

hola tequila!

As the South-of-the-Border drink enjoys a worldwide boom in popularity, Birmingham owes Guillermo Castro credit for teaching his patrons the art of appreciating fine tequila.

BY TODD KEITH
PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS



GUILLERMO CASTRO IS A PATIENT MAN. When he arrived in Birmingham 18 years ago, there were only a handful of Mexican restaurants in town. "They were fine—nothing wrong with those places—but that was it, the same type of Mexican food served in each place," Castro recalls.

Nearly two decades later, with the success of his gourmet Spanish tapas offerings at Sol y Luna, the white linen nuevo Latino cuisine of Los Angeles; and his latest venture, Cantina, a casual tortilla grill; Castro has almost single-handedly raised the stature of fine Mexican-influenced dining in the Magic City. But it's tequila, not cuisine, that is his real passion.

Just as Castro has taught his customers to appreciate gourmet Mexican food in Birmingham, he has also helped introduce premium or boutique tequila, a relatively new phenomenon in town. Long abused, ignored, and denigrated by those who had a bad experience at that around-the-clock party known as the freshman year of college, quality tequila (as opposed to sugar-and-artificial-color-enhanced cheap tequila) is enjoying a surge in popularity. Big time. From 1995 to 2000, global consumption doubled. The demand was so great that during a recent agave shortage a few years back, tequila prices rose exponentially, leading to stockpiling (ask Castro about his garage-turned-tequila warehouse) by restaurateurs and connoisseurs alike, as well as stories of black market tequila sales on the streets in major cities like London and Paris. ("Psst, hey man, wanna buy a two-year old Añejo? C'mon, everybody's doin' it.")

Sitting late one afternoon at Sol y Luna in Lakeview, Castro has filled a table with bottles of his favorite tequila, bowls of fresh guacamole and salsa, and delicious salmon ceviche. An assortment

of sangrita and lime chasers fill decorative shot glasses or caballitos, "little horses" in Spanish. We are going for a ride. "The best is blue agave," he begins. "The Mexican government says tequila must have 100 percent agave, and at least 51 percent of this must be blue agave." Consequently, the best tequilas will be 100 percent blue agave. The blue agave plant, with its long bluish spiny leaves, contains a large heart, or piña, where the juices are extracted and then twice distilled to create the best tequila. No cactus is involved in the process. All tequila starts clear and gains color, if any, depending on its aging.

"You harvest agave after eight or more years, then if you age it, you are looking at 10 to 12 years to get it to market," explains Castro. "This is labor intensive." While tequila is not normally aged beyond a few years, one has to remember that agave plants are killed when they are harvested for their sap. There is no second crop from the first batch of plants. Unlike cognac, you don't get product harvested every year but rather closer to once a decade. So when consumers wonder why they are paying a premium price for 100 percent agave tequila, they have to remember the age of the raw materials needed to make the drink.

"Let me tell you something about tequila," confides Castro, leaning forward and holding forth a small caballito of amber-hued Herradura Reposado to ponder. A native of Guadalajara, Mexico, Castro is in his element when the conversation turns to quality tequila. "The first sip will wake up your taste buds with an alcohol burn," he says. "After that sip, then you can appreciate the taste of the blue agave in fine tequila. It is something to enjoy."

Giving a bit of background on the drink, Castro makes a case for tequila being one of the oldest spirits in the world—certainly it is North America's first distilled drink. It is named after Tequila, a small town in a valley in Mexico's Jalisco state where the bulk of Tequila is made. Recently, Castro has begun taking small groups of friends and customers from Birmingham to Mexico and acting as a combination host and guide. "These trips are to relax and learn," he explains. "It is something that I do for our customers that have been so loyal and trusting over the years." Not surprisingly, Castro plans to expand these often informal trips into more frequent culinary tours and eventually perhaps even open his own cooking school in the Yucatan.

"My business starts with tequila," Castro stresses. So while the agave shortage has passed, the demand for quality tequila products has only grown, moving beyond traditional tequila enclaves like Southern California and New York. When medium-sized towns like Birmingham see educated customers walking into fashionable tapas restaurants and specifically asking for a glass of single barrel Porfidio Añejo (at \$55 a pop), then it's clear that tequila has entered the mainstream.

Like a man clearly enjoying his mission, Castro's success introducing and educating his customers and friends in a mid-sized town in the Deep South is just one more indication of how far-flung fine tequila culture has spread. "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." ◉

For more information on fine tequilas, please see www.porticomag.com/tequila.

Guillermo Castro
at his restaurant
Sol y Luna.



edibles&elixirs



Categories of Tequila

BLANCO (Silver)

The original style tequila, the clear Blanco is bottled right after distillation. While strong in flavor, it possesses a distinct blue agave taste. It is traditionally drunk in “caballitos” or small glasses.

ORO (Gold)

Unaged Blanco with the addition of colorings, flavors, or additives, such as caramel being the most common. Oro is basically a mixto (or mixed), the stuff that got you hungover in college. It is typically the choice for frozen margaritas, though tequila esthetes will recommend using good tequila to make good margaritas.

REPOSADO (Rested)

Blanco aged or rested in oak casks for at least two months and up to one year. The oak barrels mellow its taste and bouquet while creating its pale color. Reposado maintains the blue agave taste and is gentler to palates unfamiliar to quality tequila.

AÑEJO (Aged)

Blanco tequila aged in casks (usually bourbon barrels) for more than a year and up to about four years. It usually has a pronounced amber color and woody flavor. Once it ages beyond four to 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.

Lime Tequila Chaser

- ½ cup fresh squeezed lime juice
- ½ cup fresh squeezed orange juice

Mix ingredients, chill in freezer (not shaken with ice). Serve in “caballitos,” and drink with the tequila of your choice.

Sangrita Tequila Chaser

- 1 cup fresh squeezed orange juice
- 1 cup tomato juice
- 3 teaspoons grenadine
- dash Tabasco Sauce
- pinch of salt

Mix ingredients, adjust to taste, and chill in freezer (not shaken with ice). Serve in “caballitos” (shot glasses), and drink with the tequila of your choice.

edibles&elixirs

Passion Margarita

Hibiscus Tea

½ cup dried hibiscus flowers

½ cup sugar

2 cups boiled water

Let simmer for 10 or 15 minutes. Strain through cheesecloth, and put the hibiscus water in the fridge to cool.

1 ounce Hibiscus Tea

¾ ounce Rose's Lime juice

1 ounce Sauza Conmemorativo Tequila

splash of Grand Marnier

Shake all ingredients well with ice and strain into a chilled cocktail glass rimmed with coarse salt or sugar. Garnish with a strawberry and serve.

Some 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 Mexican-owned distilling family, an increasing rarity these days.

PORFIDIO SINGLE BARREL AÑEJO

The hand-blown bottle with the cactus in it may look like a PR move, but the tequila inside is a revelation: The amber color and sweet bouquet preludes an exotic taste 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 NICE 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 rested in French oak for five years and retains notes of vanilla and citrus. Expensive, but the smooth finish is worth it.

