

SUBSCRIBE TODAY
 San Jose Mercury News
 Subscriber Services

The Mercury News
 MercuryNews.com

Current: 66°
 74° / 51°
 Complete Forecast

Compare Sites & Save

And find the one that's been waiting for you. **CLICK HERE** to get started! **NEW Online Classifieds** CLICK NOW to get started!

Search Recent News Archives Web for Welcome **Alessandro**
 My Classifieds | My Account | Sign Out

Bay Area Bars

Back to Home > Entertainment >

Friday, Apr 22, 2005

- Bar & Club Listings
- Bar & Club Search
- Buy and Sell Tickets

Nightlife

email this print this

Posted on Mon, Jan. 27, 2003

Tequila gains aficionados

Most of us know tequila as the inexpensive, mass-produced stuff consumed from shot glasses or in margaritas.

But there's another, more upscale side to Mexico's best-known distilled spirit. Restaurants and bars are pouring fine, aged tequilas that are in a league with spirits such as Cognac or single-malt Scotch. And they have price tags to match.

"There is enormous interest in what would be called sipping tequilas," says Judy Blatman of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, an industry group based in Washington, D.C. That interest in upscale tequila has helped make tequila the fastest-growing distilled spirits category. From 1989 to 1999, the latest year for which figures are available, Blatman says, U.S. sales volume for tequila was up 75 percent. 1999 saw a one-year increase of 14 percent, compared with 3 percent for all distilled spirits, she says.

Contrary to popular belief, tequila is not made from cactus. It's made from a spiky plant called the blue agave. By law, agave for tequila must be grown in Jalisco or in designated parts of several neighboring states in central Mexico.

Slow-growing plant

It takes from eight to 12 years for the blue agave to reach maturity. Then the plants are harvested and their leaves removed, leaving the heart of the plant, called the *piña*. The *piñas* are slow-roasted and shredded, water is added, and the resulting juice is fermented. After fermentation, the liquid is double-distilled (sometimes triple-distilled) into tequila.

Tequila that's bottled immediately is called *blanco* (white) or *plata* (silver). If it's aged in wooden containers for two months to a year, it's called *reposado* (rested). To be called *añejo* (old), it must be aged for at least a year in oak barrels.

Tequila must be at least 51 percent blue agave. If it contains ingredients other than blue agave, it's a *mixto*; some mass-produced "gold" tequilas, for example, are *mixtos* with coloring added to make them appear aged. If a tequila is 100 percent blue agave, it will say so on the bottle. Upscale tequilas tend to be 100 percent blue agave.

Find Sales and Deals
 on Home **Electronics** at Stores Near You!
 Click here now

- Jobs
- Cars
- Real Estate
- Apartments
- Local Shopping
 - Find Sales & Deals
 - Shop Local Stores
- All Classifieds
- Personals

News

Opinion

Business

Sports

Entertainment

- Books
- Celebrities
- Comics and Games
- Restaurants
- Events
- Eye
- Horoscopes
- Movies
- Local theaters
- Videos/DVDs
- Music
- Concert venues
- Nightlife
- Performing Arts
- Performance venues
- TV
- Visitor's Guide
- Local attractions
- Visual Arts

Life & Style

ONLINE EXTRAS

Archives

Newsletters

Newspaper Ads Online

Coupons

Maps & Directions

Traffic Reports
Weather
Yellow Pages
Discussion Boards
Today's Front Page

SITE SERVICES

RSS Feeds
Help
Feedback
Site Map
Advertise
Print Services
Photo Store
Ethics Policy

To meet demand, tequila producers are sending new products north of the border. Twenty-one new tequilas were introduced in the United States in 1999, according to the Distilled Spirits Council, second only to the cordials and liqueurs category, with 22 new products.

Increased demand has also meant increased prices, and the price picture has been further clouded by weather problems and a fungal disease that has reduced the agave crop. At the high end of the market, prices also are inflated by the use of elaborate packaging. Some of these bottles are eye-catching, but they don't improve what's inside.

I didn't know my Patrón from my Porfidio, so I consulted Cindy Held, manager of Left at Albuquerque in Campbell and Paul Ino, the bar manager. Left at Albuquerque stocks about 130 tequilas, costing as much as \$30 a shot (Herradura Selección Suprema), though most are in the \$5.50-\$10 range. They poured eight tequilas for me, *blancos* to *añejos*, to help me understand their finer points.

Tasting tequila is basically the same as tasting wine. You smell the aromas, then take a tiny taste to evaluate the flavors and weight of the tequila. (The flavor and heat you sense as the tequila reaches the back of your throat is what Held calls the *¡ay caramba!*) Finally, you note the finish; *blancos* or *platas* will usually have a hotter, somewhat harsher finish than aged tequilas.

The flavors in the tequilas we tasted ranged from floral to fruity to spicy (notably white pepper). Some of the aged tequilas had an oakiness that's not unlike what you might find in oak-aged wine.

Among the un-aged tequilas, I liked the Porfidio Triple-Distilled Plata (\$11.50 a shot), which is smooth and a little floral with some white pepper and a bit of heat on the finish.

Moving on to the aged tequilas, the Cazadores Reposado (a good deal at \$6 a shot) is smooth and a little smoky with some floral notes and hints of oak. The Chinaco Reposado (\$8) is smoky with some citrus and white pepper and a smooth finish. The Casta Weber Azul Añejo (\$17.50) is full-bodied with a lot of finesse and some spicy/peppery notes. And the El Tesoro Paradiso Añejo (\$15), which is aged in Cognac barrels, is smoky, with some caramel, a long finish and a little more heat than some añejos.

Individual touches

As with Cognac, tequila producers usually have a house style and produce all their tequilas in the same manner. The only difference between a producer's blanco, reposado and añejo would be the amount of time each is aged. So, for example, the Herradura Reposado and Blanco both are full-bodied with a lot of spicy/peppery notes, even though the Blanco has considerably more heat on the finish.

Even if you prefer to limit your tequila consumption to margaritas, you should pay attention to which tequila is used. "To make a good margarita, you need two things: a good tequila and a good sour mix," says Ino. Left at Albuquerque's basic margarita contains from 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 ounces tequila, from 1/4 to 1/2 ounce Cointreau and sour mix (made especially for Left at Albuquerque) to fill.

The choice of tequila is even more crucial in the restaurant's potent "High Plains Drifter" margarita, which contains little to mask the flavor of the tequila. It's simply 1 ounce tequila (the restaurant uses Herradura Reposado), 1 ounce Citronge (an orange liqueur made in Mexico) and the juice of half a lime.

The best way to learn about tequila is to taste it. Because buying entire bottles is expensive, a good place to do that is in a bar or restaurant. In addition to Left at Albuquerque (which also has branches in Palo Alto, Burlingame, San Francisco and Walnut Creek), some other restaurants with a good selection of tequilas include Maya in San Francisco, which stocks 80-100 of them (the most expensive shot is Tres, Cuatro y Cinco Añejo, at \$90) and Palapas at Seascap in Aptos, which carries more than 40 tequilas.



 email this  print this

Ads by Google

[Organic Agave Nectar](#)

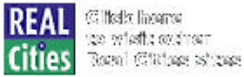
100% Natural Agave Nectar on sale with free shipping included.
www.BlueAgaveNectar.com

[Liquor Licenses at Amlex](#)

Buy or sell liquor licenses nationwide
www.amlex.com

[Agave and Yucca Seeds](#)

also palm, cycad, banana seeds. Over 500 species. Superior quality
www.rarepalmseeds.com



[About The Mercury News](#) | [Mercury News Jobs](#) | [About the Real Cities Network](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [About Knight Ridder](#) | [Copyright](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)