

Tasty Tequila!

by Elin McCoy and John Frederick Walker

Tequila has been trendy for decades. For years sales have been fueled by its *macho* image as the knock-'em-back spirit of choice for those in a serious mood to party hard. And tequila got that reputation long before it became a familiar sight on the backbar, when it existed largely in the drinker's imagination as a legendary liquor. It was said that it came with a *maguey* worm in the bottom of the bottle and that it was so strong you had to lick salt off the back of your hand, gulp down a shot like a thirsty bandito, and then suck on a lime to quench the fire — or maybe you were supposed to bite the lime first? It didn't really matter, because nearly everyone drank tequila in the form of Margaritas, which go down very easily, and the only salt you had to put up with was on the rim on the glass. Tequila was a different kind of distillate, all right. It wasn't made from grapes or grain but supposedly from some kind of Mexican cactus, and that's why people seemed to hear mariachi bands in their heads when they drank it and felt like they had a license to have a good time.

With all that going for this south-of-the-border spirit, it's no wonder that Americans buy more than five million cases annually. Last year, when the market seemed saturated with a hundred-plus bottlings, sales were spurred upward by the arrival of super-premium tequilas and scarce, new premium mezcals — tequila's country cousin. These new, smooth, high-end brands let you sip and savor what used to be drunk strictly for effect — no grimace required. Today, the best of them would make a Cognac connoisseur sit up and take notice.

A quick shot of history

For centuries before the conquistadors came to Mexico, Aztecs imbibed *pulque*, a low-alcohol potation made from the agave plant, which, in fact, is still drunk today. After the Spaniards brought the art of distillation, mere *pulque* could be turned into stronger spirits. Tequila itself was first shipped — legally, anyway — into the U.S. in 1873, when three barrels of "mezcal wine" were exported from Mexico to New Mexico. Later, more was introduced into the U.S. by American soldiers patrolling the border during the Mexican revolution in 1916. Prohibition only served to stimulate tequila smuggling, and by the 1950s the spirit had established a cult following in California, soon to spread nationwide.

Where it's from, how it's made

Scotch comes from Scotland, bourbon comes from the U.S., tequila comes from Mexico. The spirit is named for the town of Tequila, some 40 miles west of Guadalajara in the Sierra Madre Mountains, in Jalisco state. And no, it's not really made from cactus. It's actually made from the blue agave, a shallow-rooted succulent plant which looks something like a giant aloe. The precise zone of production is delimited by the government, but there are over 100,000 acres of what botanists call *agave tequilana weber* grown in the states of Jalisco, Michoacan and Nayarit.

It takes eight to ten years for the blue agave to reach maturity and grow to a height of seven feet, bristling with spear-like outer leaves. At harvest, these leaves are whacked off with a machete, and the plant is cut off



Original Sin

Margaritaville may be an imaginary place but the town of Tequila is very real. Tequila, Mexico lies in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains, and is the subject of a dramatic new photo exhibit by photographer, George Holz.

Holz's exhibition, titled *Original Sin*, features Tequila's mountainous landscape and its dramatic blue agave fields as the setting for a story about a man and a woman and their subsequent fall from grace. The blue agave plant itself is a metaphor for the tree of knowledge, and the *piña*, or heart of the agave, is now more than simply the source of tequila—in an Eden of stark contrasts, it is the forbidden fruit.

The exhibit consists of twenty-five platinum prints, a medium chosen not only because it has a rich heritage among Mexican photographers, but also as a metaphor for the narrative's lasting consequences. Platinum is the most luminous, enduring, collectable, and rare of all photographic prints. The exhibition dates are as follows:

July 1st – 8th, Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary Street, San Francisco, CA



July 17th – 30th, Photographs Do Not Bend, 3115 Routh Street, Dallas, TX
Aug. 19th – 23rd, Fahey/Klein, 148 La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, CA
Sept. 4th – 17th, Lallak & Tom, 919 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL
Nov. 13th – Dec. 17th, Gallery for Fine Photography, 322 Royal Street, New Orleans, LA. —A.M.

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"It's cigar night at God's, Dad. Can I borrow the fire?"

white (clear) tequila, but still colorless. Gold (amber color) tequilas are aged for one month to a year to pick up a touch of color and more peppery flavors. *Añejo* on the label requires a year's aging, but some are aged much longer.

José Cuervo is to tequila what Bacardi is to rum; and the Cuervo brand alone accounts for nearly half the tequila on the market today. Other major tequila producers include Sauza and Herradura, and all three offer a complete range of tequilas from standard silver and gold (\$12 and up a bottle) to mellower, richer versions, such as José Cuervo 1800, Herradura Gold, and Sauza Commemorative Añejo (about \$100). Other notable brands include the super-smooth Patron Silver and Patron Añejo, Porfidio Plata, a triple distilled whistle-clean silver (all about \$30-40) and Porfidio Single Barrel Añejo, as polished and classy as tequila gets (about \$80).

The fashion for high-end tequilas has propelled once-obscure brands to prominence, as with the rock group Van Halen's favorite, El Tesoro de Don Felipe — despite a \$40 price tag. But the big brands are not about to concede the ultra-premium category to competitors, which is why José Cuervo offers a superb Reserva Añejo, a Familia (about \$60) and Herradura has just introduced (at \$250 a bottle!) Selección Suprema, made from vintage 1980 agave plants.

Among super-premium mezcals, the Encantado brand is a water-white, super-smooth elixir with a complex, herbal-earthy scent and flavor. A blend of mezcal from 29 different palenques given a second distillation to refine it, it's already become a favorite among those looking for authentic flavors (about \$40). Not esoteric enough? Look for the smoky, super-scarce Del Maguey Single Village Mezcals, each from a different village in Oaxaca (about \$60). **S**