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FOOD

Tequila

Source: The Mexican Tourism Board

If you are looking for Tequila in Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, stop into Casa Tequila. They have been selling fine tequilas in Zihuatanejo since 1961. Family owned and operated by Pepe Armenta and his wife Marcela, it was for many years known simply as Don Pepe's. Nowadays you will more often find one of Don Pepe's four children: Marcela, Agustin, Oscar or Benjamin manning the counter, all are bi-lingual, knowledgeable and happy to help you find the perfect tequila among their over 150 brands. Casa Tequila has the



widest selection in town with many brands not found anywhere else. From souvenir tequilas for \$8 dollars a bottle to the very finest at \$350 dollars a bottle, they have a tequila to fit every budget and are happy to give you buying advice. Not sure which one you want, they offer on the spot tequila tasting and will walk you through your choices. (Benjamin also offers more extensive tequila tastings by arrangement, in the store or at your hotel or residence, includes historical overview, explanation and introduction to several tequilas and tasting, call 554-2725 for availability.) Casa Tequila also has a complete selection of liquors and wines, along with a walk-in humidor and a very large selection of cigars, including imported Habana cigars from Cuba and Zihuatanejo's own brand, Valle de Iguana.

Casa Tequila is located in Zihuatanejo at Cuauhtemoc #14, on the pedestrian walk just up from the square, across from the movie theater. Open 9am-2pm and 4pm-9pm, Tel. 554-2725. And a new store has just recently opened in Ixtapa, located in the Centro Comercial La Puerta numbers 8 & 17, behind Casa Morelos Restaurant,

Few North Americans have just up from Señor Frogs.
left Mexico without Open 10am-10pm, Tel. 553-
downing a shot of tequila. 1155.

But as tastes have become
more sophisticated, so has the production and marketing of
the country's national drink, winning it the respect of liquor
connoisseurs the world around and prompting visitors to
take the time to savor it properly.

Although tequila has experienced newfound fame outside of
Mexico, it has a long history within the country. When the
Spanish Conquistadores arrived in Mexico in the 16th
century, the Aztecs offered them pulque, a beer-like drink
resulting from the fermentation of the agave plant and
revered as a gift of the gods. By introducing the distillation
process into pulque production, the Spaniards converted the
drink into a product known as mezcal. The mezcal from
Tequila, a small village in Jalisco State in western Mexico,
became known as the best mezcal in the area and its name
lent to the refined mezcal product we know today.

Tequila is made from the blue agave plant. There are 136
species of agave, but only the blue agave produces quality
tequila. A common misconception is that the agave is from
the cactus family; it is actually from the lily (amaryllis)
family. The plant takes eight to 10 years to mature, and only
the core, referred to as a piña, is used. A mature piña can
weigh anywhere from 80 to 300 pounds. About 15 pounds
of piña produce one liter of 100-percent agave tequila.

Once the piñas are harvested, they are steam-cooked and
then slow-baked for anywhere between 50 and 72 hours.
After baking, they are crushed, their juice extracted, and
then milled, strained and mixed with natural spring water in
large fermentation tanks, to which yeast is added. The
mosto, as this mix is called, is left to ferment anywhere
from seven to twelve days in special tanks. The longer the
fermentation, the more robust the body. The liquid created
by fermentation is then distilled twice in pot stills.

When the tequila leaves the still, it is clear as water. Often
referred to as blanco (white), this young tequila has a rough
taste, with a distinct agave flavor. Reposado (rested) tequila
is aged six months to a year in oak casks, developing a
golden color and a smoother flavor than the blanco. Añejo
(aged) tequila is aged for more than a year in the casks to

yield a smooth, woody aroma and dark brown color.

More than 55 percent (about 100 million liters) of tequila is produced in the western Mexican state of Jalisco within 35 kilometers of the town of Tequila. The spirit plays such an important role in the area's development that the local university even offers a course in tequila engineering. A strict regulatory body, the Tequila Regulatory Council, (Consejo Regulado de Tequila, CRT) also ensures that any spirit calling itself tequila is produced in Jalisco (just as champagne can only be produced in the region of the same name) and that it obtains at least 51 percent of its fermented sugars from the blue agave plant. All other liquor made from agave must be called mezcal.

The most popular brands of tequila outside Mexico are Cuervo and Sauza, yet there are lesser-known brands highly regarded by Mexicans as being of exceptional quality, some of which are now available in the U.S. and Canada. They include Don Julio, Patron, Herradura and Porfidio.

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demand for tequila combined with plagues and frosts in recent years that have dramatically reduced the supply of the slow-growing agave plant have forced some distillers to close their doors, others to sacrifice quality by reducing the amount of agave, and all to raise their prices. In recent years, the price of tequila has risen up to 70 percent worldwide, putting the drink at a price-par with scotch and other premium spirits. To learn about tequila's history and production, tourists can take advantage of the tours offered by several leading distilleries. The beautiful hacienda housing the Herradura distillery, for example, boasts the original production facilities. Founded 132 years ago by Aurelio Rosales, Herradura means horseshoe in Spanish and the "lucky" label has stuck with the company throughout its history. Visitors to Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco State and Mexico's second-largest city, can also learn about Mexico's famous spirit by riding on the Tequila Express, a four-car train ferrying passengers northwest 55 miles to the town of Tequila and back the same day. For about US\$40 round-trip, passengers learn from guides how tequila is made, and are served all the tequila drinks they desire. For more information on the tours, contact 011-52-33-3880-

9099 or www.tequilaexpress.com.mx.

Tequila Drinks and Dishes

Although some Mexicans do consume tequila in one gulp or consume it in a margarita, it is more commonly sipped slowly either alone or alternatively with sangrita, a mix of tomato juice, orange juice, lime juice and chile pequin served in a shot glass alongside it. The recipes for Sangrita vary widely from bar to bar-some versions are sweeter, some spicier-but a basic recipe follows. Tequila also makes for a delightful coffee drink and is commonly used as a cooking ingredient, much like brandy or wine.

Sangrita

1 cup tomato juice

1 cup fresh orange juice

½ cup fresh lime juice

3 teaspoons grenadine

Chile powder to taste

Blend well together and serve with a shot of tequila.

Tequila Lime Shrimp

1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and de-veined

2 tablespoons olive oil

4 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons tequila

Juice of one lime

1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Once the oil is hot, add garlic and sauté for about one minute. Add shrimp and cook, stirring frequently, for two minutes. Stir in tequila, lime juice and pepper flakes. Cook two minutes or until about half the liquid evaporates and shrimp are pink and glazed.

Tequila Steaks

4 8-oz. New York steaks, about one inch thick

1/2 cup tequila

1 tablespoon pepper

2 teaspoon grated lemon peel

2 cloves garlic, minced
1/2 teaspoon salt

Mix tequila, pepper, lemon peel and garlic in a heavy plastic bag. Add steaks and rotate to distribute mixture evenly over steaks. Let sit in refrigerator over-night. Preheat grill. Cook, brushing with remaining marinade until done. Turn once during cooking time, about 12 minutes. Season with additional salt if desired and serve

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