



In a short time Tequila has climbed the ladder that is the palate of the Australian public to become one of the highest gainers in the spirits market, both on and off premise. MANUEL TERRON reports that while the mixto brands are doing well, it is the premium producers that are really making their mark on this up and coming category.



This legendary spirit shrouded in myth began as a low grade, milky substance known as Pulque and was

originally only consumed by priests and nobles as part of sacrificial ceremonies, to numb the pain no doubt. Then after the

arrival of the conquistadors, the tecuexes tribe in the highland of Jalisco formed an alliance with the Spaniards and their distillation methods to create mezcal wine. This so-called wine would in years to come be known as tequila.

The basis to this spirit is not any grain but agave, which is commonly mistaken for a cactus when in fact, it is part of the same

family as aloe vera. The favoured agave is known as the mano larga or long hand and ideally grows about 1500m to 2000m above sea level, mostly around the state of Jalisco. Essential to the production of tequila though is a strain of agave known as blue agave or tequilana weber azul that primes at eight years or more allowing for the sugars to develop. And after the fronds are cut away

the average piña, which looks like a pinecone, weighs a near ton and can produce around a hundred litres of tequila. Traditionally they are steamed in slow baking ovens for up to three days, left to cool for a day, then mashed and allowed to ferment for a week. Once strained the pulque has the alcohol content of a strong beer and is then distilled twice to create the spirit. Just like all of them it comes out clear, so the gold in many tequilas can be attributed to colouring that is meant to give the impression of ageing. Yet the real deal in aged tequilas are always marked as Reposado and Añejo, which gain some hues from ageing in barrels, ranging from bourbon to sherry depending on the style of a particular distillery. Reposado (rested) is generally aged for two to twelve months while Añejo is aged from a minimum of twelve months up to seven years. Here is where you begin to find tequilas with much more depth and many similarities to fine cognacs and single malt scotches.

There are mixto tequilas produced which are distillates containing only 51 per cent agave while the other half is made up of sugar and are usually shipped in bulk then bottled outside of Mexico. But where you see 100 per cent agave, the tequila must be bottled in the country, and labelled with

identify the distillery in case of any discrepancy in quality.

So just in case that seems rather confusing, as I'm sure it is, we'll move onto some of the clearer facts that make this a much coveted drop. That being the brands we are starting to see available in bars, restaurants and some off premise locations, one of which is Herradura, one of the few family-owned brands available.

I spoke to James France of McWilliam's who was one of the brave souls that decided tequila was not a dirty word and deserved a greater consideration from the industry and patrons at large. He began as a sole importer working closely with the Mexican embassy and slowly started pushing the tequila envelope around Australia, and has gained my respect as one of the true tequila ambassadors of our time.

So where did your love of tequila start?

Well for me it started when I was working in New York for Remy Cointreau and we launched a brand called Don Julio, where I had lunch with Julio Gonzalez himself, in fact I got to meet the whole family and I was lucky enough to go down to Mexico three or four times with that. But I moved back to Australia in 2000 and saw there was a shortage of good tequila on the market;

worm but it only comes in mescal not tequila. Anecdotaly, the majority of volume of tequila is made by the three biggest companies which are Cuervo, Sauza and Herradura. They tend to be more sophisticated in their production than mescal producers which tend to be small family operations.

What brought you to Herradura?

Herradura just struck me as being a major brand that was missing in the market as a totally different tequila and having seen how strong it was from my-time living in the US, I thought, 'yeah this would be a great one to bring into Australia'. So I contacted them out of the blue, asked them if they were interested in Australia and it went from there. Now I've been importing since mid-2003.

In that short time how have you seen the category grow?

Tequila has been growing at a fantastic level, outgrowing the total spirits categories that have maintained flat at about five to seven million cases for a long time. A lot of the volume of the dark spirits like bourbon, dark rum and whiskys have moved to RTDs where tequila powers on although only at five eight percent, it's slow but does

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"Hecho en Mexico" (Made in Mexico).

To keep things honest in the land of the pistoleros (gunslingers) the non-profit CRT guarantees quality and authenticity of tequila by protecting the denomination of origin, like cognac, sherry & champagne in Europe. Although this group has been under quite a lot of scrutiny, since it was found to have certain affiliations with one of the major distilleries.

Every distillery is given a Number of Origin or NOM, which ensures they adhere to laws and standards governing all tequila production set out by the regulatory heads of Mexico. Therefore every bottle of tequila must have the NOM stamped on it to

then I got in touch with Herradura and started importing that myself.

How does mescal actually differ from tequila?

There are four main differences: one that tequila can only be made in one of five areas in Mexico, including the state of Jalisco, where most of it comes from, whereas mescal can be made anywhere in the world; tequila is made with blue agave but with mescal you can use any agave from anywhere; tequilas are steamed in ovens but with mescal the agave is smoked in pits underground; and then there's the worm which is in fact a moth larva and not really a

continue to grow. The category is now four times the size of cognac, still small but it will never be huge because tequila is limited in its production by the slow rate of growth in agave to the fact that it can only be produced in a designated area.

Talking about RTDs, do you see some in tequila's future?

Not at all, no. There have been one or two come and go and last I saw there's not a single one left on the market. There was Tequila and I think one called El Diablo, but for some reason they just haven't worked. I think though for a company that's geared up to do RTDs that is a really good opportunity.

Tequila

I've seen Herradura starting to hit the off premise market. How is that working for you?

Yeah it's going well actually, we're getting a lot of demand for the product right across the board and we're just about geared up to be stocked in some national chains. It was too early 12 months ago to try and get those brands into the Woolies and Coles of this world but now with Vintage Cellars and First Estates, there is a definite interest in that.

What about tequila and cocktails?

Tequila is widely substitutable for vodka in many, many cocktails and as a result if they're a little bit tired of perhaps a Cosmo, they can have a Rude Cosmo. Or if you drink a Bloody Mary, add tequila instead to give it that extra zing that your looking for. The mule though that's my personal favourite. Tequila works well with not only fruit but more specifically citrus fruits and in Australia the produce available is second to none.

You do an event or party every year in Canberra right?

Yeah that's a bit of fun, we've been doing it for the past two years. Basically I started a relationship with the Mexican embassy there, and they're always keen to showcase their product, so what we do is invite a bunch of bartenders for a cocktail party from Sydney and Canberra. I introduce them to the ambassador and have several drinks in a short space of time in the embassy. It's all controlled and good fun but I would like to do it on a bigger scale this year.

James currently keeps busy by not only pushing the McWilliam's spirits portfolio but also travelling around and teaching the finer points of the taste and production of tequila. And you can bet he has one of the best ranges overall in the country, which is rather strange that most other spirit brands, whether it be vodka, whisky or gin, don't bring to Australia their full ranges. The Herradura range consists of Silver,

Reposado and Añejo, then they have a triple distilled Silver – Hacienda del Cristo – that has beautiful caramel and tropical fruit characteristics on the nose and a long, vegetal, spicy finish. This tequila gets its name (House of Christ), from when the distillery or hacienda was used as a refuge for priests that were persecuted by the Mexican government during their socialist era about 100 years ago.

There are also two mixtos, El Jimador Silver and Reposado, but the most surprising and final one in the stable is the Seleccion Suprema, currently the most expensive tequila in the country. Matured in new French oak and bottled in a crystal decanter, this is truly an outstanding number. With subtleties of rose petals and cinnamon it has won countless awards



Sweetea Tequila:
You can't go
past a margarita

worldwide. The surprising part is that, James has sold out and has taken back orders from Perth to Brisbane.

This goes to show how this particular category is really taking a hold of the aficionados of the drink culture, all the way from the bartenders to the brokers. People want quality.

Another impressive selection that is fairly recent is that from the Jose Cuervo brand which finally have brought over the cream of the crop, Reserva De La Familia and the vibrant and playful reposado Tradicional. Another of the ol' schoolers, Sauza have also

released some of the more elevated from the brand, Hornitos and a steady favourite of mine, the Three Generaciones, whose bottle depicts the famous faces of the Sauza leaders.

A lovely newcomer that is winning some fans is the highland produced tequila (where it's believed the best is made), Aha Toro. Don't be confused with the now defunct brand that carried a red sombrero on the lid. This is a great little range, which I'm sure will represent well behind bars and gain a following of consumers.

The company I credit with the initial push of the agave spirit is the Queensland company, Liqoursource which began with the cult brand, Casa Noble. Now they have some of the more eclectic selections

in the business, importing the hugely successful overseas favourite Patron Silver and Gold, while incorporating the XQ brand with its unique bottling in place of the long gone Casa Noble.

Liqoursource's hidden treasures don't come with too much fanfare, in fact El Charro Añejo is a very understated bottle which because it doesn't look fancy you would walk away from. The other high rating drop from their stable is the Hussongs Reposado, with rich toffees and deep characteristics you would almost swear it was añejo, and the bottle is in my view one of the coolest.

Barmania's Arenal Reposado and Penca Azul Añejo will be tequilas that will capture the consumers imagination by not being to forceful on the palate and lending themselves to be accepted by the majority of consumers. Similarly Gran Centenario is one of those tequilas that is definitely geared up for the general consumers tastes. The most awarded brand, though, is one I have been pushing for quite a while to my customers on the other side of the bar. Porfidio has three of the finest tequilas on the market with the Plata and Añejo as well as what they sell as their house standard, Revolucionario 501.