



VICES
tequila: more than just sucking and licking

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TEQUILA

MORE THAN JUST SUCKING AND LICKING

by Marguerite Thomas

Tequila is certainly one of the most versatile beverages on earth, with its patterns of consumption ranging from rustic to refined. Chardonnay, for example, would never lend itself to the sort of group-guzzle that tequila fans fancy: lime sucking, salt licking and bottle passing from mouth to mouth. Whiskey can't be whipped into an icy froth with lime and orange liqueur and enjoyed by a bar full of feverish salsa-heads. Microbrews aren't swirled in a snifter after dinner like fine brandy. No, only with tequila can you do all this. But what is tequila exactly, and what the hell's the story with the worm?

The first thing to get straight is that tequila is not made from just any kind of cactus. It comes from the maguey plant, which is actually in the lily family. Agave, the maguey from which tequila is made, has sharp-edged blue-green leaves and grows mostly in western central Mexico, particularly in the state of Jalisco. It takes a decade or more for the plant to reach its full height -- about six feet -- and girth -- approximately five feet. Once mature, the inner pina -- the heart of the agave, which looks like a giant pineapple -- is harvested. The entire plant is thus sacrificed in the name of tequila.

At the distillery, the pinas are heated to the point where their starch is converted to sugar, forming a fermentable liquid. They're then broken open and crushed. Some producers wash the fibers repeatedly to extract as much sugary juice as possible, while others use only the first pressing of juice, discarding the fibers in the same way that some winemakers discard grape seeds and stems. The extracted juice, called aquamiel ("honey-water"), is fermented for up to four days. When there's not enough natural sugar present, chaptalization -- the addition of alcohol derived from sugar cane -- takes place. After fermentation, the liquid is distilled in copper-pot stills known as ollas.

MEZCAL, at about 28 proof, is made from the first

TASTING NOTES

PLATAS (SILVER)

Herradura: lots of personality, with sharp peppery flavors.

Patron: Simple, smooth, sipable.

REPOSADOS (GOLD)

Cuervo Traditional: warm, golden, satisfying (squirt of lime juice perks up flavors).

Corraleajo: Smooth, complex, with beguiling

impressions of peaches, pine nuts, vanilla and, odd as this may sound, a lingering aftertaste resembling creme brulee. Our tasting panel loved this one.

Cabo Wabo: First impression is of refreshing floral/vegetal aromas, followed by a mysterious smoky quality. Swirl in the snifter, sip slowly and savor the intricate personality of this stunner.

ANEJOS

El Tesoro: medium body, complex licorice/ginger flavors.

Sauza Tres Generaciones: syrupy, with rich aromas reminiscent of honey and ripe pineapple.

PREMIUM ANEJOS

Porfidio Single Barrel "Cactus": creamy, full-bodied, subtle, with a sweet, almost butterscotchy flavor.

Chinaco: rolls across palate like silk.

MEZCAL

Del Maquey Single Village Santo Domingo Albarradas: full-bodied, smoky aromas, leaves hint of caraway flavor on tongue.

distillation. **COMMERCIAL GRADE TEQUILA** of 150 proof is made from the second distillation, while some of the finest tequilas are triple-distilled. As with whiskey, the heads and tails of the distillation are cut to eliminate unpleasant and/or toxic elements. Finally, the spirit is pumped into large oak vats where it settles for a month or longer. **BLANCO**, or white tequila, also known as **PLATA** ("silver"), is reduced down with water to 80 proof before bottling. The best platas are fresh and clean tasting, characterized by the distinctive herbal flavors of the agave. They can be served chilled, like fine vodka, in a shot glass or martini glass. (Some aficionados appreciate the addition of green olives.) **GOLD**, or reposado, tequila "rests" for approximately eight months in redwood barrels. This maturing period smooths and blends the flavors. It also imparts a slight golden color, which is further intensified by the addition of caramel (the same coloring compound used by Cognac producers.) **ANEJO** and other **PREMIUM** tequilas are made from 100 percent blue agave and must be aged for at least one year in American whisky oak barrels. (In fact, virtually all anejos are aged at least three years, and the finest may spend up to 10 years in cask.) The aging process concentrates flavors, fleshes out the body and imparts some color. The complex aroma and mellow flavors of the best anejos may be savored in a brandy snifter like fine Cognac and nicely complement cigars. In Mexico, anejos are sometimes served with spicy foods or with rich creamy desserts, such as flan or creme brulee.

A bottle of tequila good enough for making margaritas will only set you back a few bucks. For sipping on its own, however, you'll want something smoother, with a more refined flavor and less potential to make you crazy. To get the best, you'll have to pay more (surprise, surprise!). Single village mezcal can be expensive. The elegant and intensely flavored Barrique de Ponciano Porfidio Anejo, for example, retails for about \$500 per one-liter bottle -- if you can find it in the first place, that is. Only 500 bottles make it into the United States every year. And for those who want to drain your bank account, grab a bottle of Cuervo Limited Edition 1800 "Coleccion," one of the finest French-oak-aged tequilas. It's a mere \$1,000 a bottle.

Oh yeah, about that worm. Originally, it was used to test the alcohol content of mezcal. It's optional today, though a few producers still include it as a nod to tradition.

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