

# Tequila Sunrise

It's a new era for the Mexican spirit, spurred by a slew of premium, artisanal brands, some available in America for the first time. By Richard Nalley

Anybody who'd shell out \$35 for a bottle of tequila has more money than sense, a lot more," declares my Eurocentric friend Alex, all but ready to leap up and pound the table with his tasseled loafer. "But Alex," I say, "some of them seem to have both. Don't liquor-store and restaurant owners around the country agree that the super-tequila phenomenon is spreading among their connoisseur customers: the cigar-smuggling crowd, the single-malt crowd? Could they all be fashion slaves? Closet Aztecs? Sun-struck *inistas*?

"Or maybe, just maybe, could enthusiasts for these small-batch, artisanal tequilas be onto something?"

We need a NAFTA of the tastebuds. We are so accustomed to thinking that a refined liquor—even a single-barrel bourbon or upscale California brandy—has to be based on a European model that we have been missing out on our own continent's sexiest spirit: fine, 100 percent agave tequila.

These super-tequilas have been around in Mexico for generations, of course, but only a smattering have made their way across the border. Until the past five or 10 years, we just were not paying attention. We weren't prepared for a perfumed, flavor-layered tequila worth sipping slowly and savoring.

Spirits connoisseurs in El Norte woke up to fine tequila only in the late 1980s, when drinking these artisanal liquors suddenly flared into a cult phenomenon in the Southwest and on the West Coast. No one could have been more surprised than the importers themselves, who in many cases were stuck without supplies. Chinaco, a brand that had been on U.S. retail shelves since 1983, became a particular object of veneration, with retailers running up the prices of the scarce *añejo* (aged) version to well

over \$100 a bottle by 1989, according to importer Robert Denton. In the fall of that year, the craze reached a new pitch of intensity when the Christmas shipment of Chinaco to California was hijacked outside Pharr, Texas. (It was recovered months later.) "Our distributors were hating us," says Denton, "but I told them, if you don't believe me, call the FBI yourself."

The aficionados' feeling of urgency may have abated—not least because of a mini-explosion of fancy new brands—but the infatuation with fine tequila is still growing. Numbers for super-premium bottlings are difficult to isolate, but total tequila consumption has climbed by more than 10 percent since 1990 (while the rest of the spirits market has swooned), according to data compiled by New York trend tracker Impact Databank. "The super-premium tequilas are definitely very much still a trend," says David Ross, managing editor of the wine, spirits, and beer trade publication *Market Watch Magazine*.

"Restaurants and upscale spirits stores are doing a much better job of explaining these tequilas to customers," he continues, "and the customers themselves are becoming increasingly sophisticated. They are getting under their belts the differences between single malts and blends in scotches, and they are now applying that same sort of knowledge to tequilas. Most consumers are well past associating these drinks with a worm."

It is probably still true, however, that many U.S. drinkers identify tequila as the firewater they poured over their heads at Fraternity Hell Night,

Trendsetting artisanal tequilas (from left to right): Herradura añejo; Jose Cuervo La Reserva de la Familia; Chinaco añejo; Porfido Single Barrel añejo; El Tesoro de Don Felipe añejo; Encantado mezos; Souza Tres Generaciones; and Patrón añejo.

