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### TEQUILA

Few North Americans have left Mexico without downing a shot of tequila. But as tastes have become more sophisticated, so has the production and marketing of the country's national drink, winning respect of liquor connoisseurs the world around and prompting visitors to take the time to savor properly.

Although tequila has experienced newfound fame outside of Mexico, it has a long history within the country. When the Spanish Conquistadores arrived in Mexico in the 16th century, the Aztecs offered them pulque, a beer-like drink resulting from the fermentation of the agave plant and revered as a drink of the gods. By introducing the distillation process into pulque production, the Spaniards converted the drink into a product known as mezcal. The mezcal from Tequila, a small village in Jalisco State, Mexico, became known as the best mezcal in the area and its name lent to the refined mezcal known today.

Tequila is made from the blue agave plant. There are 136 species of agave, but only the blue agave produces quality tequila. A common misconception is that the agave is from the cactus family; actually from the lily (amaryllis) family. The plant takes eight to 10 years to mature, and only the heart, referred to as a piña, is used. A mature piña can weigh anywhere from 80 to 300 pounds. About 100 pounds of piña produce one liter of 100-percent agave tequila.

Once the piñas are harvested, they are steam-cooked and then slow-baked for anywhere between 48 to 72 hours. After baking, they are crushed, their juice extracted, and then milled, strained and mixed with natural spring water in large fermentation tanks, to which yeast is added. The mosto, as this mixture is called, is left to ferment anywhere from seven to twelve days in special tanks. The longer the fermentation, the more robust the body. The liquid created by fermentation is then distilled twice in stills.

When the tequila leaves the still, it is clear as water. Often referred to as blanco (white), this young tequila has a rough taste, with a distinct agave flavor. Reposado (rested) tequila is aged 60 to 180 days in oak casks, developing a golden color and a smoother flavor than the blanco. Añejo (aged) tequila is aged for more than a year in the casks to yield a smooth, woody aroma and dark brown color.

More than 55 percent (about 100 million liters) of tequila is produced in the western Mexican state of Jalisco within 35 kilometers of the town of Tequila. The spirit plays such an important role in the development of the region that the local university even offers a course in tequila engineering. A strict regulatory body, the Tequila Regulatory Council, (Consejo Regulado de Tequila, CRT) also ensures that any spirit calling itself tequila is produced in Jalisco (just as champagne can only be produced in the region of the same name) and that it obtains at least 51 percent of its fermented sugars from the blue agave. Other liquor made from agave must be called mezcal.

The most popular brands of tequila outside Mexico are Cuervo and Sauza, yet there are lesser-known brands highly regarded by Mexicans as being of exceptional quality, some of which are now available in the U.S. and Canada. They include Don Julio, Patron, Herradura and Porfidio.

Skyrocketing international demand for tequila combined with plagues and frosts in recent years dramatically reduced the supply of the slow-growing agave plant, forcing some distillers to close their doors, others to sacrifice quality by reducing the amount of agave, and all to raise their prices. In 2001, the price of tequila has risen up to 70 percent worldwide, putting the drink at a price-parity with scotch and other premium spirits. To learn about tequila's history and production, tourists can take advantage of the tours offered by several leading distilleries. The beautiful hacienda housing the Herradura distillery, for example, boasts the original production facilities. Founded 132 years ago by Aurelio Rosales, Herradura means horseshoe in Spanish and the "lucky" label has stuck with the brand throughout its history. Visitors to Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco State and Mexico's second-

city, can also learn about Mexico's famous spirit by riding on the Tequila Express, a four-car train that takes passengers northwest 55 miles to the town of Tequila and back the same day. For about US\$40 per person, passengers learn from guides how tequila is made, and are served all the tequila drinks they want. For more information on the tours, contact 011-52-33-3880-9099 or [www.tequilaexpress.com](http://www.tequilaexpress.com).

#### **Tequila Drinks and Dishes**

Although some Mexicans do consume tequila in one gulp or consume it in a margarita, it is more commonly sipped slowly either alone or alternatively with sangrita, a mix of tomato juice, orange juice and chile pequin served in a shot glass alongside it. The recipes for Sangrita vary widely from bar to bar-some versions are sweeter, some spicier-but a basic recipe follows. Tequila also makes a delightful coffee drink and is commonly used as a cooking ingredient, much like brandy or wine.

#### **Sangrita**

1 cup tomato juice  
1 cup fresh orange juice  
½ cup fresh lime juice  
3 teaspoons grenadine  
Chile powder to taste

Blend well together and serve with a shot of tequila.

#### **Tequila Lime Shrimp**

1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
4 cloves garlic, minced  
2 tablespoons tequila  
Juice of one lime  
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Once the oil is hot, add garlic and sauté for about 1 minute. Add shrimp and cook, stirring frequently, for 2 minutes. Stir in tequila, lime juice and pepper flakes for 2 minutes or until about half the liquid evaporates and shrimp are pink and glazed.

#### **Tequila Steaks**

4 8-oz. New York steaks, about 1 inch thick  
1/2 cup tequila  
1 tablespoon pepper  
2 teaspoon grated lemon peel  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1/2 teaspoon salt

Mix tequila, pepper, lemon peel and garlic in a heavy plastic bag. Add steaks and rotate to distribute mixture evenly over steaks. Let sit in refrigerator overnight. Preheat grill. Cook, brushing with marinade until done. Turn once during cooking time, about 12 minutes. Season with additional salt and serve.

#### **About the Mexico Tourism Board**

The Mexico Tourism Board (MTB) brings together the resources of federal and state governments, municipalities and private companies to promote Mexico's tourism attractions and destinations internationally. Created in 1999, the MTB is Mexico's tourism promotion agency, and its participants include members of both the private and public sectors. The MTB has offices throughout North America, Europe, Japan and Latin America.

**FOR PRESS ONLY:** For additional ideas, help with a story or general travel and tourism information about Mexico, please contact the MTB's North American Press Room directly at 1-800-929-4555 or email at [northamericanpress@visitmexico.com](mailto:northamericanpress@visitmexico.com), or visit our press Web site at [www.visitmexicopress.com](http://www.visitmexicopress.com). To access an online warehouse of free, downloadable brochures, visit [www.thenewsmarket.com/visitmexicopress](http://www.thenewsmarket.com/visitmexicopress).