



[FindArticles](#) > [Independent, The \(London\)](#) > [May 21, 2000](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)

High spirits

STUART HUSBAND

hink of tequila and a host of torrid images spring to mind: a bunch of dishevelled office party-ites in slammer frenzy, earnestly assuring each other that they're the best friends anyone ever had; or sunrised- up Club-Medders, menaced by pink elephants while lying face down on a Cancun disco floor. In other words, it's been the intoxicant of choice for those on the fast track to oblivion.

But there's a new movement afoot to recast this much-maligned spirit as nothing less than the new whisky. In the US, dedicated tequila bars are springing up, offering endless varieties of the piquant 40 per cent proof tippie, and rather than slam-dunking, or diluting it into the much more mainstream margarita, the cocktail cognoscenti are sipping it from shot glasses or snifters and rhapsodising, Jilly Goolden-like, about oakTen undertones and hints of apricot, with finishes as astringent as vodka or as voluptuous as fine cognac. In short, they're amused by its presumption. This enthusiasm reached a crescendo with the investiture of the world's first tequila sommelier, at the Adobo Grill in Chicago. Fernando Guzman presides over 75 brands, each with their own particular character, and each, he emphasises with the connoisseur's hauteur, eminently unsuitable for something as vulgar as slamming.

This is all music to the ears of Tom Estes, founder of London's Cafe Pacifico group, who's been importing tequila for 25 years, and, although he would never define himself as such, is probably the nearest thing to a sommelier this side of the pond. Drinkers here, he says, are following the American lead. "It used to be something you'd only get around to ordering after 15 pints; it was probably the most underappreciated and misunderstood of the world's great spirits," he says. "Now people are much more sophisticated about brands and flavours."

They need to be. We're sitting in his La Perla bar in Covent Garden, contemplating an awesome display of bottles of all shapes and hues, bearing exotic names like Chimaco, Gran Centenario and Porfidio. The process of making tequila, as Estes explains it, turns out to be every bit as sophisticated as the drink itself. It's produced from the juice of a cactus-like plant called agave, which grows in abundance in an area of the Mexican state of Jalisco, centred on a village called (yes!) Tequila. (The champagne- and- chablis rule applies here - only tequilas produced in this area have an inalienable right to be thus appellated.) The plants take up to 12 years to reach maturity, after which the leaves are cut off, and the fleshy, pineapple-like cores are steamed and the juice pressed out, fermented and distilled. It can then be bottled or aged in oak caskets.

The length of the latter process determines the various classifications of tequila. "Joven" is a young brand (and the kind most often used in slammers; most of the bog-standard Cuervo tequilas scattered across Britain's pubs fall into this category); "reposado" (rested) has been aged for two to 12 months; "anejo" (aged) has been maturing for a year or more; and "100 per cent blue agave" are the purest brands and the most sought-after by aficionados. (Mezcal is also made from agave plants; it's this variant that comes with a worm in the bottle, but, contrary to the feverish claims made by hardcore enthusiasts, it has no connection to mescaline.) "The breadth of varieties means you can drink it as an aperitif or digestif, as a shot with lemon or lime, or as a chaser with beer," says Estes.

Tequila rituals and lore - strictly speaking, you should lick salt from between the thumb and forefinger before drinking a shot, following through by sucking on a piece of lemon or lime - means it's the latest liquid diversion to be taken up by the fashion crowd, who've "done" vodka and absinthe. At least, that's the hope of Cairbury Hill, whose marketing and management company RMS, is importing premium Mexican brands like Patron into achingly trendy bars such as Saint and Che. "In places

like California, it's got a cool, cult image," he says. "It's drunk by movie and pop stars and TV personalities. Jennifer Aniston recently made margaritas for everybody when she guested on Saturday Night Live." Hill even drew up a profile of the ideal tequila consumer: "Single, no dependants, on around pounds 30,000 a year. We put a bottle of Patron in the Met Bar and it was gone in a day, despite the fact that it's around pounds 8- 9 a shot."

Tom Estes has certainly seen his clientele expand, from the girls who'll come in on Saturday afternoon and sample some brands at the bar, before bestowing the ultimate accolade - "better than shopping" - to those who think nothing of spending pounds 100 a shot on the premium of premium tequilas, Coleccion, sitting majestically on the highest shelf. Those who fork out have their names emblazoned on the shield of the Coleccion Club, displayed behind the bar (hi, Ray from The Lady!).

Estes is keen to stress the unique "high" of tequila inebriation (a fact that will please the marketers of Tequiza, a new hybrid lager/ tequila drink aimed at lads which is due to launch shortly.) "A few shots will take you up to a certain point, where you're on this kind of ridge, feeling pretty mellow," he says. "It's a myth that it's hallucinogenic but it does give you a fairly intense, crazy high that can take your legs away."

It's time to test that feeling for myself. The shot glasses are lined up, and the reposados, anejos, and agaves are poured; ten minutes later, I've swilled the liquid lasciviously, I've luxuriated in top notes of pear and melon before succumbing to the killer punch of pepper or anise bases. Provided you don't plummet into drunken wooziness, top-line tequila is a rarefied pleasure - reassuringly expensive, with a bang/ buck ratio so intense, it's barely legal. Barman, line 'em up. n

Copyright 2000 Newspaper Publishing PLC

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved.