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July 31, 1998

Tequila Two-Step

First, forget about margaritas--then prepare to savor the flavor of superpremium tequilas

By Sam Gugino

While those swimming pool-sized margaritas are still being lapped up by the millions with burritos, salsa and other Tex-Mex fast food, the image of tequila is slowly changing. Like single malt Scotch and aged rum before it, superpremium tequila has emerged as a fine sipping beverage to be savored in snifters, not slurped through a straw or knocked back with a lick of salt

and squeeze of lime.

"Margaritas are still 60 percent of the high end," said Steve Goldstein of Cuervo, the best-selling tequila in the U.S. Tequilas have grown 20 to 25 per

When Rick Bayless opened the first Mexican restaurant in the U.S., there were virtually no superpremium tequilas available. Now he carries 43 of them, categorized by style and region, at Frontera and its next-door sister Topolobampo, two of the most highly regarded Mexican restaurants in the United States. "People have come to appreciate fine Mexican food," he says. "[And] they know that there are some really good tequilas in Mexico. It's just taken time for them to make it into the United States."

Tequila is the oldest distilled spirit in North America. Its origins go back to pre-Colombian days when the Aztecs made pulque (POOL-keh), a sweet, lightly alcoholic drink from the blue agave (uh-GAHV-ee) plant. The Spanish upon arrival took it one step further, distilling pulque into the more potent tequila, and the refinement has continued.

In 1978, Mexico established Norma Oficial Mexicana to govern the production of tequila. Under Norma, as this set of regulations is more commonly called, tequila must come from the heart of the blue agave plant, which thrives in the volcanic soils of the state of Jalisco (where the town of Tequila is located) and parts of four other states.

"Tequilas made from highland agave have much more floral characteristics than valley-grown ones, which are richer, with more depth," says Bayless. Despite the commonly held view, the agave is not a cactus but a member of the amaryllis family. Another myth is that tequila bottles sometimes contain a worm--it is mezcal, a harsher, unregulated cousin of tequila, that may contain a worm.

The blue agave takes 8 to 12 years to mature, reaching a weight of up to 150 pounds. For Bayless, this is where tequila is different from Cognac and Bourbon. "In tequila, everything happens before distillation, not afterwards like whiskey or Cognac, which can be made with inferior corn or grapes," he says. "Tequila is all about farming."

"It's a lot like grapes for wine. It depends on where the agave is planted and how it is brought to maturity," says Robert Denton of Robert Denton & Co., who started importing superpremium Chinaco Tequila into the United States in 1983. Denton added that the best tequilas are often made from estate-grown agave that is allowed to reach full maturity.

When the plant reaches maturity, its heart, called the piña (PEEN-yah; Spanish for "pineapple" because it looks like a giant pineapple after it is trimmed), is removed and cooked in large ovens (traditionally made of stone) to soften its tough fibers and convert its starch to sugar. Liquid (*aguamiel*, or honey water) is extracted, fermented and distilled.

Early versions of tequila were coarsely distilled, retaining impurities called



fusel oils that produced headaches. (Despite tequila's macho image, its percentage of alcohol is no more than that of most other spirits--about 80 proof when diluted after distillation.) Single-distillation column stills removed unwanted impurities, but took out most of the flavor as well. To retain character and flavor, superpremium tequilas are double-distilled in pot stills, in much the same way as is Cognac.

Another measure of quality is the amount of blue agave used. Regulations set a minimum of only 51 percent blue agave. The rest can be sugar. The best tequilas are often 100 percent blue agave.

Tequila that is not aged, save for a resting period of up to 60 days before bottling, is labeled silver or *blanco* (white). Most have little flavor. But if made with a high percentage of agave, they will show fruit, floral and spice characteristics. Gold tequila has no status as an official grade and is essentially white tequila with legally added caramel.

Reposado (rested) tequila is aged from two to 12 months. *Añejo* (aged) tequila is aged in wood for between one and six years, though three years seems to be the maximum aging time before wood flavors overtake the nuances of the spirit itself. Used Bourbon barrels of American oak are the wood of choice, though some producers of high-priced tequilas are using new American oak, and in the case of **Porfidio** Barrique de Ponciano, new French oak.

At \$500 for a liter bottle, the limited-edition (500 bottles) **Porfidio** is the second most expensive tequila; after Jose Cuervo 1800 Colección, a limited-edition (347 bottles) version that sells for \$1,000 a bottle. Most other superpremium tequilas cost between \$40 and \$80 a bottle.

But for Bayless, too many of the new superpremium tequilas are overoaked, making them more like Cognacs, and not very good ones at that. Denton, for his part, believes that the age of the barrels makes the difference, and that barrels that have been used many times can be used to age tequila for seven or eight years without distorting the taste.

With these comments in mind, I found new appreciation for silver tequilas, especially the El Tesoro de Don Felipe with its fresh floral and citrus aromas and lovely fruitiness. As a result of its triple-distilling, **Porfidio** Plata was supersmooth, but it lacked the fruitiness of the El Tesoro. Chinaco Blanco was another fine silver tequila.

Among the *reposado* tequilas, mustard-yellow Los Valientes had an aroma of orange blossom and licorice. Gran Centenario had a rich, honeyed nose and a slight peppery catch in the back of the throat. Chinaco was viscous, and spiced with wood notes and smokiness. **Porfidio's** round, cobalt-blue bottle with gold lettering was hands down the most attractive packaging, and the spirit it contained was no slouch in the aroma and flavor departments either.

All the *añejo* tequilas showed the effects of their wood aging, some to a fault. Herradura had restrained caramel and butterscotch aromas and more woody flavors (primarily cedar) than most of the others. Patrón was well-



integrated, with a bouquet and flavor reminiscent of Cognac. Cognac-like qualities could also be attributed to Gran Centenario and the **Porfidio** single-barrel version. El Tesoro achieved a balance between wood and fruit, as did Chinaco. Reserva de Dueño and a 2-year-old **Porfidio** were both overwhelmed by vanilla.

Cuervo Reserva de la Familia had a nice amber color from its three years in wood, and attractive pepper and spice notes. Cuervo 1800 had a golden color and a long, sweet finish. The fruity nose (mostly pears) of the pale green-gold Sauza Conmemorativo reminded me of an eau-de-vie (clear fruit brandy).

Enjoy superpremium tequila as you would single malt Scotch or Cognac. Tulip-shaped Cognac glasses or Sherry *copitas* are the best vessels because they allow aromas to be savored without resulting in the drinker inhaling too much alcohol. Denton suggests rubbing the inside of the glass with an orange peel to enhance the aroma. But skip the lime and salt--and the burritos.

Sam Gugino, Wine Spectator's Tastes columnist, is coauthor of Matthew Kenney's Mediterranean Cooking.

How to Get It

Any good liquor store should have a decent selection of superpremium tequilas. The Cuervo 1800 Colección is also available by mail through Neiman-Marcus, (312) 642-5900. But for just a sip, here are some restaurants with good selections.

Café Annie Houston (713) 840-1111
Café Marimba San Francisco (415) 776-1506
Chef Allen's Miami (305) 935-2900
Coyote Café Santa Fe, N.M. (505) 983-1615
Frontera Grill/Topolobampo Chicago (312) 661-1434
Red Sage Washington, D.C. (202) 638-4444
Sonora Café Los Angeles (213) 857-1800
Zócalo New York (212) 717-7772

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