

Spanish conquistadors landed in the New World four centuries ago, bringing with them an insatiable appetite for fresh assets and a knowledge of alcohol distillation. Rum, the largest-selling distilled spirit in the world as well as one of the oldest, found its Caribbean roots when Christopher Columbus planted sugar cane on the island of Hispaniola, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The West Indies began cultivating sugar plantations and only shortly thereafter did rum become an important economic commodity. Traders earned reputations of illicit proportions, fueling piracy and slave trading within the infamous Rum Triangle.

Arriving on Mexican soil, the Spanish exerted their will by decimating the ancient Aztec culture. *Mezcal*, a slightly refined version of an indigenous Indian alcoholic tonic called *pulque*, was a product of the agave plant and tequila's first ancestor. Thus by 1519, Spain's conquest over civilizations on both of the world's great oceans had been accomplished, their influence over rum and tequila now firmly established.

It seems like a long leap from these origins to the tropical elixirs now enjoyed in bars and restaurants worldwide, but then so, too, is the distinct variation of flavor available within each of these spirits. The quality of rum and tequila alike is dependent upon five primary factors: raw materials, fermentation, distillation, aging and blending. Each individual step has a direct and dire result affecting the whole, and while certain standards exist, even mandated by Mexican law, it is their application which distinguishes each brand.

The root of rum is molasses, a by-product of crushing fresh sugar cane. In contrast, tequila begins with a particular species of agave plant, *agave tequiliana* Weber, not cactus as is commonly believed, which flourishes primarily in the mineral-rich volcanic soil of Jalisco. The heart of an agave plant, or *piña*, is baked and crushed into pulp for fermenting.

Like cognac, fine tequila and rum are fermented with the plant fibers during a slow and deliberate process in large wooden vats. Once completed, the remaining mash (or *mosto*, as it is called in the case of tequila) is placed in either a column or pot still where it is heated to a boil. The resulting vapors condense into a clear liquid devoid of congeners or impurities. The process is repeated to assure the highest level of purification.

Aging, particularly critical for vintage rum, determines a

spirit's outcome more than any other step in the process. Old Kentucky bourbon barrels, made of white oak, are used to house both superior rum and tequila. It is the nature of this wood, usually charred slightly, whose tannins absorb into the liquid which contributes to both the smooth texture and flavor of the final product. Each barrel, depending on a number of factors including atmospheric conditions, imparts its own flavor upon the aging liquids.

Tequila is separated into specific categories, all outlined under Mexican law. Silver tequila is bottled immediately after distillation. The taste is abundantly fresh agave, strong in flavor and without subtlety, forcing the drinker to clamp down on a lime to lessen the bite. Gold tequila is simply silver tequila with caramel color added. *Reposado* (literally translated as "rested"), aged between two months and one year, has the edge slightly finessed, but still possesses a tangible immaturity. Lastly, *añejo* is aged in oak barrels for a minimum of one year. It is this singular classification which concerns us here, because tasting tequila añejo is an altogether different experience than tossing back a throat-searing shot of Cuervo Gold.

Rum, on the other hand, has no set production standards to which it must adhere. Aging is accomplished similarly to tequila, with an equal percentage of producers foregoing the process altogether and bottling directly after distillation, hence "light" rums. Dark rum owes its color to at least partial aging, determined by the manufacturer's taste. The few who wait patiently for 15 years or more do so with pride while reaping economic rewards.

Blending is the final variable which allows distinguishing characteristics from each barrel and batch to be married for complex flavor. Tannin from newer barrels will be tempered by the subtlety of older casks, and differing ages may be united to create rich and complex flavors. And flavor, after all, is what we most desire.

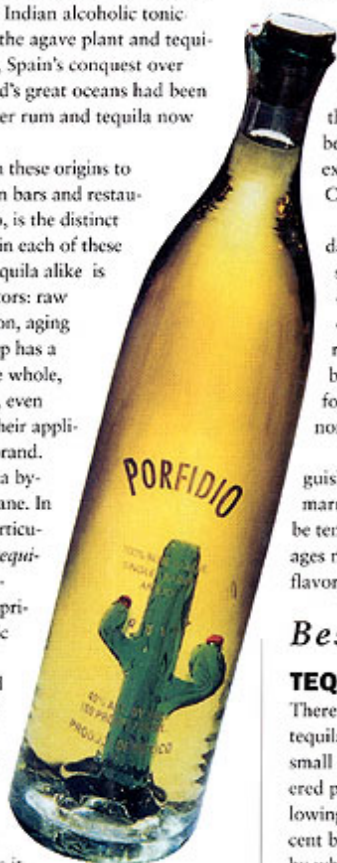
Best of the Best

TEQUILA

There are more than 1,400 brands of tequila available, of which only a small percentage can be considered premium selections. The following choices are all 100-percent blue agave, the benchmark by which all standards are set. All but one are fashioned in the Jalisco region of Mexico.

HERRADURA SELECCION

SUPREMA. This brand is distinguishable as the only "estate bottled"



tequila currently sold, meaning they grow and harvest their own plants, ferment, distill, age and bottle on premises. Founded in 1861, 6 miles from the town of Tequila and grown without pesticides, Selección Suprema is an astoundingly complex new addition to the market without a hint of sharpness. Created from vintage 1980 plants, this tequila has been aged more than four years. Only 2,000 bottles will be available each year, individually numbered with a certificate of authenticity and adorned with a specially crafted wooden case. "We wanted to offer discriminating tequila drinkers a product of unique quality and exclusivity," says Harrison Jones, brand manager for Sazarc Company, U.S. importers. Also worth noting is Herradura's Añejo, a blend of 1- to 4-year-old tequilas. Wonderfully smooth and more readily accessible, this is by no means a lesser version of the \$249 Selección Suprema, but stands on its own.

PORFIDIO SINGLE-BARREL AÑEJO.

Superbly smooth, almost sweet, this tequila is one of the rare opportunities to taste an unblended premium tequila. These uniquely hand-blown bottles, containing a small green glass cactus suspended inside, contain tequila which comes from a single-batch barrel. Their process is unique because barrels are roasted before being used, then moved and shallowed to give the tequila maximum contact with the wood itself. Imported by Todman's, this delightful liquor had disappeared for years but is now once again available. The similarities to single-barrel whiskey is immediately apparent on the palate.

EL TESORO DE DON FELIPE AÑEJO. Only 4,000 cases are imported by Robert Denton, this country's first torchbearer for premium tequilas. No water is added to this blend of batches aged up to three years in old Jim Beam bourbon barrels. It is estate grown like Herradura, but bottled at another nearby location. It is not so layered nor complex as the Herradura, even sharp at the finish, but a delightful and pure-tasting blend of classic tequila. Five days of fermentation, instead of the more standard three, adds an almost silky texture. El Tesoro ("the treasure") has a very clean and natural body, its nuances refreshing.

CHINACO AÑEJO. Also imported by Robert Denton and distributed by Jim Beam Brands. Perhaps the lightest of the

truly premium tequilas, this brand was introduced to the U.S. market in 1983 and virtually coined that classification. Reminiscent of the finer cognacs, this añejo is the only tequila produced in Tamaulipas, not Jalisco. Each bottle is numbered and aged up to four years. Visit both Chinaco and El Tesoro on the internet at www.realtequila.com.

TEQUILA LAPIZ AÑEJO. This brand may still be difficult to find with only 3,500 bottles made available in 1996. Bert Erpillo, owner of importer TIST, Inc. of Dallas, tells me that number will increase to 5,000 for 1997, all of which will



Photo by Tim Hawkey

