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### Sept/7 bus. Trendy tequilas \$smooth as Silk

September 07, 1997 12:00 AM

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By TONY VINDELL

Herald Business Editor

#MATAMOROS -- Ask people from all walks of life what they consider to be the

national drink of Mexico, and they will tell you, "Tequila."

But little do they know that the popular liquor made from the maguey plant is

now conquering a specialized market in the United States, enjoying the same

kind of success as trendy cigars and gourmet coffees.

After all, most people in Mexico are accustomed to buying tequila for a few

pesos, or a couple of dollars.

The same goes for U.S. tourists, many of whom are most familiar with the

Cuervo and Sauza brands of tequila.

Some people may have paid \$9 for a bottle of Centenario, or \$12 for a bottle

of Commemorativo tequila.

But whoever heard of paying anywhere from \$200 to \$700 for a bottle of the

super premium varieties made by Porfidio Distillery or Casa Cuervo?

Garcia's de Matamoros, a restaurant and souvenir store about a block from the

Gateway International Bridge, has one of the biggest varieties of tequilas of any city along the Mexico-U.S. border.

"We have more than 120 different kinds," said Emigdio Garcia, the business family's patriarch. "We've got bottles ranging from \$2 to \$300."

He said the trendy tequilas of today aren't anything like the varieties most people are used to drinking.

"These are super premium tequilas, made from the blue agave plant," Garcia said. "But Tequila Sauza and Cuervo are still the most popular brands these days."

He said the demand for good tequilas led distilleries to produce varieties as smooth as some aged Caribbean rums, English Scotch whiskies and U.S. bourbons.

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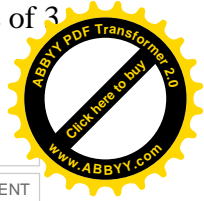
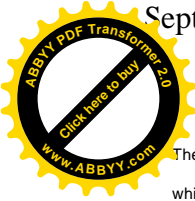
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The tequilas are more popular in central and southern Mexico, while the whiskies and rums are consumed by residents from Mexico's northern border regions from Tamaulipas to Baja California Norte states.

But that is changing, particularly due to the economic hard times that have plagued the country since the peso devaluation of 1982.

A few years ago, it wasn't uncommon to go to a party and see people consuming bottle after bottle of the relatively expensive Buchanan Scotch Whiskey. Today that is limited to parties given by politicians or at small gatherings.

Cheap brandies and rums are the most popular liquors for large gatherings, as are cheap tequilas, while the fine tequilas are consumed by more affluent men and women.

"Tequila consumption among men and women is 50-50," said Martin Grassl, an Austrian-born entrepreneur and owner of Porfidio Distillery of Guadalajara in the Mexican state of Jalisco. "People are using more tequila at weddings and birthday parties more today than ever before."

He said many varieties of tequila are produced in Mexico, but only the states of Jalisco, Nayarit and Guanajuato are officially recognized by the government as genuine tequila producing regions.

Jalisco, for instance, has more than 30 tequila distilleries.

Mexico produces an average of 225 million gallons of tequila, but only 5 percent of that represents the trendy tequilas.

Grassl said Porfidio produces about 50,000 gallons of tequila annually, compared to Cuervo's production of 12.5 million gallons.

"The objective of our distillery -- founded in 1991 -- is to produce the world's finest tequila," he said. "Jose Cuervo is known to produce the country's biggest volume."

Jose Cuervo has been in existence for more than 200 years. In addition to its offices throughout Mexico, it also operates Jose Cuervo International in San Antonio.

Jose Cuervo, best known for its Cuervo blanco tequila used to make margaritas and other mixed drinks, also sells expensive varieties. The cheapest bottle sells in Mexico for 35 pesos, or \$4.60, while the most expensive goes for 850 pesos a bottle, or about \$113.

In San Antonio, the cheapest bottle of Cuervo sells for \$18 retail, while Reserva de la Familia sells for \$80 a bottle.

Tequila experts said Mexico today produces more than 160 varieties of the hard liquor, and although most tequilas contain 51 percent agave juice and 49 percent sugar cane juice, the super premium varieties are made with 100 percent blue agave.

Besides the traditional tequilas, the aged and /reposado/ varieties are bottled and sold to be consumed alone -- not in mixed drinks.

Grassl said a tequila that is aged is supposed to be consumed after 12 years while the /reposado/ is aged anywhere between two and 12 months.

Garcia said the trendy tequilas he sells are bought mostly by politicians, business people and by managers from the maquiladora, or twin-plant, industry.

Worldwide, the biggest market for tequila is the United States, followed by Japan and Europe.

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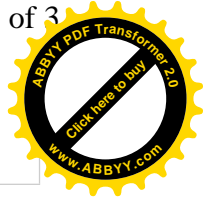
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Stan Brooks, a maquiladora plant's owner, said he takes a couple of shots of tequila a week.

"However, I did not know about all the varieties available today until I noticed them at Garcia's," said Brooks, a regular at the family-owned bar//restaurant. "People are used to the cheap tequilas. I use the expensive bottle whenever I have people over to my house."

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