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## BLUE AGAVE SUNRISE

*The Record*

The Record (Bergen County, NJ);  
12/5/1997; PATRICIA MACK,  
Food Editor

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The Record (Bergen County, NJ)

12-05-1997

BLUE AGAVE SUNRISE --  
DESIGNER TEQUILA FINDS A  
MARKET AMONG SIPPERS  
By PATRICIA MACK, Food Editor  
Date: 12-05-1997, Friday  
Section: YOUR TIME  
Edition: All Editions -- 4 Star, 3  
Star Late, 3 Star, 2 Star, 1 Star

The in-crowd is leaving  
Margaritaville.

Leaving the limes; forgetting the  
salt. Just bringing the tequila,  
the good tequila.

The classic Mexican spirit has new cache among a more refined set  
unwilling to join the lick-shoot-and-bite crowd. No, the way of the  
tequila lover now is sip-and-savor.

"It's a younger group of people interested in tequila -- I'd say  
Generation X-ers -- the people they used to call `yuppies,'"  
said Carlo Russo, owner of Carlo Russo's Wine and Spirit World in Fort  
Lee. "It's a more refined and more expensive tequila they want. The best  
is made solely from the blue agave plant. Look for those words `blue  
agave' when you're buying."

Agave is a huge, spiny plant -- a kind of lily, not a cactus -- from  
which all tequila is made. It grows for eight to 12 years before it is  
harvested by jimadores wielding knife-sharp shovel-like tools to unearth  
the giant plants and then hack away their leaves. What's left is a huge

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orb that looks like pineapple, which will be roasted and pressed for its juice, which will then be distilled.

The finer tequilas are now also being aged in oak casks purchased from Kentucky bourbon makers to gain a little color and age, then bottled in attractive containers. The clear tequila that has crowded American shelves in the past -- Jose Cuervo for one, Pepe Lopez for another -- is hauled into the United States by tanker truck where it can be mixed with other ingredients before it is bottled.

Cuervo owned 47 percent of the tequila market last year, and the company also has some finely made 100 percent agave tequilas. These "designer tequilas" account for a small fraction of the overall tequila market, perhaps 10 percent.

Industry figures show that most tequila in the United States -- 75 percent by volume -- still goes into that old standby, the Margarita. Shot-slammers account for another 15 percent of consumption. But the sippers, at 10 percent, have been gaining ground the last few years.

Retailers are not sure exactly where the high-end tequila market is going. A profusion of new brands has made it hard on the consumer, especially with prices ranging up to \$90 a bottle.

Leah Karliner, representative for William Grant & Sons, which is based in Edison, says that by the end of 1997, tequila consumption levels are projected to jump to 5.8 million 9-liter cases -- a 3.4 percent increase over last year.

Grant, which imports Glendfiddich and Balvenie single-malt scotches, and now Reserva Del Dueno tequila, believes the introduction of high-priced anejo (aged one year) tequilas have brought mystique to the premium brands.

"Consumers are sophisticated and consider taste a priority," said Michael Luftglass, the company's director of marketing. "They are interested in the complexities and nuances of what they drink, whether it is a single-malt scotch or anejo tequila."

Profit for tequila makers is another market force. The production of the liquor -- growing, harvesting, fermenting, and double-distilling -- is relatively simple and inexpensive.

At Orendain distilleries in Tequila, a little town in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, many traditions are maintained. Tequila makers test the vats of fermenting tequila by dipping a hollow bull's horn into the 110-proof liquid. It is taste, not scientific measurement, that determines when the tequila moves on to casks or bottles.

Marketing and packaging of high-end tequilas, experts say, affect the price as much as what's inside.

The bottles are beautiful. Porfido, a 100 percent blue agave single-barrel anejo tequila, is contained in a hand-blown, long, lean bottle distinguished by a green glass cactus (not a worm -- that was never in tequila, only in mescal) in the bottom. Arette Reposado, also 100 percent blue agave (expressed as azul on the label), is the latest entry from the Orendain family, which for generations has produced high- and low-quality -- they make Pepe Lopez -- tequila. Reserva del Dueno is contained in a squatter bottle, but one wrapped with gold mesh.

Tequila made from agave is as tightly regulated by the Mexican government as cognac is by the French. It is produced by 46 distilleries in five states in Mexico, principally in the west-central state of Jalisco. Just as all real champagne comes only from that particular region of France, authentic tequila comes from only one region.

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Tequila first came to the United States in the 1950s -- some say toted across the border by vacationers who sampled it in Mexico. However, Bob Emmons, author of "The Book of Tequila" (Open Court, \$10.95), says it was Bing Crosby who introduced tequila to the United States. Now, 90 percent of Mexico's tequila exports come to this country, according to beverage industry sources.

In Mexico, fine tequila is served in small glasses called cabillitos. Sometimes coarse grain salt and lime wedges are accompaniments. Or, two cabillitos are brought, one with tequila, the other with sangrita, an orange and tomato juice combination. Alternate sips are taken, first the tequila, then sangrita.

Whether to chill tequila is a new debate. Martin Grassl, owner of Destileria Porfidio in Mexico, says that the answer lies in what kind of tequila is being consumed.

"Silver or white tequilas are best chilled to bring out the taste of the agave," he said. "However, chilling can subdue the bouquet of fine anejo tequilas. Anejos are best served at room temperature."

Which glass is also a controversy. In Mexico, the cabillitos are favored, but some of the silvers are served in martini glasses, and aged tequilas are poured into a brandy snifter.

Grassl suggests using an eau-de-vie glass instead.

(SIDEBAR)

If there's a worm in it, it's mescal

- **AGAVE:** The spiny plant from which tequila is made. Also known as blue agave or blue Weber agave, the plant is not a cactus but rather a member of the lily family. Real tequila must be at least 51 percent agave, and the finest tequilas are 100 percent blue agave. Pronounced ah-GAH-vay.
- **ANEJO:** Tequila aged for a minimum of one year. Anejos are usually the top-shelf tequilas. Aging a tequila more than three years is a marketing gimmick and pointless affectation. Pronounced ahn-YAY-ho.
- **GOLD:** This means nothing more than the tequila is a golden color -- perhaps from its time in oak barrels, but more likely because it has had caramel coloring added. Tequila makers originally concocted this bit of marketing to make their commonplace "silver" or "white" tequilas appeal to the scotch- and bourbon-drinking American market.
- **JOVEN:** Literally, "young." The term typically applies to a white or silver tequila that is fresh off the still. Pronounced HO-ven. Joven tequilas are sometimes called abocados.
- **MESCAL:** Rougher than tequila, this 80-proof liquor from Oaxaca can be made from agaves and other plants. It is distilled only once and varies greatly in quality. Mescal, which is unregulated by the Mexican government, occasionally has a worm (or moth larva) at the bottom of the bottle. Tequila never has a worm in it.
- **REPOSADO:** Literally, this means "rested." A step below the anejo tequilas, reposados are aged between three months and a year.
- **RESERVA:** This term usually denotes a brand's best tequilas, made from the best plants, distilled in small batches and aged in oak barrels. There are no regulations about the use of the word, however, and even the most ordinary tequilas could be called "Reserva" by unscrupulous makers.
- **SANGRITA:** A sipping sidekick to tequila. Recipes vary, but

most sangritas contain tomato juice, orange juice, Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco, salt, and black pepper.

· SILVER: Also known as plata, white, or blanco tequilas, these are non-aged tequilas that usually aren't 100 percent blue agave. See "Gold."

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