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## Tequila:

*The "Liquid Geometry of Passion"*

By Gordon Young  
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Trust me. A frat party -- or any other social gathering where guests are likely to throw up in the hibiscus before the night ends -- is the worst place to learn about the charms of tequila. Downing shots of inferior-grade Mexican petrol to the strains of "Louie Louie" with your fellow rent-a-friends is an insult to the creation that author Tom Robbins once described as "the liquid geometry of passion," not to mention an affront to your brain cells and your self-esteem.

*The drinking public's taste in tequila  
is maturing as availability increases*

Then again, tequila and intelligence have never been close friends in this country. Booze hounds love to use cheap tequila as an excuse to act a fool. I once had a roommate in Detroit who polished off a bottle of bad tequila and fashioned an elaborate knot around his treasured bowling ball with a long stretch of twine. He then tied the other end to the back of his rickety blue Schwinn and started doing laps around the block. He was having a great time until the Black Beauty lodged in a storm drain -- the ultimate gutter ball -- and he somersaulted his way into the Tequila-Haters Fan Club. I know too many heavy drinkers like him who get all queasy with hangover flashbacks at the very mention of the "T" word.

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Tequila, to put it bluntly, was something to get you wasted. The salt and lime routine was nothing more than a stylish ritual created to hoodwink your taste buds. Most people didn't know *good* tequila even existed. After all, how could tequila have any positive attributes when it inspired a band as bad as the Eagles to write a song about it? No offense to José Cuervo -- the manufacturer that has traditionally controlled the market -- but for a long time you simply couldn't get fine tequila in very many places outside Mexico. Thankfully, that has changed. Tequila has grown up in the past few years. More accurately, the drinking public's taste in tequila is maturing as availability increases.

## Understanding Agave

To get in touch with the essence of tequila, you have to understand the agave plant, a species whose name is derived from the Greek word for "noble" or "admirable." There are more than 100 varieties of agave, a plant closer to a lily than a cactus. Specifically, tequila is distilled from *Tequiliana weber azul*, more commonly known as the blue agave. Each swordlike, silvery blue leaf is tipped with a single thorn and equipped with sharp, menacing ridges along each edge. The plant seems intent on protecting its sweet, starchy *piña* or "core" that is cooked and robbed of its fermentable sugars to make tequila.

According to Mexican law, 51 percent of the alcohol in a bottle of tequila must come from the fermented sugars of the blue agave. To save money, the lower-quality tequilas rarely exceed the 51 percent threshold. The best tequilas -- including most of the four-dozen available at Tommy's -- are distilled from 100 percent agave. A good rule of thumb is that if it isn't 100 percent agave, it carries a 110 percent chance of delivering a hangover that will make your eyes ache.

"For most people, their first experience with tequila is a tragic one," says Julio Bermejo, the thirtysomething tequila *experto* whose father opened Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco a few months after Julio's birth. Julio makes trips to Mexican tequila distilleries three or four times a year to sample products, talk to manufacturers, and augment his private stock. "That's because they drank the cheap tequila sold in most bars and grocery stores. That stuff's poison. It's paint thinner. I'll show you how real tequila tastes. We can stay here until five in the morning and you won't even come close to a hangover." I had heard similar anti-hangover pronouncement from other tequila aficionados. Sure, I thought, tell that to my friend with the bowling ball.

## Blanco

I decided to investigate with a taste test of my own. Silver tequilas are a logical way to begin any drinking session with Mexico's most enduring import. This clear, unaged variety -- also known as *blanco* or "white" -- typically goes straight from the still to the bottle. Silvers offer the most discernible, unadulterated taste of the agave and form the groundwork

for a distillery's entire line.

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The first silver to hit my shot glass belonged to Herradura, a venerable distillery that produced the first registered 100 percent agave tequila exported to the United States. The blue horseshoe on the label promised good fortune for the rest of the night and reminded me how lucky I was to sample Herradura's dry, crisp flavor accented by a hint of citrus.

The lesser-known Pueblo Viejo Blanco was next. The ugly label indicates the distillery is more concerned with making good tequila than marketing. It looks like a miniature version of a placemat you'd find at a sorry gringo taco joint. Who cares? At \$4 a shot, Pueblo Viejo is a wonderfully smooth bargain and leaves you with the sweet, distinctive taste of agave in your mouth.

I moved on to Patrón Silver, a brand at the forefront of the tequila boom. Unlike Pueblo Viejo, Patrón is packaged in what is touted as a "hand-blown glass decanter" (even though there's a seam along one edge of the bottle) that will cost you 40 bucks. The silver deliciously mixes a trace of mint and pepper before giving way to a sweet finish. But I have to stand by my taste buds; the less expensive Pueblo Viejo -- tacky label and all -- was a touch smoother.

El Tesoro Silver was next. The process used to make it has not evolved much over the years. The absence of electricity rules out a crushing machine used at most distilleries to extract the juice from the agave. Instead, both the juice and the agave fibers are fermented in the early production stages. And instead of being distilled to a high proof and diluted with demineralized water, El Tesoro is distilled to approximately 80 proof and then bottled. The result is an intense agave flavor -- fruity, floral, and smooth.

## Reposado

Next I waded into the *reposado* tequilas. A reposado is a tequila that has "rested" or aged from two months to one year in oak tanks or barrels before bottling. A flavorful mingling of fruity agave flavor and a touch of the subtle taste of oak make a fine reposado a delicate balancing act in a bottle. The peppery bite of a silver is smoothed over and often replaced with a slight hint of vanilla or spice. Reposados are silvers that still know how to raise hell but aren't so obvious about it.

I begin with Pueblo Viejo Reposado -- a dry, peppery liquid that obviously opted for the taste of the agave over the woodiness of the oak barrel that had held it. Things got much fruitier with the Centinela Reposado that came next.

I finally found the oak flavor in two offerings from Herradura. The first was the Herradura Reposado made prior to November 1992, before the distillery went with newer oak barrels and longer aging periods. Side by side, the older and the younger Herradura reposados obviously have the same blood line, but they are far from identical twins. The slightly smoky aroma of the pre-'92 mingles with the familiar herbaceous qualities of the agave to produce a slightly bitter taste that lingers on the tongue. The newer version of Herradura Reposado is smoother and offers an oakier taste.

## Añejos

*Añejos* are the heavyweights of the tequila world -- the golden-hued, mature older brother of silvers and reposados. By Mexican law, añejos must be aged for at least one year in government-sealed oak barrels. But like all spirits, age doesn't automatically make a good tequila even better. The give and take needed to strike a balance in reposados is sometimes tilted in favor of oak at the expense of the agave in añejos, often with unfortunate results.

Unsurprisingly, El Tesoro Añejo achieves an impressive balance, retaining the essential quality of the agave augmented with vanilla and oak flavor. Real Hacienda Añejo still retains a peppery bite that tells you this is a refined tequila, not a quirky single malt. If upscale packaging were all it took to sell a premium tequila, Porfidio would give José Cuervo a run for his money. Each bottle of Porfidio Single Barrel Cactus Añejo contains a green-glass cactus tipped with red flowers. The tequila is pungent and robust with a spicy kick that isn't eclipsed by the oak. *Wine Enthusiast* magazine liked it enough to give Porfidio its highest rating for an añejo.

At the other end of the spectrum, Herradura Añejo made after November 1992 tilts decidedly toward the oak, as does the Chinaco Añejo. I found it a welcome change that added an elegant richness to the flavor of agave. The nose is incredible, and añejos should be enjoyed from a brandy snifter to take full advantage of it. For those who find the agave flavor too much in eclipse when it comes to these oaky treats, the silvers and reposados are always there to satisfy your needs.

At the completion of this drinking marathon, I had a much better understanding of what Tom Robbins was getting at when he dubbed tequila "the buzzard god who copulates in mid-air with the ascending souls of dying virgins." One thing I didn't get, however, was a hangover.

**Gordon Young** is a San Francisco-based freelance journalist.