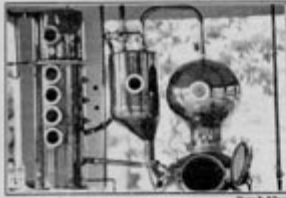


Austrian entrepreneur breaks Mexican domain with classy 'Porfido' tequila



ROLLS ROYCE OF DISTILLERIES—Tequila is born. Martin Grand's distillery, which was built in 1979, is located in the town of San Mateo. Through his technology, Grand is able to extract the juice from the inner cores of the agave plant to produce a superior blend of tequila.

The days of licking salt granules off your lip, slugging back a shot of stingingly potent tequila and chugging it with a wet lime wedge are passing.

Once considered the standard drink for Mexico's less-fortunate because of its cheap price and powerful pleasing effect, tequila has seen a renaissance that now has distillers raffling for their award the world for as much as \$50 dollars.

Who is their right mind in going to drink out that much money for a bottle of alcohol? On top of this, who is going to buy a high priced bottle of Mexico's national drink from an Austrian producer?

There are just some of the questions Martin Grand faced.

Grand was born in Austria in 1940. His employer, an Austrian trading company, sent out a Tequila representative enough to be sold in the Japanese market. After a meticulous search, Grand came back empty handed. Because a bottle of that number was now common at that time, he put forward the notion to his employer to create such a product himself. The proposal was rejected so Grand designed and embarked on the venture on his own.

"My goal is to produce the best possible tequila regardless of price," Grand said. "When companies work the other way around—around a budget first."

He borrowed some money, came to Oaxaca and rented a small distillery.

In 1971, his first batch of tequila was ready, hence the birth of Porfido. The most popular of his tequilas, the \$1-dollar Porfido Single Barrel Añejo, is contained in a long slender bottle that has a

healthful green glass outer inside — produced from recycled Coke and 7-UP bottles.

Distiller pointed fingers at the bottle's design, saying Grand did not know the difference between agave fiber plant tequila comes from and coconuts. They also talk one at the same of his new product, because it seemed like a mistake.

Grand, from the same name, states that he is not a tequila producer. He is a distributor. He is a distributor of tequila. He is a distributor of tequila. He is a distributor of tequila.

In a recent interview with *Clayton* magazine, Grand explained the reasoning behind the bottle's design and name.

"Everybody knows the cactus is practically the national symbol of Mexico," he said. "You just look at the bottle and you know where it comes from."

In the beginning, he focused his efforts on Europe and Asia, then on the United States. Grand conducts liquor tastings and educational seminars all over the world to promote his product.

He said when he first came to Mexico, the people here viewed tequila as a drink for commoners. Surprisingly, 60 percent of Porfido sales are now in Mexico. So what changed the minds of those who once viewed Grand's efforts as ludicrous?

According to Grand, the prestige that Porfido and other high-end brands gained abroad convinced Mexicans that tequila was also a classy drink.

If you look closely, you will find a growing number of people in restaurants and bars around the world sipping tequila, straight or over ice, from snifters and not in bulky margarita glasses.

Depending on the quality, a bottle of Porfido can cost anywhere from 25 dollars for a bottle of Porfido Silver, 45 dollars for the most popular Porfido Single Barrel Añejo to 100 dollars for a bottle of Porfido Barrique de Provenca, the world's most expensive tequila.

"The demand for the Barrique is much higher than we are able to produce," Grand said.

Currently, his product is distributed in 13 countries. Although Mexico accounts for a big chunk of the market, the United States is his number one overseas buyer.

With business exploding and a cash flow that is increasing 800 percent a year, Grand opened his own distillery in 1977 near Puerto Vallarta where tequila is being produced 24 hours a day.

He also works out of two other distilleries in Jalisco, a Porfido representative, Veronica Andrade, said Grand wants to eventually phase out these factories and run the whole operation out of Vallarta.

"In Tequila, Barrique takes four years to age," Grand explained. "In Vallarta it takes only three years because of the tropical heat, so we don't get a year."

Grand's commitment to his new distillery, Porfido Republica, is evident in his aged tequila ads for the brand.

Also this year, Grand has started construction for an upscale restaurant, located on the grounds of the distillery, that will open in October. "We hope to offer evening seats to the public when we open," he said. The new restaurant will specialize in steaks, because after all "tequila goes best with a good steak," Grand said. (By Patricia Dwyer)



Tequila from 1

Grand says he does not use any chemicals to enhance the flavor of his tequila, as some other distillers do.

Barrique is also 100 percent pure blue agave. Most tequilas are made, meaning they contain the minimum agave required by law which is 60 percent. The uncommon 100 percent pure blue agave tequilas have a cleaner, velvety taste that is sweet, not bitter.

As Grand's distillery, the filters from the agave plant are stone processed, the machinery resembles the old fashioned one and looks like a top. He points out that the stone press makes him to separate the maximum juice from the agave.

After the juice is extracted, it is fermented for three days in stainless steel tanks that are completely sealed in order to prevent contamination. Most distilleries use open tanks.

By law, all tequilas must go through two distillation processes. Barrique goes through three distillations. Grand claims that with that third distillation, the impure alcohol from the sides of the agave are discarded and used for less expensive brands, while the extractives from the core are used for his expensive ciders.

The alcohol that are produced from the sides of the agave are the ones that are responsible for that hole in the stomach feeling you get after a night of hard drinking and partying.

You can drink a bottle of Porfido Barrique and never experience a hangover, Grand claims.

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Once considered the standard drink for Mexico's less-fortunate because of its cheap price and powerful plastering effect, tequila has seen a renaissance that now has distillers selling the elixir around the world for as much as 500 dollars.

Who in their right mind is going to dish out that much money for a bottle of alcohol? On top of this, who is going to buy a high-priced bottle of Mexico's national drink from an Austrian producer?

These are just some of the questions Martin Grassl faced.

Grassl was sent to Mexico in 1990 by his employer, an Austrian trading company, to seek out a Tequila sophisticated enough to be sold in the Japanese market. After a meticulous search, Grassl came back empty handed. Because a drink of that standard was non-existent at that time, he put forward the notion to his employer to create such a product himself. The proposal was rejected, so Grassl resigned and embarked on the venture on his own.

"My goal is to produce the best possible tequila regardless of price," Grassl said. "Most companies work the other way around -- around a budget first."

He borrowed some money, came to Guadalupe and rented a small distillery.

In 1991, his first brew of tequila was ready, hence the birth of Porfidio. The most popular of his tequilas, the 85-dollar Porfidio Single Barrel Añejo, is contained in a long slender bottle that has a handblown green glass cactus inside -- produced from recycled Coke and 7-UP bottles.

Distillers pointed fingers at the bottle's design, saying Grassl did not know the difference between agave (the plant tequila comes from) and cactus. They also snickered at the name of his new product, because it seemed like a misprint of "Porfirio," from the name Porfirio Diaz, the dictator who ruled over Mexico for 30 years before being overthrown at the start of the Mexican Revolution.

Local tequila producers sat back and laughed at this foreigner's attempt to break into a traditionally Mexican domain. One journalist described the young entrepreneur's efforts as a "hobby."

But Grassl knew exactly what he was doing. He said the name of his product was deliberately created to draw attention and provoke explication.

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"In Tequila, Barrique takes four years to age," Grassl explained. "In Vallarta it takes only three years because of the tropical heat, so over here I gain a year."

His business continues to grow with the introduction of his newest concoction, Porfidio Reposado. The eight-month aged tequila sells for 80 dollars.

Also this year, Grassl has started construction for an upscale restaurant, located on the grounds of the distillery, that will open in October. "We hope to offer evening tours to the public when we open," he said. The new restaurant will specialize in steaks, because after all "tequila goes best with a good steak," Grassl said. (By Rumina Daya)