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Viva Tequila!

Bay Area connoisseurs discover Mexico's upscale liquid gold

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First there was single-malt scotch. Then small-batch bourbons. Then vodka was the rage. Now the latest in liquor is tequila.

Where tequila was once confined to margaritas in Mexican cafes, now top restaurants across the country -- and not just those serving Mexican food -- are adding tequila lists to their bars.

“Tequila is a primary component of what we do here,” says Bo Thompson, manager at the newly opened Gordon's House of Fine Eats in San Francisco. “Sales are very good.”

Gordon's -- which specializes in American cuisine -- offers more than 15 upscale tequilas. And it has good reason to do so.

Americans are going for tequila in a big way. According to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a trade association, consumption has risen 112 percent since 1985 to almost 16 million gallons per year, making it the fastest-growing distilled spirit in the nation.

Brian Bowden, spirits buyer for the Beverages & More! chain headquartered in Concord, says retail tequila sales are way up. “We had growth of about 18 percent at the high end,” he says, indicating that consumers are becoming more selective in their tequila buying. Ultra-premium -- and quite costly -- Chinaco, Patron and Porfidio brands are selling especially well, he points out.

Bowden says the store is starting to get single-estate bottled tequilas from Mexico -- and consumers are buying them despite the \$50-\$60 per-bottle price tag.



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The seemingly sudden interest in the beverage that was solely the drink of Mexico's poor is the result of the discovery by restaurateurs and their customers of high-end tequilas, some of which are considered on a par with fine brandy and Cognac.

Cuervo Gold may be the most recognized brand of tequila in the United States, but what's selling now is far more refined.

"We won't go through one liter of Cuervo Gold in a year at Tommy's," says Julio Bermejo of Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco's Richmond district. But the restaurant has no problem selling the other 110 top-of-the-line tequilas stocked in the bar.

In fact, locally and nationally, much of the promotion of upscale tequila has come from Bermejo, whose passion for the stuff has led him to stock the bar at his parents' restaurant with more types of 100 percent agave tequilas than at any other restaurant outside of Mexico, he claims.

Bermejo says he started his quest to educate people about tequila a decade ago because he was tired of people thinking the liquor was cheap. He was well acquainted with the better tequilas because he traveled to Mexico frequently to visit distilleries.

But when Bermejo first started stocking the bar at Tommy's with ultra-premium brands, he had trouble selling those without recognizable names like Cuervo and Sauza. So he began a tequila club, taking the idea from the beer club run by Raleigh's, a bar he frequented while a student at University of California at Berkeley. Raleigh's customers had to taste every beer in the house to become a member.

To reach the apex of Bermjo's tequila club, members -- there are more than 2,700 -- must first try 35 tequilas, then pass a 100-question test about the spirit and try an additional 10 to 20 reserve brands and, finally, visit the tequila distilleries in Mexico. Only 14 of the members have reached the top level, but all flash their membership cards in pride. And mention tequila to Northern California aficionados and the name Julio Bermejo isn't far behind.

In fact, Bermejo was instrumental in developing the tequila list and training the staff at Gordon's, Beach Chalet, Harry Denton's Starlight Room and Left at Albuquerque. He has also consulted with the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas.

Part of his education program includes an presentation on how tequilas are made and what sets the good tequilas apart.

A key factor of top tequilas is they are made entirely from blue agave, a plant that resembles a cactus but is a member of the lily family. A similar spirit called mezcal that's frequently confused with tequila can be made from any member of the agave family. So while tequila is always mezcal, mezcal is not always tequila -- much the way Champagne is always sparkling

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wine, but sparkling wine is not always Champagne.

Lesser-quality tequilas that were prevalent in this country until a few years ago are actually a blend of tequila and fermented cane juice.

Tequila is made by baking the pina -- the huge pineapple-looking center of the plant -- to convert the starches to sugar. The pina is then crushed and the juice extracted and transferred to distillation tanks.

There are four types of tequila, based on what happens after distillation (see related article), with flavors ranging from crisp and peppery to deeply complex and oakey. But, like wine -- and unlike most distilled spirits -- fine tequila tastes in part like the plant from which it's made, in addition to flavor nuances resulting from manufacturing techniques.

Other restaurateurs who may not be as passionate about their tequila lists as is Bermejo have also noticed an upswing in sales.

Treg Finney, bar manager at Jardiniere, says the prominent placement of the bottles plays a part in sales. ``This is a martini and Champagne bar," he says, ``but we get a ton of questions about tequila."

Finney has also put two tequila tastings on the menu, which become popular once one patron orders it. Customers see the lineup of glassware, and suddenly everyone wants one," he says.

Some people have started drinking the super-premium tequilas, especially anejos, instead of Cognac or single-malt scotches as after-dinner drinks. But margaritas remain the main form of tequila consumption.

``Ninety percent of tequila at Tommy's is made into margaritas," Bermejo says.

``At most places, it's a waste to make an anejo into a margarita, but at Tommy's we use so much tequila, it's not bad."

At Maya, the upscale Mexican restaurant south of Market, shots are ordered as often as margaritas, but don't expect salt and lime as accompaniments.

``We pour shots with a spicy-sweet tomato juice back called sangrita, which complements the tequila," bar manager Matt Jenness says. ``You just sip back and forth between the tequila and the sangrita."

Other restaurants are urging patrons to try tequilas as an after-dinner drink to refine their palates. Gordon's is implementing a program where the servers will take two or three bottles of super-premium tequilas to the table and let customers have a small sample to encourage them to try tequila in a different way.

No one is sure why super-premium tequila is the latest craze in the bar scene, but many say the strong economy gives people more freedom to try new things.

``I think people want something new and fun," Gordon's Thompson says. ``Prices have

gone up dramatically, and now it seems cool and Californian."

The introduction of as many as 200 new tequila brands over the last five years indicates the tequila craze is not just a fad.

"People are going more for the flavors of tequila instead of something to spike a sweet drink," Thompson adds. Good tequila is here to stay, Bermejo says, because of its exceptional quality coupled with the liquor's casual reputation.

"I like tequila because you can drink it in sandals and shorts. You don't have to be wearing a smoking jacket and driving a Rolls."

CHOOSE THE TYPE YOU LIKE

The best tequilas are made from 100 percent blue agave, but all tequila falls into one of the following four categories. All but the first category have wonderful selections.

-- Joven abocado. This term for "young and smooth" describes the low end of the scale. In Mexico, anything made with 51 percent fermented from blue agave can be legally called tequila, but up to 49 percent may be fermented cane juice. These lack the character and complexity of 100 percent agave tequila.

This type -- which includes brands such as Cuervo Gold -- also gets its golden hue from the addition of caramel color, not from aging -- which leads to the description "adulterated." These tequilas run about \$10 for a 750-milliliter bottle.

-- Silver (plato) or white (blanco). These unaged tequilas are usually crystal clear and have a crisp, peppery flavor. Some brands, like Herradura, spend a little time in oak for more complexity, but not enough time to pick up heavy oak tones. Herradura Silver is the house tequila at Tommy's, Maya and Gordon's House of Fine Eats. Most silver tequilas are \$25-\$35 for a 750-milliliter bottle.

-- Reposado. These "rested" tequilas have been aged for two months to one year in oak, producing a natural golden-brown hue and an oak flavor that varies from producer to producer.

Many aficionados consider reposados made by Herradura and El Tesoro to be excellent. Rock star Sammy Hagar owns a company that makes a decent reposado called Cabo Wabo. Reposados usually cost \$30-\$40 per bottle, though some can cost more.

-- Anejo. These aged tequilas are generally considered to be the highest-quality tequilas available. To be called anejo, the tequila must be aged in 53-to-55-gallon oak barrels for at least one year.

This category is traditionally the most expensive and includes the 4-year-old Chinaco and Herradura Seleccion Suprema. Prices for anejos can run from \$40-\$250 or more per bottle.

RESTAURANTS ON QUESTS TO PERFECT THE MARGARITA

Margaritas are personal drinks, and many restaurants have their own signature combinations.

At Maya in San Francisco and New York, the bar serves four different versions, ranging from a frozen version flavored with hibiscus to a top-shelf version made with Cointreau and a floater of Grand Marnier.

The secret to the margarita at Gordon's House of Fine Eats in San Francisco is lots of fresh lime juice and a drop of sweetened lemon juice.

At Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco, tequila connoisseur Julio Bermejo selects his limes carefully, and the bartenders taste every margarita they make. ``Would you cook without tasting?" Bermejo asks.

Tommy's margaritas are made to showcase the flavor of the tequila used in the drink, and the drink changes substantially depending on the type and brand of tequila. The house tequila at Tommy's is Herradura Silver, which makes a delicious crisp, slightly peppery margarita.

TOMMY'S MARGARITA

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 ounces 100 percent agave tequila
- 1 1/2 ounces fresh squeezed lime juice
- 3/4 ounce Triple Sec
- Splash of sweet-and-sour mix

INSTRUCTIONS: Combine all ingredients over ice in a cocktail shaker. Shake vigorously.

Strain into a martini glass or margarita glass.

Serves 1.

PER SERVING: 210 calories, 0 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 0 g fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 1 mg sodium, 0 g fiber.

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