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European whiz kid pushes Mexican tequila up market

14:47 Dec 04, 1996 EST

TEQUILA, Mexico (Reuter) - It is now sipped as well as slammed and served in cognac snifters as well as shot glasses, and it can sell for up to \$400 a bottle.

Tequila, once known as the mostly-to-be-avoided drink of party animals and macho revolutionaries, is brushing up its image. And while most "tequileros" in this farming town are as earthy, weather-worn and prickly as the blue agave cactus from which tequila is made, it is a 29-year-old Austrian with snappy suits and a flair for marketing who is shaking up the industry like an upstart Pancho Villa.

"I'm a rebel in all aspects," Martin Grassl, owner of **Porfidio** tequila, said in an interview as he sipped a glass of his premium tequila that he claims is among the best and most expensive in the world.

"I was the first person in the industry who spoke in favor of producing highest quality tequila on a par with any European alcoholic beverage. I have a quality concept. I produce tequila for people who can spend \$100 a bottle."

While some rivals contest Grassl's pioneer role, there is no question tequila has shot inexorably up market. More and more women are drinking it, while among men it is fashionably enjoyed with a fine cigar in a romantic throwback to tequila-swigging rebels like Villa, one of the heroes of the 1910-1917 Mexican revolution.

According to industry figures, bottling of premium 100 percent pure agave tequila such as **Porfidio** doubled to 17.1 million liters in the first 10 months of 1996 from the same period last year. Exports are up almost 75 percent.

"Those people who used to drink margaritas with cheap tequila in their college days are now grown-up yuppies in New York. That is who is drinking **Porfidio**," Grassl said.

Advertised in the trendy U.S. magazine Cigar Aficionado, his bottles are tall, elegant and labeled like designer drinks. The amounts Grassl bottles are comparatively small. He has produced only 500 bottles of his latest premier brand, an aged tequila barreled in the best French oak, and he says it was all pre-sold at \$200 a bottle and will retail at twice that.

“You're looking at buyers like the Ritz Carlton hotel in the United States and Cancun. The other big pre-orders are Mexican politicians -- people in the government where money doesn't matter because the government pays.”

Grassl is not alone in making good tequila. Old-fashioned Mexican tequileros also got wind of the taste for quality, as did international liquor firms like Seagrams and Jim Beam.

The Mexican government recently won the right in the European Community to ensure that only agave-based liquor produced in the states around this dusty central Mexican town had the right to be named tequila.

Some tequila barons hope only 100 percent agave-based liquor eventually will be able to claim the tequila distinction. The best-known brand names, cheaper tequilas like Jose Cuervo, mostly contain just 51 percent agave.

In a nationalistic industry, Grassl stands out not just as a foreigner but in his unconcealed disdain for the marketing efforts and quality standards of his Mexican rivals.

He also has an almost sacrilegious disregard for tequila's heritage -- the Mexican-ness that his competitors display on their bottles like a badge of honor.

When he started exporting to Europe, he says, he deliberately dropped the name tequila from his bottles, marketing it as “Eau de Vie d'Agave” in hopes of winning the cachet of a sophisticated kirsch.

Mexico quickly put a stop to that. By law, any 51 percent agave distillate has to be called tequila. But the name is subtly underplayed on his labels because, he says, cheap tequila has created such a shoddy image of bad taste and hangovers that the name does not necessarily sell well.

“If I go to a nice restaurant in Germany and I say it's an eau de vie and they drink it and like it, and the next day I do the same thing and I call it tequila and they think it's awful, I have a certain problem with that,” he said. “I don't like to suffer from the bad marketing my colleagues have done in the tequila industry.”

Talk like that astounds his competitors. While Grassl is widely credited as a marketing genius, some take issue with his claim that he started the trend for quality.

Eduardo Gonzalez Garcia, a 39-year-old who makes Don Julio tequila, named after his famed tequilero father, says he was the first to bring good tequila to restaurants five years ago.

He takes the Austrian's charge that the tequila name lacks cachet as a slap in the face.

``It's a free world, and anyone can do what they jolly well like, but as Mexicans that gets the blood up," he fumed at his family-run factory, where Don Julio is bottled, capped and labeled by hand.

``I was going to make eight trips abroad this year, but I'll make 10, 12, 500. I'm not going to let my tequila, my Mexico, be put in the mouth of someone who has no feel for it."

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