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## Tequila dawn

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By Dave Broom

I've always had an ambivalent relationship with tequila, and I'm not alone. Mention tequila to most people and watch them shudder as they recount horrifying tales.

But tequila still sells. Perhaps its success is down to the fact that it doesn't taste like a spirit - it's more like an overripe fruit punch with a sweetness that borders on decay. It is this weirdly seductive quality that allows innocent young drinkers to be able to drink lots of it.

But hang on a minute. Tales are seeping across the Atlantic, or floating on the Internet, that tequila is serious business. Premium tequila is currently the fastest-growing spirit in the USA, where it has acquired the same gloss as malt whisky.

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The UK has mostly remained oblivious to this. However, an exception is Salvo Alfano, general manager of London's Cactus Blue restaurant, which boasts a tequila list of epic proportions. He showed me 20, divided into three flights - silver (unaged); gold (non-wood aged) and reposado (tequila that has been "rested" in barrel for a minimum of six months); and anejo (aged in wood for up to five years).

Silver is usually considered only good for mixing. Brand leaders José Cuervo (IDV 01279 626801) and Sauza (Allied Domecq 01403 222600) lived up to that reputation, both being aggressively estery. But then came Herradura (H Rose 0181-887 0055) with its smoky sandalwood aroma; El Tesoro's enormous burst of rich, herbal fruit; and the delicately fragrant Patron. All good enough to sip; brilliant in margaritas.

In the golds, once again the artisans cleaned the board - the delicately nutty Real Hacienda; a beautifully balanced Porfidio Reposado, rich but refined and miles away from the clumsy caramel overload of Cuervo Gold.

The anejo brands were consistently fine. Cuervo's 1800 big and true, while its Reserva de la Familia was a classy spirit whose time spent in Bourbon barrel was fully in evidence. Still, it seemed clumsy when compared to El Tesoro Anejo's spicy fruit and almond, or Real Hacienda's astonishing mix of white chocolate, lemon and lime. These are best as sipping spirits - Cactus Blue lists them on its dessert menu alongside sweet wines and digestifs.

Astonishingly, few had that heavy aroma that makes your eyelids slip down before you've even taken a sip. These were refined, complex spirits. The difference lies in better production. The best were all made from 100% blue agave (rather than using other fermentable sugars), used small batch production, left the caramel alone and used wood in a light and clever fashion. You'll have to search to find them, but it's not impossible. Alfano used the Internet to establish direct contact with producers. If you want to be ready to catch the next wave, get surfing now.

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