequila in their college days are now grown-up yuppies in New York. That is who is drinking Porfidio," Grassl said.

Advertised in the trendy U.S. magazine Cigar Aficionado, his bottles are tall, elegant and labeled like designer drinks.

The amounts Grassl bottles are comparatively small. He has produced only 500 bottles of his latest

premier brand, an aged tequila barreled in best French oak, and he says it was all pre-sold at \$200 a bottle and will retail at twice that.

Grassl is not alone in making good tequila. Old-fashioned Mexican tequileros also got wind of the taste for quality, as did international liquor firms like Seagrams and Jim Beam.

The Mexican government recently won the right in the European

Community to ensure that only agave-based liquor produced in the states around this dusty central Mexican town had the right to be named tequila.

In a nationalistic industry, Grassl stands out not just as a foreigner but in his unconcealed disdain for the marketing efforts and quality standards of his Mexican rivals. He also has an almost sacrilegious disregard for tequila's heritage — the Mexican-ness that his competitors display on their bottles like a badge of honor.

When he started exporting to Europe, he says, he deliberately dropped the name tequila from his bottles, marketing it as "Eau de Vie d'Agave" in hopes of winning cachet. Mexico quickly put a stop to that. By law, any 51 percent agave distillate has to be called tequila. But the name

is subtly underplayed on his labels, because, he says, cheap tequila has created such a shoddy image of bad taste and hangovers that the name does not necessarily sell well.

Eduardo Gonzalez Garcia, a 39-year-old who makes Don Julio tequila, named after his famed tequilero father, says he takes the Austrian's charge that the tequila name lacks cachet as a slap in the face.

"It's a free world, and anyone can do what they jolly well like, but as Mexicans that gets the blood up," he fumed at his family-run factory where Don Julio is bottled, capped and labeled by hand. "I was going to make eight trips abroad this year, but I'll make 10, 12, 500. I'm not going to let my tequila, my Mexico, be pushed the mouth of someone who has no feel for it."