

From pulque in Oaxaca to margaritas in Chicago,  
the improbable evolution of America's newest favorite spirit.

BY PATRICIA UNTERMAN

## THE LURE OF AGAVE

The minute I set foot in Mexico I want to drink margaritas. The peculiar herbal flavor of agave combined with sweet Mexican limes and the scent of orange works splendidly with the chilies, cilantro, avocados, beans, and tortillas that are hallmarks of Mexican cuisine. Of course, at authentic Mexican restaurants—those thatched huts on the beach, the hole-in-the-wall in

### SPIRITS FROM AGAVE

**Agave:** not a cactus, but a family of succulents with so many species that it has been given its own botanical name, *Agavaceae*. The agave plant provides material for many uses, from clothing to food, but only a select few from specific regions can be used to make the following beverages.

**Pulque:** the fermented, undistilled juice of some types of agave. Produced mainly in the cool highlands of central Mexico from several regional species of agave. Milky, viscous and of very low alcohol (4%-6%), it is not found far from its source because it spoils quickly.

**Mezcal:** Distillation was introduced by the Spaniards, who tried it on the juice of the agave. The resulting single-distilled product is mezcal. It is produced in the lower, warmer regions of Mexico. Coal roasting of the *piñas*, or hearts of the agaves, gives a characteristic smoky flavor. If you see a *gusano*—a worm—at the bottom of the bottle, it's mezcal, not tequila; the worms live only in the mezcal-producing agaves.

**Tequila:** the twice-distilled juice of the agave. For more on tequila, see page 35.

town, the semi-private dining room open only one day a week, the white-tiled stall in the central market—margaritas are nowhere to be found. I am more likely to find a margarita at a Mediterranean cafe in San Francisco than in a *mole* place in Oaxaca. At restaurants in Mexican towns and villages, tequila or mezcal is drunk straight from narrow shot glasses before, not during, and sometimes after the meal, long into the night.

As I'm writing this, breezes blow up from the Pacific into an open Mexican-style *palapa* shaded by tropical foliage on a hillside in Zihuatenejo, a fishing town four hours north of Acapulco. I have been to the central market—a maze of stalls piled with clear-eyed fish, avocados, citrus, white onions, bright red tomatoes, cilantro, yellow-skinned chickens, whole pigs, slabs of beef, ropes of chorizo, baskets of hot, crusty rolls. I bought the makings for a classic guacamole: perfectly ripe, nutty avocados, white onion, a jalapeño, a bunch of fresh cilantro, coarse Mexican sea salt. I prepare guacamole according to the recipe of Diana Kennedy, the reigning authority on Mexican cooking, at least in the English language.

(Coarsely mash the avocados with finely chopped onion, chili and cilantro. Salt liberally.) To accompany this gorgeous mixture, I fry up tortilla triangles in sunflower oil, sprinkling coarse salt on them as they drain.

I stopped in a liqueur store in downtown Zihuatenejo to pick up ingredients for margaritas. I was drawn to a clear bottle with a screw top and a colorful label. It turned out to be a tequila reposado made by Herradura. Next to it sat a square green bottle of "Controy," a Mexican knock-off of Cointreau at a quarter of the price; this version has a pleasant anise undertone. I also bought a huge bottle of sugar syrup. I had already picked up a

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photo: Richard Eakin

## Some Top-Shelf Tequilas Considered

To Mix or Not to Mix? Tasting notes by Gary Regan

Being a cocktail fancier, I have spent many long hours arguing with spirits buffs about which bottlings of any liquor should be used in mixed drinks. I propose, and am yet to be convinced otherwise, that if you use top-quality spirits to make a cocktail, the resultant drink will be far better than had you used a low-end brand. "But you lose all the intricacies of the spirit," cry my connoisseur compadres. "That's right," I counter, "but we don't always want to sip neat spirits. There are times when we want mixed drinks—and why shouldn't we have the best mixed drinks we can possibly make." Just as there's nothing better on this earth than a prime steak, people still tend to slide a little baked potato, or a piece of broccoli onto their fork alongside a cube of meat—it makes for a far more interesting bite.

When it comes to tequila, restaurants and bars often offer margaritas made with top-quality spirits, so in many cases I'm preaching to the converted in this particular category. During the last five years, the number of bottlings of añejo tequila on the market has grown dramatically, and many of these are shaken into the best margaritas. Since there are now a range of qualities and ages available, we decided to look at the top-end of the category, to see if any distinctions could be made in terms of style. We gathered sixteen añejos, as well as two of the leading silver tequilas to provide a reference point—silvers represent a vast majority of the tequila consumed in this country, much of it in margaritas.

Our assembled panel of tasters were shouting "¡Andale!"—we had eighteen tequilas to taste. What a challenge. With me at the tasting table were Joseph Aguilar and Omar Zaras of Gabriela's; Dale DeGroff, beverage manager, the *Rainbow Room*; Josh Eisen, W&S

contributing writer; Stephen Monkewicz and Jim Conghlin of Aquilon Restaurants Ltd. (*Arizona 206*); Tara Thomas, W&S; Michael Weiss, wine instructor, Culinary Institute of America. We asked the panel to discern which high-end tequilas were well suited to becoming cocktail ingredients, and which bottlings were so superlative that we just couldn't bear to mask their flavors with lime juice and Triple Sec.

In making these distinctions, we found the major stumbling block was sugar. For decades Americans have been quaffing tequilas made from a mixture of agave and sugar (forty-nine percent sugar is legal unless the label notes "100% agave") and thus our taste buds have grown used to a rum-like quality in this Mexican spirit. Although sugar was harder to discern in the unaged white tequilas, it was quite apparent in some of the añejo bottlings. All of them had at least a touch of sweetness. By the end of the day we had decided that what separated the best of the one-hundred percent agave bottlings was that green, vegetal quality, sometimes described as "woody," or "herbal," that highlights the agave flavors.

We dropped a few bottlings that were overly sweet, and chose a number of others as "ideal for cocktails"—those that showed the true vegetal qualities of tequila, but weren't quite complex enough to warrant sipping them neat. In fact, most of these añejos will make superior margaritas, as they have the flavors to shine through the other ingredients. The tequilas were presented blind and tasted neat, at room temperature. We cleansed our palates with bottled water and white bread. The panel found a range of unusual and unexpected words to describe the flavors and aromas of these spirits, and the most useful are compiled from their comments in the notes that follow.

### Reference Point: Silver Tequila

**Jose Cuervo Premium Silver** This tequila bears a pungent, peppery nose—some tasters mentioned citrus and pineapple aromas. The soft, medium body brought a fruity element—refined sugar was one descriptor—and one of the panel detected a slight smokiness and hints of cocoa and chocolate. There's heat in the quick finish. Great for cocktails or for shots with salt and lime. \$10-\$15 *Heublein Inc., Hartford, CT*

**Sauza Blanco** Some panelists thought that this bottling was particularly round on the nose; others mentioned spice notes, vanilla and cocoa. The medium body brought some sugary notes and a medicinal quality. The finish was sharp and quick. Best suited for cocktails. \$9 *Domecq Importers, Old Greenwich, CT*

### Añejo

**Centinela Añejo, 100% agave, Tres Años** This pale chartreuse bottling displayed a very complex nose—poblano chiles, toasted almonds, agave, cinnamon,

and tangerine were all noted. The medium body and multi-dimensional palate prompted words such as agave, pineapple, lanolin, violets and cloves to be thrown back and forth across the table. The finish was long, warm and both fruity and herbal. The complex agave character made this a connoisseur's tequila, fit for a snifter. "This is what tequila is all about," noted one panelist. *Exceptional. \$52-\$58 El Dorado Importers Ltd., Santa Fe, NM*

**Chinaco Añejo, 100% blue agave** A pale-straw colored tequila with hints of green wood, spicy candied apples and clover honey in the nose. The spirit changed character in the mouth, entering lean and then immediately fattening up and becoming very round and supple. The term "green wood" came back when we discussed the palate, and so did some other intriguing phrases: "plump almonds," "candied nuts from a New York street vendor," and "smoky dried herbs." The finish was smooth, long, and warm. "There's no youth in this tequila," remarked one panelist, and we all concurred—this is a very mature, very

complex, exceptional sipping tequila. *Exceptional. \$45 Robert Denton & Co., Auburn Hills, MI*

**El Conquistador Añejo, 100% blue agave** El Conquistador is a very pale añejo—is it possible that all of its color came from the wood? The aromas were fairly complex; vegetal (cucumber), floral, smoky and agave were all used as descriptors. The medium body brought a well-balanced palate that was herbaceous and spicy, but didn't quite live up to the promise of its nose. The finish was well balanced and a little sweet. The panelists agreed that this was quite good. Some of us would sip it from a snifter, and some would use it to make a great cocktail. Available summer '97. \$29 *Heaven Hills Distilleries, Bardstown, KY*

**José Cuervo Añejo Reserva de la Familia, 100% agave** And what do we have here? The color of this tequila is nothing short of astounding—we argued between deep amber, mahogany, walnut, and a few other dark reddish woods—maybe cream-

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basketful of the plumpest, juiciest limes I had ever squeezed.

The tequila I chose turned out to be delicious, smooth and full of character. My margarita formula is simple: for one part fresh lime juice I use  $\frac{1}{2}$  part tequila,  $\frac{1}{4}$  part orange liqueur,  $\frac{1}{4}$  part sugar syrup, or a bit more to taste. I pour this over a pitcher of ice cubes (made, of course, from purified water) and stir. Then, to prepare the little, narrow tequila glasses I found in the market, I rub the rims with lime and dip them into sea salt. Together with the guacamole and warm chips, these bracing margaritas represent the taste of coastal Mexico for me. Everything I'm snacking on has been collected within a few miles of where it has been grown or made, the tequila itself from Jalisco, a few hundred miles to the north. It tastes of the soil, the moist balmy air, the geography that produced it. Though it may be true that the margarita was invented in Palm Springs (there are many conflicting tales), this drink has come to symbolize the pleasures of life on a white Mexican beach.

In recent years, restaurants in the United States have been exploring regional Mexican cooking and are seeking out more and more authentic Mexican ingredients. The leaders of this movement, Rick and Deann Bayless of *Frontera Grill* and *Topolobampo* in Chicago, have not only put out a menu of superb regional specialties, they have assembled a deep collection of tequilas which they offer in both the traditional Mexican fashion as well as in margaritas.

Purists choose one of the nineteen 100% agave tequilas to sip before dinner with guacamole, fresh chips and salsas. The selection intrigues: Chinaco Reposado for its tremendous finesse and smoothness, or the soft, well-rounded Chinaco Blanco for its bright agave flavor; the elegant Patron Añejo or Plata; Centinela Three-Year Añejo; El Viejo Reposado. The restaurant offers several tasting flights if you're curious to try more than one. After dinner, Cuervo Reserva de la Familia—a refined, velvety, aged tequila with the elegance of a fine old cognac—could make a perfect closure, or maybe the Patron XO, a tequila-based coffee liqueur.

But the *Frontera* people also understand the appeal of the margarita. They have designed four different blends, each having its own unique flavor profile. Their basic, the Gold Margarita, is made by the gallon, in order to give the flavors time to meld. It uses Cuervo Gold, Gran Torres orange liqueur, and *limonata*, a combination of freshly-squeezed lime juice, zest, and sugar syrup. Served on the rocks, it is as easy to drink as a punch. I found myself downing glasses of it

Rick Bayless offers a deep collection of tequilas and a variety of margaritas at his *Frontera Grill* in Chicago.



with dinner. But the most popular margarita is the Topolo, made with Sauza Conmemorativo, a blended, aged tequila, Gran Torres, and limonata, prepared table side in a martini shaker and poured into a salt-rimmed martini glass. It's served straight up to preserve its full distinctive flavors.

They also offer what beverage manager/sommelier Jim Fessler calls, their

#### A TEQUILA PRIMER

By law at least 51% of the fermentable sugars must come from the Agave Tequilana Weber, commonly known as blue agave, grown in certain areas decreed by law within Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacan, Nayarit and Tamaulipas. Tequila distilled from 100% blue agave must be labeled as such and be bottled in Mexico. Though usually drunk straight in its native country, most of it is exported to countries where it is downed in great quantities in margaritas and other cocktails as well as straight.

**Silver/Plata:** bottled immediately following distillation. Colorless.

**Gold/Joven Abocado:** young tequila softened with certain permitted flavoring and coloring agents.

**Reposado:** aged from two months to one year in oak. The tequila retains some color and flavor of the wood.

**Añejo:** oak-aged at least one year.

**Muy Añejo:** oak-aged at least two years.

"purist" margarita, made from equal parts of 100% agave tequila (Chinaco Silver or El Tesoro Plata), Cointreau, and unsweetened lime juice, served straight up. "The Cointreau is slightly sweeter than the Gran Torres, so we don't need to use any extra sugars. It lets the pure agave flavor come through more."

A fourth option features a premium mezcals, Encantado, with Don Pedro Mexican Brandy, Peychaud's bitters and limonata. It is delicious, but it really doesn't taste like a margarita to me. "The mezcals, because of how it is produced, has a smokier, broader flavor spectrum, and the bitters give it a nice herbal quality and color," Fessler says. There are four other artisanal mezcals offered as well.

Although a number of restaurants and bars have gathered a range of the finest tequilas and mezcals, few have the authentic regional Mexican food to accompany these drinks. And in these contexts, the margarita may be a forgiving sort of mixed drink—they are, after all, an American (or at least an American-inspired) creation. But for my taste, the most satisfying food and drink experiences are derived from products that share locality, that have been produced in the same place. I maintain that you haven't really tasted a great one until you get your hands on some ripe Mexican limes and sip the concoction while being caressed by the moist, warm breezes of the Mexican Pacific. Agave drinks refresh the most when drunk in the country that sustains the plant. ■

Patricia Untermyer, restaurant critic for The San Francisco Examiner, and *debaucher* of The Hoyo Street Grill, recently returned from a trip to Mexico.

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sherry color would have the best descriptor. The nose was initially sweet but there were definite hints of butter, fresh leather, apples, cinnamon, and a sharp, citrus/pepper note in the background. This is a tequila of a different breed from the rest. Panelists noted hints of sambuca, coffee, toffee and apple-cinnamon oatmeal in the palate, all set on a sweet woody vegetal (agave) backdrop. The body and the finish followed suit—long, and a little sweet. Drink this one neat, after dinner. It's an exceptional tequila in a category all its own. *Exceptional.* \$75 *Heublein Inc., Hartford, CT*

**José Cuervo 1800** The label explains this is a blend of "añejo and other fine tequilas." It has a deep gold color and a slightly peppery nose with subtle hints of green wood, all set on a backdrop of pure caramel. The medium body was silky smooth and the palate very similar to the nose—hints of green vegetal notes, a few sharp darts of white pepper, and a sweet backdrop. The finish was smooth, warm and sweet. This gentle spirit is a good introduction to tequila as a category. \$18-\$25 *Heublein Inc., Hartford, CT*

**Herradura Añejo, 100% blue agave** Another pale chartreuse tequila, this one's complex nose carried notes of vanilla, cocoa, tropical fruits, and burnt apricots. The almost syrupy body coated the mouth and the sophisticated palate prompted descriptors such as dried fruits, dried peppers, dates and raisins. The finish was warm and soothing. We agreed that this was a tequila of very high quality, and although a few panelists noted that they might use it in a mixed drink, almost everyone thought that this was a sipping tequila. *Exceptional.* \$39.95 *Sazerac Co., New Orleans, LA*

**Immemorial Añejo, (Viuda de Romero)**

This pale straw tequila bore a well balanced nose with hints of agave, lilac, pears, and peach pits. The medium body was described as delicate by some tasters, and the palate, with notes of mangos, stone fruits, and spices, displayed a pleasant "musty" tone. The finish was warm and short. The panel consensus was that the tequila was quite good and would be best used in good mixed drinks. \$19.95 *Mina Int'l, Phoenix, AZ*

**Patron Añejo, 100% agave** Pale straw in color, the nose is light and vegetal with a complex herbaceous backdrop and a very faint hint of sweetness. The medium body bears a spicy palate with hints of green wood, chile peppers, a complex gathering of herbs and a silky, yet dry, mouthfeel. The finish is long, warm and glowing. This bottling is highly recommendable as a "sniffer quality" tequila, and a margarita made with Patron would be very distinctive. (The Patron bottling was, unfortunately, not available for the tasting event, and therefore, the tasting notes on this particular tequila are mine.) \$35-\$40 *The House of Seagram, NY*

**Porfidio Añejo, 100% blue agave** A very pale tequila with just the suggestion of a greenish hue, this bottling was one that we decided was very true to its roots. The spicy/herbal nose bore hints of grass, salt, and cloves, and the body, lean when it entered the mouth, quickly grew to full and fat. Agave, chile peppers, honey, rich leather and an herbal grassiness were all detected in the nose, and the finish, initially hot, bore a minty freshness in the throat. This is a superb example of fine tequila for sipping. *Exceptional.* \$35 *Patron Spirits Ltd., W. Palm Beach, FL*

**Porfidio Añejo Single Barrel ("Cactus") 100% blue agave** A greenish-yellow spirit with a sweetish candy-apple nose and some notes of macadamia nuts, green wood and fresh hay, the body entered lean and quickly turned surprisingly plump and very dry. On the palate, this bottling was not overly complex, but it brought words such as salty, new oak, and rock candy into play. The finish was spicy/sweet and pleasantly warm. The panel agreed this was a connoisseur's spirit, but overall we preferred the regular añejo bottling from Porfidio. \$79.95 *Todhunter Imports Ltd., W. Palm Beach, FL*

**Real Hacienda Añejo, (Viuda de Romero), 100% agave** This pale-straw colored, medium-bodied tequila bore an interesting nose—cream, wildflowers, herbs, nuts and a hint of sugar were detected. The palate was supple, herbaceous, floral, and bore a fruitiness that reminded some tasters of sultanas and raisins. The finish was smooth, warm and a little spicy. Two of the panelists said that this was a sipping tequi-

la, but most thought it best used in mixed drinks. \$39.95 *Mina Int'l, Phoenix, AZ*

**Sauza Tres Generaciones Añejo** A pale green spirit with a very pleasant nose that bore hints of agave, green onions, butter, pineapples and even honey. The syrupy body displayed some sweetness, but the sharp vegetal notes—along with some spices, flowers, a touch of fruit and a distinct woodiness—kept pushing through. This tequila had a hot alcohol finish that smoothed out and displayed a nice vegetal/fruit character. While this appears youthful, we would still recommend it as a spirit to sip neat. \$30 *Domecq Importers, Old Greenwich, CT*

**Sauza Conmemorativo Añejo** The slightly green-gold spirit brought aromas of pears, prunes, corn and caramel, and the medium body bore an initial burst of sugar. The panel found buttery, woody and vanilla elements. The finish was initially hot, but it left a warm glow in the throat for quite some time. A simple tequila, good with mixers, though one taster insisted that this bottling could be sipped alongside a cigar. \$20 *Domecq Importers, Old Greenwich, CT*

**El Tesoro de Don Felipe Añejo, 100% agave** This bottling is pale chartreuse in color, with a very complex nose—agave, mossy, herbaceous and "jalapeños in vinegar" were all used as descriptors. The medium body (yes, almost all the añejos had medium bodies) had a complex palate that was very similar to the nose, and provoked some panelists to add hot ginger and lemon zest to their list of descriptors. The finish was described as long and leafy. On the whole, the panel really liked this tequila, while some found it a little loose-knit. It could be sipped straight, and it would also make a superlative margarita. *Exceptional.* \$38 *Robert Denton & Co., Auburn Hills, MI*

**El Viejo Añejo, 100% blue agave** This pale green tequila had a very complex, well balanced nose—butter-sautéed pineapple, agave and nutmeg were all detected. The medium body was woody, herbal, spicy and salty, and the finish was long, warm, and flavorful. "Very flirtatious," was one comment. The panel would choose to enjoy this bottling's true tequila flavors in great cocktails rather than for sipping neat. \$31 *A. Hardy USA, Rosemont, IL* ■



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