

on the edge [drinks]

# tequila sunrise

South of the border single malt By Scott Clevenger

■ Mention tequila and most people think of a high-octane, scorching spirit best downed in shots or drowned in lime juice. While the quick-fix style of consumption is still common, tequila drinking is undergoing a quiet revolution every bit as profound as America's discovery of single malt scotch.

A recent wave of high-end, handcrafted tequilas has begun to capture the attention of liquor connoisseurs. To really appreciate the startling range of choices now available, it's necessary to first understand the differences between the four basic types of tequila:

**Blue Agave** – All tequila starts with blue agave, a tough desert plant related to the lily, although there isn't much family resemblance. Grown primarily in Jalisco (a Mexican state that includes the town of Tequila), only spirits distilled in this region can legally bear the name tequila.

**Mixtos** – The most common tequilas are mixtos, meaning they contain a government-mandated minimum of 51 percent blue agave with the rest distilled from another source, usually sugar cane. They are often tinted to simulate aging which can contribute to the blistering hangovers sometimes associated with tequila. Unfortunately, these additives do nothing to improve the taste, which is why mixtos are so often gulped from shot glasses.

**Agave** – 100 percent agave tequila, a step above mixtos in flavor and refinement, come in two forms. *Platas* (sometimes called "blancos" or "silvers") are bottled promptly after distillation, resulting in an undiluted yet delicate character. *Reposado* tequilas, which are generally more complex in flavor, are "rested" or aged for several months in old bourbon or whisky barrels. These tequilas boast an intriguing mixture of flavors and aromas and should always be sipped rather than slammed.

**Añejos** – At the top of tequila's evolutionary scale are the añejos. These mellow spirits are invariably distilled from the most mature plants (10 years old) and aged for a minimum of one year. The best añejos offer a smooth texture and a bouquet brimming with floral top-notes and spicy undertones.



## The Guru of Agave

Tequila guru Julio Bermejo holds court from behind the bar of Tommy's Mexican Restaurant. Armed with a vast inventory of premium tequilas, he proclaims the benefits of 100 percent agave over mixto brands, and parses the subtle differences between *plata* and *añejo*.

Grateful bartenders call Jerry Thomas "the professor" in honor of his political science background, but Julio Bermejo actually bestows doctorates on his bibulous acolytes. For a nominal fee, budding connoisseurs can join his Blue Agave Club and earn their tequila master's degree by tasting 35 premium brands. Students seeking their tequila Ph.D. must sample an additional 35 tequilas, then pass a written examination. Successful candidates are eligible to attend one of Julio's exclusive tours of Tequila region distilleries. The current student body contains aficionados from all over the world, including a number of high profile food critics, chefs and restaurateurs, but membership is open to anyone with a strong curiosity, and an even stronger liver.

Tommy's Mexican Restaurant  
5929 Geary Boulevard  
San Francisco, CA  
415.367.4747

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Number of tequila brands offered at Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco.



## >>>The Magnificent Six

Thanks to the tireless proselytizing of a few knowledgeable tequila fanciers, there are now a multitude of excellent small-batch and handcrafted tequilas available in the US. Below are six of the finest. Enjoy them in the traditional way, served at room temperature and sipped slowly from a caballito, or pony glass.

### Porfidio Single-Barrel Añejo

Age: Handcrafted in a manner similar to single barrel bourbons  
Personality: Dry and intricately textured  
Aroma: Molasses and caramel, with flourishes of spice and nuts  
Finish: Strong, warm  
www.tequilaporfidio.com, \$100



### El Charro Reposado

Age: Six months  
Personality: Bold agave flavor  
Aroma: Pepper and smoke  
Finish: Clean, faintly smoky  
www.elcharrotequila.com, \$25

### Chinaco Reposado

Age: Barrel aged eight months  
Personality: Stands alone, but makes an unforgettable margarita  
Aroma: Citrus and herbs with a faint woody aroma  
Finish: Slightly warm, lingering  
www.chinacotequila.com, \$50



### Chinaco Añejo

Age: Three years in oak barrels  
Personality: Treat this tequila as you would a fine brandy – pour it neat into a snifter  
Aroma: Fruit, oak and cinnamon  
Finish: Buttery smooth  
www.chinacotequila.com, \$55



### Casa Noble Añejo

Age: Matured in oak barrels for five years  
Personality: Full, almost syrupy body  
Aroma: Pear, vanilla, caramel and a hint of almond  
Finish: Sweet and mellow  
www.casanoble.com, \$87

### El Tesoro Añejo

Age: Spends up to three years in bourbon barrels  
Personality: Assertive and aromatic without being harsh  
Aroma: Fruit, vanilla and molasses  
Finish: Lingering but temperate  
www.thesorotequila.com, \$50

