

## HOUR

## Long Shots

By Anthony Brandt

The results? The most expensive tequila failed to live up to its price. The cheapest was everybody's favorite but one.

**M**y introduction to tequila came in the most appropriate of places, the border town of Nogales, Arizona. I was having dinner with Jim Harrison, a writer who understands booze. Harrison drinks tequila solo. Straight up. In shots. If you know your way around a bar, you know that drinking tequila in chilled shots is to the 1990s what drinking champagne from ladies' slippers was to the 1890s: the thing to do.

Jim Harrison drinks tequila in shots no doubt because, for one, you can actually taste the tequila, which you often can't in a margarita, and also because Harrison wouldn't be caught dead drinking anything green. So he ordered tequila in shots. For both of us. Herradura, he insisted, his favorite brand. And it came, two small glasses filled to the brim. And we are men and men don't sip their drinks, they drink them. Then they order another. And another. And another. And that was my introduction to tequila, and why I don't recall the name of the restaurant, or what we ate, or whether we ate at all.

In a liquor market that can only be described as (forgive me) dispirited, tequila sales grew by 3.4 percent in 1995 alone, and they're up 24 percent over the past 10 years. In the past few years more and more distillers have introduced high-end boutique tequilas made only from the legendary blue agave and priced accordingly. Even mass-market Jose Cuervo has joined this trend; it now offers a Cuervo Reserva de la Familia at, get this, \$75 a bottle. The finest cognacs seldom dare to cost that much money. But producers have convinced an awful lot of people to order up a shot of high-end tequila instead of the old frat-boy stuff. Demand is so high for

Cuervo Reserva de la Familia, for instance, that it's hard to find it at a bar, much less a liquor store.

Cuervo is only one of many pursuing this strategy. Sauza has done the same with its Tres Generaciones brand at \$32 a bottle; Patrón prices its high-end tequilas at \$29 and up; and one brand, Porfidio, sells for \$60 a bottle. The bottle, to be sure, has something to do with the price. Porfidio's are hand-blown and each one contains a handblown glass cactus attached to the bottom. Porfidio is also the only single-barrel tequila; it's aged in American white oak and bottled directly from the barrel, with a minimum of filtration and no blending.

Packaging aside, the justification for such prices



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