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Thirst for tequila fuels Mexican agave rustlers

By Kevin Sullivan
The Washington Post

TEQUILA, Mexico - Men in black SWAT suits, with pistols at their hips and sheathed combat knives at their thighs, stand guard over vast fields of blue agave plants, prized for the juice that produces tequila.

Around the clock they patrol the dirt paths that crisscross endless acres of the cactus-like plants, 5-foot-tall starbursts that tint the valley floor smoky-blue in the namesake capital of Mexico's national drink.

As global demand for 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 and increasingly targeted by thieves.

A kilogram (2.2 pounds) of agave now sells for about \$1.50, compared to 8 cents in January 1999. That has sent the price for a bottle of good-quality tequila from around \$11 to \$33.

Jose Cuervo, the world's leading tequila producer, 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 rich cores, which contain up to 150 pounds of juice each and look like monstrous pineapples. That stolen load was worth more than \$8,000 at the distillery.

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

Tequila is more than a drink in Mexico. It is a national passion shared by rich and poor, Indians and those of European ancestry.

In the past five years, tequila's image has undergone a remarkable image make-over, 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 Anejo Cactus with its "smooth peppery finish."

Credit marketing. The major names in tequila, including Cuervo, are now partly owned by global liquor conglomerates, such as Seagram and United Distillers of Britain, which have used such gimmicks as crystal decanters, leather gift bags and "limited edition" bottlings selling for hundreds of dollars to entice wealthy, status-conscious American and European sippers.

The most expensive labels are those made from 100 percent agave juice; the vast majority of tequilas are 51 percent agave, the minimum required by Mexican law, and 49 percent distilled cane sugar.

In response to the recent boom, tequila production has almost quadrupled in the past 10 years, from under 50 million liters in 1990 to more than 190 million last year.

The problem is that agave plants take up to 12 years to mature. Tequila's current popularity, combined with the disease that destroyed millions of agave plants a couple of years ago, has led to a severe agave shortage. The Mexican government says there are a third fewer agave plants growing now than there were three years ago.

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