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Tequila's Happy Hour

Mexico's national drink has suddenly become hip-- which is putting its price up on the very top shelf

By [SANDY M. FERNANDEZ](#)

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Did you spend last December stockpiling Champagne? Sucker. Instead of getting ready for a bubbly crisis that never came, you should have been stashing away the harder stuff, tequila. Since last year, farmers in and around the tequila-producing

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Mexican state of Jalisco have been facing shortages of agave, the spiky-leaved member of the lily family from which the spirit is distilled. Agave's price has leaped from about \$40 a ton a year ago to a high of \$560 a ton last December. If the shortage continues--and the agave plant's grandfatherly maturation time of eight to 12 years almost guarantees it will--Mexico's leading liquor export, which brought in \$296 million in 1998, is sure to get a lot more expensive.

Weber blue agave, the only species authorized for tequila making, has suffered from a 1997 freeze and a recent spate of crop diseases. Even so, these are heady days for the tequila industry. Since 1995, drinkers the world over have turned tequila into a best seller. Global consumption has doubled, making Mexico's national drink the fastest-growing liquor category in the world--another reason for the agave shortage. A major factor in the beverage's popularity has been the burgeoning demand for premium and superpremium tequilas, like La Alternativa distillery's El Tesoro, or La Gonzalena's Chinaco, made of 100% blue agave. These use nearly twice the fermented agave juice necessary to mix cheaper brands. "What is happening today is a product of what happened in 1991 and 1992," says Javier Arroyo Chavez, president of Mexico's Tequila Regulatory Commission. "No one then ever imagined that the tequila industry would go on to its present success."

Before the boom, when the current agave crop was being planted, the international market for tequila was decidedly downscale. "People knew tequila as what they drank in college to get drunk," says Alex Alejandro, co-owner of New York City's oldest Mexican restaurant, El Parador. The restaurant has stocked premium tequilas for all its 40 years, but it hasn't always found a ready buyer. "Ten years ago, the average consumer wasn't willing to pay more than about \$4 a shot," says Alejandro.

Today drinkers at trendy bars from Manhattan to Mayfair pay as much as \$40 for a tall shot, or caballito, of Porfidio Barrique, and buyers snap up Herradura's \$230-a-bottle Seleccion Suprema. Even mass-market leader Jose Cuervo now offers a \$1,000 bottle of limited edition 1800 Coleccion. It's all part of the trend toward boutique liquors that began in Europe and the U.S. in the late 1980s, says Chris Morris, national marketing director for American



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distiller Brown-Forman's two tequila brands, Pepe Lopez and the newly introduced Don Eduardo. "When single-malt whiskeys burst onto the market, we saw consumers become fascinated with niche products," says Morris. "People were willing to pay \$25 or \$30 a bottle if you gave them a good product or a reason to try it." Soon it was tequila's turn, both straight and in America's reigning cocktail, the margarita. "When I opened, customers just wanted to down their tequila in one go," says Fernando Martinez, who started the Going Loco bar in London in mid-1998. "Now many regular customers experiment and taste different tequilas just like a whiskey connoisseur would."

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