



## TEQUILA SUNRISE

Long unknown in the States, premium tequila is becoming the newest drink of choice.

BY TODD KEITH  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON WALLIS

**L**ONG ABUSED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS on Spring Break binges, tequila is enjoying a comeback among a more sophisticated class of consumers. From 1995 to 2000, global consumption doubled, and demand was so great that, during a recent agave shortage, tequila prices skyrocketed, leading to stockpiling by restaurateurs and connoisseurs alike, as well as stories of black market tequila sales on the streets of major cities like London and Paris. (“Psst, hey man, wanna buy a one-year old Reposado? C’mon, everybody’s doin’ it.”)

While the shortage has passed, the demand for quality tequila products has continued to grow, moving beyond traditional tequila enclaves like Southern California and New York. Premium tequila bars have sprung up in smaller cities across the country, perhaps the best indication that tequila has entered the mainstream. To top it off, Georg Riedel, the well-known maker of wine and spirit glassware, recently created the first official tequila glass, crafted specifically to accentuate the drink’s unique traits.

But with all of its recent success, there are still plenty of people who eye this South-of-the-Border spirit with suspicion. Like cheap vodka, tequila is often lumped together with the types of alcohol that you shoot, mix, or ignite for fun. However, like the best cognacs, armagnacs, and single malt scotches, there is an artistry to the production of tequila that defies this preconception, whether you label these types of tequila “boutique” or “premium.”

“Of the tequila-drinking public, 95 percent of those drinkers don’t drink the 100 percent agave product, and they are clearly missing out,” says Julio Bermejo, one of the country’s foremost experts on tequila. “Originally it was all 100 percent agave—adding sugars was a way to cheapen the cost. Tequila has a pleasant taste all its own, but it is one of the least understood of the

great spirits.” Owner of Tommy’s Mexican Restaurant, opened by his parents in 1965, as well as Tres Agaves Restaurant in San Francisco, Bermejo travels to Mexico every three weeks year-round to purchase tequila, inspect distilleries, and maintain his intimate knowledge of the 275 or so tequilas he offers at his restaurants.

Of the larger categories of spirits, only tequila can be produced both unaged, such as Blanco, and aged, such as Reposado or Añejo. Bermejo explains, “It has great versatility and, unlike cognac or armenac, you can pair tequila with every course in a meal, from salads to fish to meat, and even use it in dessert drinks.”

In order to more accurately recommend tequilas to his patrons, Bermejo and his staff describe tequila in terms of geographic region, either Highland or Lowland. Though produced in five Mexican states, around 98 percent of all tequila comes from the Highland state of Jalisco. Rich red volcanic soil and cooler temperatures produce the young, fruit-driven, and generally spicier tequilas seen in such brands as El Charro, Gran Centenario, and Patron. Lowlands-produced tequilas come from more fertile soil and are characterized by their earthy, herbal, and vegetal notes, as seen in labels such as Herradura, Arette, Cuervo, Cabo Wabo, and Sauza.

“It’s so versatile, you can’t just walk up to a

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customer and recommend something,” Bermejo insists. “At our restaurants, we show customers two bottles of Highland and Lowland and let them choose which one they like. Then we let them smell some others and ask, ‘What smells good to you?’ From there, we’ll move to wood influence and how aged a tequila they want.”

While tequila is not normally aged beyond a few years, one has to remember that agave plants take eight to 12 years to mature, and then are destroyed when they are harvested for their sap. Unlike cognac, you don’t get a product that can be harvested every year, but rather closer to once a decade. So when consumers wonder why they are paying a premium, they have to remember the age of the raw materials needed to make 100 percent agave tequila. Fortunately for the industry, that is starting to happen.

“Let me tell you something about tequila,” says Guillermo Castro, as he leans forward and holds up a small glass, or *cabalito*, of amber-hued Herradura Reposado. A native of Guadalajara, Mexico, Castro is chef and owner of Sol y Luna, Los Angeles, and The Cantina, three white-linen

## Categories of Tequila

### Blanco (Silver)

The original-style tequila. Clear and transparent, Blanco is bottled right after distillation. While strong in flavor, it possesses a distinct blue agave taste. It is traditionally drunk in *cabalitos*, or small glasses.

### Oro (Gold)

This is unaged Blanco mixed with colorings, flavorings, or other additives (caramel being the most common). Oro is basically a mixto (or mixed), the stuff that left you hungover in college. It is typically used in frozen margaritas, although tequila esthetes will recommend using good tequila to make good margaritas.

### Reposado (Rested)

Blanco that has been aged in oak casks for at least two months and up to one year. The oak barrels mellow the taste and bouquet while creating its pale color.

Reposado maintains the blue agave taste and is gentler to palates unfamiliar with top-quality tequila.

### Añejo (Aged)

Blanco tequila aged in casks (usually bourbon barrels) for more than a year and up to about four years. These usually have a pronounced amber color and woody flavor. Once it ages beyond four or five years, tequila tends to take on some of the characteristics of whiskey.

### Reserva

A special Añejo that some distillers age for up to eight years. Like the name sounds, Reserva is the big league, both in taste and price.



THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Herradura Añejo (aged) Tequila is highly caramelized, with moderate smoke, floral, and agave aromas; Sauza Tequila Reposado Hornitos has a sharp, peppery quality and a long finish. OPPOSITE: chef and restaurateur Guillermo Castro displays some of his favorite tequilas.





Mexican restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama. “The first sip will wake up your taste buds with an alcohol burn. After that sip, you can appreciate the taste of the blue agave in fine tequila. It is something to enjoy.”

Castro’s success at introducing premium tequila and educating his customers about it, particularly in a mid-sized city in the Deep South, is just one more indication of how far-reaching fine tequila culture has become. “You’ve got to have some respect for this product,” he says. “It is a culture. It’s a whole way of living. And it is part of an experience that I encourage. For me, tequila is all I drink.” **ET**

*Tequilas to Consider*

**Don Eduardo Silver** Triple distilled, with the smoothness of a fine single malt scotch, this tequila is 100 percent blue agave and is made by a family-owned Mexican distillery, an increasing rarity these days.

**Porfidio Single Barrel Añejo** The hand-blown bottle with the cactus on it may look a little overblown, but the tequila inside is a revelation. Its amber color and sweet bouquet precludes an exotic burst of fruit, herbs, and oak.

**Sauza Hornitos** Aged for at least two months, this delightful drink has a slight sour lime or pear character with a clean finish. A pleasant surprise for non-tequila drinkers.

**Herradura Reposado** Dry with hints of lemon and honey, this smooth tequila is aged 11 months, longer than any Reposado in the industry.

**Herradura Seleccion Suprema** Made from Tequilana Weber Blue Agave, it is aged in French oak for five years and retains notes of vanilla and citrus. Expensive, but the smooth finish is worth it.



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