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### Agave plants attract thieves

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Tequila fields under heavy guard Skyrocketing popularity of Mexico's traditional drink makes the agave plant attractive to thieves

August 13,2000

Kevin Sullivan  
Detroit News


TEQUILA, Mexico TEQUILA, Mexico -- Men in black SWAT suits, with pistols on their hips and combat knives sheathed to their thighs, stand guard over vast fields of blue agave plants, prized for their juice that produces tequila. Around the clock they patrol the dirt paths that crisscross endless acres of the cactus-like plants, five-foot-tall starbursts that tint the valley floor smoky-blue in the namesake capital of Mexico's national drink.

Until four months ago, the only security in these hot, sleepy fields 300 miles northwest of Mexico City was Roberto Castaneda Flores, an old mustachioed cowboy nudging his ancient horse along with jangling spurs. But as global demand for suddenly chic tequila booms, and as farmers seek to make up for the ravages of a disease that killed millions of plants a couple of years ago, the supply of blue agave plants is dwindling. That has made them increasingly expensive -- their market price has gone up by more than 10 times in a year -- and increasingly targeted by thieves.

In response, the wealthy distillers in this valley where almost all tequila is produced have deployed a private army to protect their agave plants, which are as important to Mexican identity, and suddenly almost as valuable, as the masterpieces of Diego Rivera or Frida Kahlo.

"When a person steals agave, he offends the people of Mexico," said Fernando Flores Zuniga, head of security for Jose Cuervo, the world's leading tequila producer. "They are stealing our history, part of our cultural identity."

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- [TA Video Podcast # 001](#)
- [TA Podcast #001](#) 
- [TA Podcast #002](#)
- [TA Podcast #003](#)
- [L.A. Tequila Festival 2005](#)
- [L.A. Tequila\\_Festival Video](#)
- [Interview with The CRT](#)
- [Interview with JB Wagoner](#)
- [Interview with Raul Mora of The L. A. Tequila Festival](#)
- [Interview with Alfonso Lujan from 100% Tequila](#)
- [Photo gallery](#)
- [Diary of A Mad Tequila Aficionado](#)
- [Diary of A Mad Tequila Aficionado Part II](#)
- [Fina Estampa--Hi-Yo Silver!](#)
- [The Mega Marketing of a Brand part I](#)
- [The Mega Marketing of a Brand part II](#)
- [The Mega Marketing of a](#)

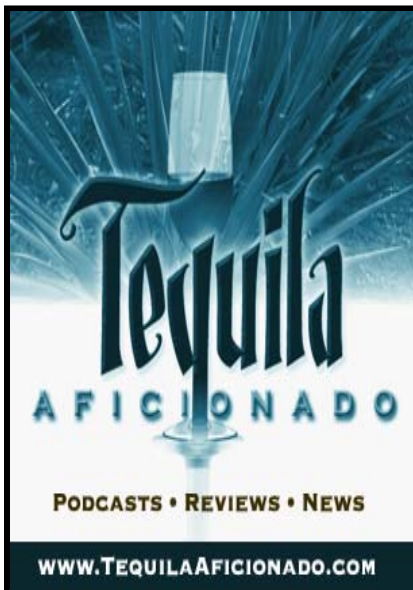
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- L.A. Tequila Festival 2005
- Tequila in trouble
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- Interview with Sammy Hagar of Cabo Wabo
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- Tequila in Canada
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Cuervo has sent 125 security guards into its agave fields since April, when it created a security department for the first time in its 205-year history. Even with the new guard force, thieves this week hacked down 120 agaves and stole their juice -- rich cores, which weigh up to 150 pounds each and look like monstrous pineapples.

That stolen load was worth more than \$8,000 at the distillery, a sum that exceeds what most laborers in the region earn in a year.

Thefts since the tequila boom began, ranging from two agaves to 70 tons of cores worth nearly \$70,000, have unsettled Tequila, where most of the streets are cobblestone and most of the buildings belong to Cuervo or Sauza, Mexico's other major tequila producer.

Overwhelmed local police have happily accepted assistance from the rich tequila companies. Flores said Cuervo has supplied the Tequila police force with two pickups, radios, flashlights, tents, raincoats, food and other supplies to help keep an eye on the agave fields.

Tequila is more than a drink in Mexico. It is a national passion shared by rich and poor, Indians and those of European ancestry, and which traces its origins to Aztec priests who discovered the agave's potent qualities.

And like Bordeaux or Champagne, Tequila is more than a name. It is the pride of a distinct region. In Mexico's case, that region locates its center in this flush company town of 35,000 people, which announces itself to visitors with a billboard: "Welcome to Tequila, Population: 100 Percent Agave."

The unusual rise in crime here, where almost everyone depends on tequila for his livelihood, is a direct result of the phenomenal global success of tequila. In the past five years, tequila's image has undergone a remarkable makeover, evolving from frat-party booze to a chic sipping drink selling for top-shelf prices in fancy bars from San Francisco to London.

"People are more interested in tequila now; they don't want to just do shooters," said Dan Mesches, a partner in the Red Sage restaurant in Washington, which carries a selection of 46 tequilas with prices ranging up to \$16 a shot for a Porfidio Añejo Cactus with its "smooth, peppery finish."

"Just five years ago, tequila companies were begging us to carry their product," Mesches said in a telephone interview. "But now, as people become more affluent, they are seeing tequila not just as a rot-gut liquor, but as something you can use as an after-dinner drink in a snifter."

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In the Tequila valley, Jose Luis Gama, 53, is delighted to hear that customers at trendy American restaurants enjoy the fruits of fields where he now works with his son, and where his grandfather and father worked before him. For most of his life he has been out here, hacking the long, spiky leaves off agave plants with a coa, which resembles the long-handled paddles used to remove pizzas from hot ovens, except that the coa is sharp as a razor. Gama said the only thing new is the armed guards watching him. But, he said, smiling under his sweat-stained straw hat, "I'm glad they're here."

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