

The Spirit of Mexico

The latest wave of **ultra-premium tequilas** blends Old World artistry with New World sophistication **BY DAVID LANSING**

Tequila—good tequila—is the most evocative of all spirits. Anyone who has spent even a day in Mexico will be magically transported back to this land of smoky landscapes and fiery cuisine by the smallest sip of this earthy elixir. With its spicy nose and hot, long finish, tequila is the brass wailing of a mariachi band playing “Sabor a Mi,” the slow-cooked sweetness of a goat stew, the astonishing burst of fireworks celebrating a birth, a wedding, a saint’s day. A finely balanced 100 percent agave tequila conjures up the aromatic scent of orange blossoms and white pepper, wild mint and scorched coffee. It tastes venerable, complex, and explosive, just like the country itself. And with the latest wave of ultra-premium offerings from the heart of Jalisco, there has never been a better time to fall under tequila’s spell.

Not so long ago, I went on a tequila pilgrimage to Mexico. It began at La Fuente, a smoky cantina in Guadalajara’s historic district in the Mexican state of Jalisco, which is considered the birthplace of both mariachi music and tequila. You cannot separate one from the other, which is why I started my quest at this serious drinking establishment not far from the Plaza de los Mariachis. Here, on most evenings, dozens of musicians in their *charro*-inspired finery of embroidered felt hats and high-waisted jackets



You can bet on these: classic Mexican *lotería* art on a grid with some of the hottest super-premium tequilas on the market.

entertain strolling *tapatíos*, as the locals call themselves, alternately celebrating and lamenting love, death, family, Mexico, and the company of a good horse.

It was at La Fuente, while sampling a number of fine tequilas—the best of which have only recently hit the U.S. market—that I met Jose Delores, the leader of a mariachi band from nearby Atotonilco. I invited Señor Delores, a violinist, and his son, who played the *vihuela* (which looks like a small guitar) in his father’s band, to join me for a drink. I asked them to explain the connection between mariachi music and tequila.

“I don’t think it is possible to listen to mariachi and not drink tequila,” said the somber-looking Señor Delores. “One is the heart of Mexico and the other is the soul. Which is which I’m not really sure. But this is not important because it is not possible to have one without the other. Do you understand?”

“Sí, claro,” I told him.

The next day, over a hearty lunch of *carnitas* and hand-made corn tortillas, I sipped an amber *reposado* that seemed to be the very heart and soul Delores was talking about. And so my next stop was Cazadores, a respected distillery in the highlands of Arandas producing this singular *reposado*. Walking into the distillery, I was greeted by Gonzalo De La Pezuela, who ▶

poured me a taste of Cazadores's newest super-premium tequila, Corzo. De La Pezuela works for Bacardi, Corzo's distributor, and it's obvious the company has gone to great lengths to take tequila to a sophisticated audience. Corzo comes in a sleek, elegant bottle designed by Fabien Baron, who is best known for designing fragrance bottles for Calvin Klein and Jil Sander.

De La Pezuela led me through the distillery to a building where rows of stainless steel tanks were filled with fermenting agave juice, bubbling away while listening to Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Cazadores's *tequilero* claims the microorganisms in the fermenting agave juice are moved by the music, so they are more relaxed and ferment more quickly.

But it isn't just designer bottles and a sound track that have revived tequila as the life of the party, albeit a much more sophisticated affair. How super-premium tequilas have come to be the "It" spirit of the newbie millennium is a story of a perfect storm. Back in the late 1980s, young baby boomers began searching out connoisseur liquors, from Northern California's handcrafted pale ales to peaty single malt whiskies from Islay.

"It was all about lifestyle and image," says Ed Brown, a former Seagram's executive and now president and CEO of Patrón, which introduced one of the first premium tequilas in 1989. Last year Patrón raised the bar again with the introduction of Gran Patrón Platinum (\$190), an ultra-premium silver tequila that comes in a hand-etched crystal bottle inside a violin-quality maplewood box.

By 1995, global consumption of tequila was skyrocketing, making it one of the fastest-growing liquor categories in the world. Still, most of what we were drinking was swill: popular "gold" tequila that was really only 51 percent tequila mixed with inexpensive sugarcane or corn syrup alcohols and colored with caramel. No wonder it gave us killer hangovers.

Then two major events occurred in 1997. First, the World Trade Organization and the European Union granted Mexico's request that only tequila made from blue agave in the state of Jalisco or four other designated neighboring states could be called tequila, suddenly giving it the prestige of Cognac or

Sherry, two geographically defined liquors. Second, a spate of crop diseases plus a freeze decimated thousands of acres of the spiky-leafed blue agave, which takes seven to ten years to mature. Two years later, agave had gone from about \$40 a ton to more than \$550. Premium tequilas—those made with 100 percent blue agave, as noted on the label—were suddenly selling for \$50 and more. But rather than dampen the tequila craze, these unrelated events only made the market hotter.

With sales of premium tequila escalating almost 20 percent in the past two years alone, there's never been a better time to sample these more sophisticated tequilas, which can have as many as 600 aromatics compared to 30 for Cognac. For the uninitiated, the first thing you should look for on a bottle are the words "100% agave." This is important because agave plants, like grapes, get much of their herbaceous flavors from the soil—what the French call *terroir*.

The next distinction is the age of the tequila. *Plata*, or silver (also sometimes referred to as *blanco*, or white), is not aged. *Reposado* is aged from two months to a year in wooden vats or barrels, where it gets its amber color and picks up subtle tones of butterscotch and apple. *Añejo* is aged from one to five years in sealed oak barrels where the flavors mellow, like single malt whiskies, picking up hints of vanilla, smoke, or dried fruit, depending on whether they were aged in new French white oak or charred bourbon barrels.

I sipped one of the finest examples of the last category in the cellars of Mundo Cuervo, the final stop on my pilgrimage, in the little town of Tequila, the Mecca to this Mexican spirit. In a small, dark, underground room that was almost like

a shrine, I sampled the distiller's Añejo Reserva de la Familia, a chestnut-brown tequila as smooth as a single malt whisky and as aromatic as a fine Cognac. Cuervo's *tequilero* poured a bit more in my *caballito* as we both sat back and listened to the strains of a mariachi band playing nearby. Then the *tequilero* raised his glass and made a toast: "A la buena vida," he said.

To the good life, indeed. ■

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Ten to Try

From herbaceous to oaky, these are the tequilas to buy now

BLANCO OR PLATA

CHINACO BLANCO (\$40). Complex for a white tequila; hints of citrus.

DON JULIO BLANCO (\$40). Sweet agave flavor with a touch of vanilla.

PATRÓN SILVER (\$42). Earthy agave aromas with traces of pepper and banana.

PORFIDIO PLATA (\$60). A mellow, grassy silver with anise notes.

REPOSADO

CENTINELA REPOSADO (\$36). White pepper with fruit and oak.

EL TESORO DE DON FELIPE REPOSADO (\$40). Delicate floral flavors with a hint of eucalyptus.

CORZO REPOSADO (\$50). Sweet, honey flavor with rich amber tones.

AÑEJO

TRES GENERACIONES AÑEJO (\$40). Straw-colored and mildly herbaceous with a very long finish.

GRAN CENTENARIO AÑEJO (\$60). Clove, orange, and nutty tones.

JOSE CUÉRVO RESERVA DE LA FAMILIA (\$100). Dark amber with figs and nutmeg; smooth as Cognac.