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An ode to Mexico

SHATBHI BASU

Posted online: Friday, January 09, 2004 at 0000 hours IST

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If there ever was a spirit replete with history, mystery and intrigue, it must be tequila. Even today, years after it's arrival on bar shelves, tequila is regarded as a strange Mexican potion containing worms, hallucinogens, et al. The same attributes contribute to making it the most 'hip' spirit.

Tequila-like spirits have been produced in Mexico from the age of the Aztecs, long before the arrival of Spanish conquerors in the 16th century. In 1795, Jose Cuervo, under a government license, began distilling tequila in the Jalisco region (which included the town of Tequila), where Weber blue agave 'cactus' was abundant. Actually, the agave is not a cactus at all but a succulent, related to the aloe and lily family! Jose Cuervo is by far the largest selling brand.

Tequila can be made only from the 'Weber blue agave' grown in a specific, government designated area of Mexico, and must conform to strict quality controls. It undergoes two distillations in pot stills (which allows it to retain the distinctive taste of the agave), is filtered through charcoal, and then bottled or aged according to its category. Though Mexican law stipulates that tequila must contain at least 51% blue agave, most premium, high value brands use 100% blue and say so on the bottles.

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But what about the worm? Actually you'll find the worm in 'mescal' - another Mexican spirit similar to tequila. Mescal is not subject to the controls and restrictions that tequila is and can be distilled from all varieties of the agave. The mescal worm is harmless and,

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despite innuendoes to the contrary, does not contain hallucinogens. Burying the worm in the spirit seemed the natural thing to do (it spends its entire life in the agave). Of course, it turned out to be a great marketing idea.

The different styles Silver: Most silver tequila is filtered, brought to potable strength with de-mineralised water and bottled straight from the still. Fine silver tequilas can be surprisingly smooth and peppery. **Gold:** The colour comes from the addition of caramel to a silver tequila and not from age. **Reposado:** This is aged in wooden barrels for between two months to a year and are mellow enough without losing the freshness of the silver. **Anejo (aneho):** To be eligible for the anejo label, it must be aged in oak barrels for over a year. The ageing leaves it smooth and lush with a warm amber hue. Much like whisky, anejos show characteristic tannin flavours with a hint of vanilla. **100% Blue:** Ultra premium tequila made totally from the blue agave. They come in silver, reposado and anejo types.

Key Regular Brands: Jose Cuervo, Sauza, Pepe Lopez, Camino Real, Tres Magueyes, Montezuma, El Toro. **Key 100% Brands:** Herradura, Porfidio, El Tesoro, Chinaco, Don Julio, Sauza Galardon & Tres Generaciones, Jose Cuervo Reserva de la Familia.

How is it best drunk?

The one drink that is responsible for elevating tequila to such great heights is the Margarita - said to have been named by a sentimental bartender in honour of this young girl who felled by a stray bullet and expired in his arms. Actually, a young lady called Margarita Sames invented it and decided to name it after herself! The drink was a runaway success. The classic Margarita is made by shaking tequila, triple sec or Cointreau (clear orange liqueur) and lime juice in varying proportions with a lot of ice and strained into a salt rimmed goblet. Alternately, it can be blended with crushed ice and served 'frozen'.

And if all this sounds like too much work, chill the bottle and simply 'lick, shoot, suck'! You know that route well. Adios amigos!

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