



Hecho.en Mexico

To say tequila is misunderstood in Australia would be a complete understatement. It's not simply a lip numbing, late night shot as some think, but it's actually one of the finest produced spirits in the world. With a rise in the number of products now available in the market, *bars&clubs* put together a special tasting panel to see what the best tequilas on our shores are.

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As historically driven as any liquid created, tequila was birthed by two diverse cultures coming together, taking the indigenous Mexican pulque and transforming it with Spanish distillation techniques. It has taken a long time but finally this spirit, overcoming plague and mafia style murders has become the hot new cocktail mixer from New York to London and now Australia.

Tequila is created from a natural plant, Agave, which is commonly mistaken for a cactus but in fact is a succulent, like Aloe Vera, but more specifically the blue strain known as Tequilana Weber Azul. It is mescal, with its mystical worm in the bottle that can be made with any agave and due to different cooking techniques tends to be smokier and not as refined.

Tequila and refined may seem like an oxy moron to many people, but when you're talking about some of the brands currently available, they fit like hand in glove. So, for those that have only the faint memory of a hellish night sinking shot after shot of harsh golden spirit with beer chasers, prepare to be educated about the real deal.

Firstly it is important to explain that until very recently (the past three years or so) the only tequila available in Australia were mixtos, which literally means mixed. Basically these are the lower quality spirits that are now legally required to have 51% of the blue agave juice while the rest is sugar. Now you can understand the headaches.

It's the quality stuff that will always be labelled as 100% blue agave and to assure the authenticity should also state that it is 'Hecho en Mexico', which of course means its made by guys named Juan or Pedro. It goes to show that there is more to this naturally born liquor than we have been accustomed to, especially when we start discussing the varying aged versions of this tasty agave nectar.

In essence there are only three types of tequila that truly define this category, White or Blanco, which comes directly out of the still and is sometimes, let rest for a short while in oak. Reposado, that are aged between two and twelve months, and my favourite, Añejo, which by law is required to spend at least a year in wood. This ageing gives the true colour and depth of flavour to the spirit, nothing else.

Of course there are those products known as Gold that are widely recognised, drunk on a regular basis and to some extent are the best sellers around the world.

Each company uses their own method to imbibe the colour into the spirit, including artificial caramel colouring and wood chips that are sometimes charred. I'm sure the question in mind is, how can we tell what is worth our hard earned pesos? Well fear not, as *b&c* took the liberty of collecting the majority of products available in Australia, brought together some of Australia's biggest enthusiasts and tasted every single tequila over a two day period at Café Pacifico in East Sydney to determine what you can expect from your next tipple.

The panel included: Jim Granger, Epping Hotel; Phil Bayly, Café Pacifico; Mark Ward, Hugo's Group; Naren Young, Bayswater Brasserie and a food and drinks writer; Sven Almenning, food and drinks writer; Ben Davidson, The Arthouse Hotel; James Wilkinson, Managing Editor of *bars&clubs*; and myself, Manuel Terron, Drinks Editor of *bars&clubs*.

During the process, all products were blind tasted (and broken into styles of tequila) on a number of areas, including the aroma, colour, front palate, back palate, strength of agave and numbing on the lips. Panelists then gave the products a score out of 30, and the average scores are noted next to the

name. So, hold onto your sombreros while we let you into the very intriguing world that is the spirit of Mexico.

1800 Añejo

Gold Brown. Nice full nose of matured oak with plenty of caramel and playful florals, almost syrupy. The richness continues on the smoky agave filled palate and ends, eventually with a little spicy tingle. Davidson found the "beautiful characteristics of honeyed fruit" carried the lengthy finish while I found strong similarities to brandy or Cognac of age.

Aha Toro Añejo

Gold Brown. Strong nose of acid and earth with subtle oak notes. Fuller in the mouth with nice rounded peppery tones and hints of fruit. I didn't think it was too desirable on the nose but had developed richness on the palate while Granger thought there "wasn't enough caramel and smoky strength".

Aha Toro Blanco

Colourless. Very earthy with an intense burn on the nose and some hints of citrus and apple. A punchy and slightly bitter vegetal hit of white pepper and oak in the mouth with an expanded finish. Davidson said that its strength was in the flavour of spicy ripe fruits and Young commented on the green tea and lemon nose with smoky vegetal characteristics coming through with a good overall mouth feel and length.

Aha Toro Reposado

Golden. Strong agave aroma with sweet lemon, wood and spice tones. It's oily in the mouth with a naturally sweet agave taste coloured with oak and finishing with a lip tingling bite. For me this was a vibrant tequila with gentle sweetness and a sexy agave flavour. Most of the panel agreed, Bailey said it was "excellent and very enjoyable" and Wilkinson thought this was a good cocktail tequila.

Arenal Reposado

Soft yellow. Some florals appear in this somewhat earthy and sugar aroma driven tequila that also has the acidity of citrus peel. The palate is to some extent disappointing finishing short with too much caramel and heat. Davidson thought it had "a restrained nose and palate that doesn't quite present itself". And Almenning just said it was "a little dumbed down".

Don Julio 192

Yellow. Full and inviting nose with warming honey and woody aromas filled in with intricate floral colouring. Rich caramelised agave rounded off perfectly with luscious woody tones and a very slight touch of pepper. Apart from comments like, "brilliant", "the best ever" and "rich, creamy and soft", its no wonder why this tequila was top of the heap.

El Charro Añejo

Golden. Gentle but full on the nose with some sweetness, white pepper and camomile. The cooked agave is big on the palate still made intriguing by the playful peppery zing but finishing with warming rich wood. This was a thoroughly enjoyed tequila with a lot of positive feedback like Davidson mentioning its "gorgeous character" that was "full and developed" and Almenning saying it was a "well balanced and complex".

El Charro Gold

Unpronounced golden colour. Sharp heat on the nose with pungent ginseng attacking the senses finishing with caramels. The taste is sweet, over ripe apple that finishes as the alcoholic burn goes on and on. "Not an inviting aroma, too sharp up front in the mouth," was the statement from Granger. I agreed, thinking the pungent nose matched the sweet and volatile palate.

El Jimador Reposado

Pale yellow. Unimpressive attack on the nose but does hold some grassy and citrus peel aromas. Medium bodied spirit that has agave, caramel and oak flavours with some alcoholic bite and a smoky finish. Wilkinson said it was "a smooth, sweet and easy drinking tequila you could sip on for hours". And Davidson thought it had "a harmless, middle of the road flavour".

Gran Centenario Plata

Pale yellow in colour. The nose has a slight earthiness with trace of pepper and oak. The intensity of sweet agave becomes apparent on the palate finishing with that initial pepper and oak. Wilkinson thought it had a "strong pungent nose but was countered by an excellent finish" while I was pleasantly surprised by the slight oak and caramel tones.

Gran Centenario Reposado

Yellow. Soft but sweet fragrance of fresh agave with florals notes. Very approachable smoky palate with rich but unobtrusive caramels and a slight peppery finish. Ward found a creaminess on the nose that finished very nicely and Davidson favoured this "gorgeous sipping tequila" for its "smoky and vegetal flavours".

Hacienda del Cristero

This clear tequila has a big caramel aroma with the intense impression of tropical fruits. The agave is big on the palate with no apparent sweetness and an elongated spicy finish. Bailey thought it had a good start but a poor finish. Granger on the other hand believed it had a strong body that was slightly bitter and a short after taste that wasn't to intense.

Herradura Reposado

Golden. Intense aroma of sweet apple, banana and camomile, also some white peppery notes. Well balanced with sweet smokiness and the taste of cooked agave. Granger wasn't sure about the "strong burn" but was allured by the "sweet citrus and smoky flavour". Davidson thought it had a very nice, developed palate with beautiful aromas.

Herradura Silver

Slight yellow hue. Citrus on the nose with strong agave and slight peppery notes. The full agave followed through on the palate with the continuance of pepper tingling the tip of the tongue. I loved the full and lively aroma, as did Young, who commented "not very complex. Subtle burn on the palate and an attractive sweetness... pleasant overall, a nice drop".

Hussongs Reposado

Light gold. Intense toffee apple and vanilla aromas with a nice earthy roundness. The sweetness is well developed allowing for a nice peppery bite with a balanced cooked agave finish. Almenning at first found it "very sweet with toffee and caramel flavours" but concluded that it was, "very

nice, with great honey complexity". Wilkinson became a fan stating, "great nose, vanilla, caramel, and toffee. Sweet taste with a moderate spice - a keeper".

Jalisco Revolucionario 501 Reposado

Golden. The vibrant, sweet nose here is attributed to the strong caramel, honey and wood notes. Syrupy in the mouth you can find sweet stewed plums and honey with quite a long earthy finish. I found this one to be too sweet - almost too much caramel and not enough agave, seeming fake. Davidson wasn't totally convinced when he stated it had a "nice developed character" but was "suspicious of the pedigree".

Jose Cuervo Gold

Yellow/gold. Fresh root aroma with some citrus and smoky characteristics. Thin in the mouth, this tequila lacks complexity. Acetone and burnt sugar are the base to the flavour. There was a general consensus about this one - it was not enjoyed by the panel garnishing it with the lowest score all round.

Jose Cuervo Reserva de la Familia

Gold Brown. Soft approach on the nose with gentle aromas of caramelised lemon with deep wood notes. Full palate of sweet smoked agave following through with the lingering depth of fine ageing in Cognac barrels. A big favourite, I found this to be a sublime drop thoroughly enjoyable with the natural smoky oak following on. Wilkinson commented it was "a very smooth tequila that shows no burn on the nose or the palate. A well crafted tequila".

Jose Cuervo Tradicional

Pale yellow. Forceful attack on the nose with sweet and floral notes. Hints of vanilla and oak in this strong vegetal agave flavoured tequila. Davidson liked the "nicely developed vegetal characteristics like smoky capsicum" and Granger made mention of the "good body with undertones of spices and florals and a strong alcoholic warmth".

Los Arangos Añejo

Pale Yellow. Easy on the approach with complex florals and red apple notes but still quite light. The palate is a little thin but carries some textures of new oak, citrus but minimal sugars. Davidson was enjoying the "palate while it lasted" and so did Bailey adding, it was "interesting but didn't develop further".

Los Arangos Reposado

Yellow hue. Full attack on the senses with a lot of initial burn on the nose with acetone and some smoky root vegetable characteristics. Some caramel and oak with vegetal traces but overall the flavours seem to be misdirected finishing flat.

Both Almenning and Ward thought the tequila smelled and to some degree tasted "corked", while I felt the heat far outweighed the flimsy finish.

Olmecca Gold

Yellow gold. Aroma of toffee and caramel notes with some hints of pepper. Quite a bit of alcoholic burn masking the slight sweet agave giving an acidic finish in the mouth. I thought this particular tequila would be best served

with a mixer that could cover the imbalances, though Ward said that he found some hidden characteristics, but couldn't define them.

Patron Silver

Clear. A nice subtle approach with sweetness on the nose, oak and lemon are prevalent. A touch of heat with smoky sweetness on the palate finishing quite short. We believed overall that this spirit was well balanced with complexity of character though the table was split as to whether that was good or bad.

Penca Azul Añejo

Soft yellow. Sweet agave, citrus and white pepper give touches of complexity in the aroma. The palate has some spice with interesting lemongrass and capsicum notes coming through on a long finish. I thought this tequila may have had a weak nose but made up for it with an overabundance of seductive tones on the palate. And Wilkinson found "floral notes on the back palate of this very long finish".

Porfido Añejo

Gold Brown. Intense and deep fragrances of toffee, ripe fruits and charred oak. The taste is also deep and complex with a lot of caramel and wood but softened by a long smoky finish. Incredible Tequila equivalent of drinking rare Cognac. Davidson summed it up as "rich and complex, stewed fruit, smoky and powerful".

Porfido Plata

Clear. Very soft attack on the nose but some wood and florals comes through. The taste is much fuller having richer smoky notes and a long sweet fruit finish. An intriguing drop. Young thought this number had a "light, floral nose with tea and sherry aspects... great length and the complexity of stone fruits on the palate". Bailey went on to comment "a great full bodied blanco with a lot of character, possibly a highland tequila, sweet and full".

Sauza Gold

Yellow toned. Caramel and lemon on the nose with some earthiness. Easy medium body, with upfront floral tones then sweetness and finishing with a peppery burn. Davidson liked the palate on this one finding pear and Speyside whisky as the predominant flavours. And Granger found rose through both the nose and palate while at the end found a long white pepper finish.

Sauza Hornitos

Pale yellow. Initial burn on the nose leads to some notes of spice and lemon. The spice is more apparent on the palate as well as subtle smokiness with faint fruit and a short finish. Granger likened it to "paint thinner, off wine smell", and Bailey felt it had a "neutral taste with not a lot of character", while Almenning called it "extremely weak and disappointing".

Sauza Tres Generaciones

Golden. Gentle nose held together by soft fruity, caramel notes that invite. The palate is filled with sweet tropical fruit like passionfruit and pineapple with little wood at the end. Almenning didn't think it was overwhelming because of a "thin palate" but Davidson, although feeling it was a "tad mellow", said the initial hit was "powerful".

STARS OF TEQUILA: THE TOP 20 PERFORMERS

★★★★★

Don Julio 1942 (29/50)

Porfido Añejo (27)

El Charro Añejo (25)

Jose Cuervo Reserva de la Familia (24)

★★★★

Porfido Plata (23.5/30)

Gran Centenario Reposado (23)

Hussong's Reposado (23)

Aha Toro Blanco (22)

Jalisco Revolucionario 501 Reposado (22)

Sauza Tres Generaciones (22)

1800 Añejo (21)

Aha Toro Reposado (21)

Gran Centenario Plata (21)

Los Arangos Añejo (21)

Herradura Reposado (20.5)

Patron Silver (20.5)

XQ Reposado (20.5)

Aha Toro Añejo (20)

El Jimador Reposado (20)

Hacienda del Cristero (20)

XQ Añejo

Golden. Strong vegetal nose with sweet florals and earthy characteristics. Quite a sharp alcoholic bite but very unbalanced with no direction in the palate mixing up acidic, sweet and bitter tones. Bailey felt the "sweet thin flavour" was "delicate with a bitter sweet finish", but I thought it had some alluring flavours that ended quickly.

XQ Reposado

Yellow/gold. Very spicy nose with underlying agave and citrus holding just above the heat. The palate carries the initial nose of some agave but also has some woody tones and a long peppery finish. "A very interesting peppery nose that surprisingly is not intrusive but drops off a tad on the flavour", was how Wilkinson described this one. I felt it was a lovely drop that touches many facets; caramel, oak, agave and a punch of pepper.

There is a through-line that can be noticed in these notes, which echo the traditional flavours of this particular spirit. So in truth, some people will never like tequila and not everyone will be turned by what they read, but at least if you're daring to give it another go, this is a solid guide.

It's thanks to people like Phil Bayly from Café Pacifico for constantly raising the level of awareness and continually busting the myths surrounding this fine beverage. He regularly runs seminars and tastings for the drinks industry and people who want to be educated on the finer points of tequila.

So once you realise that there is more to it than what you thought you knew, then you can begin to look at tequila through different eyes and hopefully start your own love affair. There has to be some reason why Mexicans are so fiercely proud of their national spirit, so much in fact they even use it for what ails them. Now I've never seen a sick Mexican so you know it must be good.

bars&clubs would also like to thank Phil from Café Pacifico for hosting The Panel, plus Jules, Chimay, Marco and Ryan for their input during the tasting sessions. Next month: Single Malt Scotch.