

# What's in a name?

The world of tequila is a minefield of different names and varieties. **Paloma Alvarez** sheds some light on the varied meanings behind one of the world's most controversial spirits.

Tequila is made from the fermented and distilled juice of the agave plant (pronounced a-gar-vay). There are more than 300 varieties of agave, just as there are many varieties of grapes. The agave is a perennial, xerophyte plant belonging to the family of agavaceae, the same as the Aloe Vera and Century Plant. Its appearance is the same as the Aloe Vera plant, but is 10 times larger. The agave grows best in an arid, hot climate zones with light soil with a high oxide and potassium content, customarily on volcanic terrain. The plants require seven to 10 years of maturation before being harvested and undergo a costly process of hydrolysis (steam cooking in most instances) to obtain fermentable sugars.

The agave plant is composed of inulin, fiber, minerals and water. Inulin differentiates agave from all other sugar sources of alcohol and herein lies the agave's quintessential superiority. Inulin is composed of Fructose molecules, which is easily metabolised by humans and is suitable for people affected by Type II Diabetes due to its low glycemic content. Consequently, agave sugar is sold worldwide in health food stores as an alternative sweetener to other sugars.

## History of Agave spirits

Long before Spain conquered its future American colonies, the native Indians in the Americas engaged in the production of fermented agave wine, known as pulque. The Spaniards brought distillation technology to their colonies, which they in turn had acquired from their former Arab conquerors. Thus agave spirits were born in Mexico and Venezuela.



In Mexico, agave spirits were initially known as "Vino de Mezcal" followed by the name of the region. The production of agave spirit was confined to semi-clandestine activities until Mexico and Venezuela gained independence from Spain in the 19th century. This was the result of Spain's export push of Spanish brandy into its colonies. Up to now, Spanish brandy is the spirit of choice of the upper class in Mexico. After independence from Spain, the consumption of agave spirits in Latin America was socially confined to the Indian or black peasant farming community, as European products were still considered to possess more social cache than native agave spirits.

The biggest production explosion of the agave spirits industry in Mexico occurred during the Age of Prohibition in the United States. Whiskey factories were closed down in the United States and consumption of whiskey was substituted with agave spirits in the Southern and Western States, smuggled across the Rio Grande. The agave spirits industry in South Africa was born during the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s. Agave plantations were expropriated from their former white landlords and distributed among the poor Indian peasant farmers, which led to a total collapse of the Mexican agave industry, in particular the sisal agave trade. The British, being at that time the biggest consumers of sisal agave fiber for industrial use, grasped this historic opportunity and massively planted agave in South Africa and Kenya. By historical mistake, various plantations were established with Agave Americana (with a low fibre content) instead of Agave Sisal (with a high fibre content), and inappropriate for agave fiber production, but very suitable for alcohol production, thus the agave spirits industry South Africa began. Despite this, their agave spirits industry never managed to make an impact on the international agave spirits market, because the Agave Americana has half the sugar content of the Blue Agave, making production for export uneconomical.

Venezuela's agave spirits industry was suppressed by the military throughout the 20th century in favour of the big rum industrialists, who financed the military. However, since the arrival of President Chavez, the Venezuelan agave spirits industry has undergone a newly found, proactive dynamism and export push.

Dr. Weber, a German scientist, is historically credited with being the first person to have properly researched and classified most agaves plants in the Americas during the first decade of the 20th century, and is consequently considered the actual grandfather of today's modern agave spirits industry. In his honor, "Blue Agave" has been botanically named "Agave Weber".

Tequila Cuervo, owned by the Beckmann family of diplomatic German decent, is historically credited for having created the brand awareness for the tequila name after WWII in the United States and subsequently throughout the world.

## The naming convention

An agave spirit's name is usually defined by the combination of the agave plant types used to make its alcohol and the region where it is produced. Throughout history, depending on prevailing fashion trends, one type of agave has been considered superior over another. Agave varieties are linked to names of spirits and in some instances, with trademarks:

Mezcal: from Southern Mexico, made usually from Agave Espadin

Tequila: from Central Mexico, Agave Tequilana (or Blue Agave)

Bacanora: From Western Mexico, Agave Tequilana, among others

Sotol: From Northern Mexico, Agave Silvestre

Cocuy: From Venezuela, Agave Cocuy

South African Tequila: From South Africa, Agave Americana

Raizilla: From Western Mexico, a blend of various wild agave plants

Super-Jalisco: From Jalisco, Mexico, the best agave growing terroir, Agave Tequilana (or Blue Agave)

## Distillation

Sugar is transformed by yeast into alcohol, resulting in a wine or beer. Pulque is the name given to the 'wine' from fermented agave juice. Such an

alcoholic beverage can be taken a step further to a spirit – technically and simply, a separation and concentration of the alcohol contained in the fermented juice. This process is done through distillation, where the fermented juice is heated to 98 degrees Celsius, the evaporation point for alcohol. Alcohol vapours are collected and condensed back to liquid, leaving the water behind. Distillation can be done via two methods. Column Distillation has both positive and negative qualities. While it is fast and efficient, it tends to lose some aromas. Alambique Distillation preserves aromas and separates head and tails but it is a slower process. Quality spirits aim to capture the aroma of the plant from which they are made, and therefore high quality agave spirits are alambique distilled.

## Blended and pure agave spirits

All the above agave spirits, except Super-Jalisco, are available in two variations – blended or pure. Some plants are more expensive than others in terms of processing costs. The concept of blending was developed to make expensive alcohols available to the masses. For example, some distillers would blend expensive agave juice with inexpensive sugar before distillation in order to lower the cost of the final product to the consumer.

There are three methods of blending. The cold blend blends two different types of finished alcohol together. The warm blend mixes the juice from one plant with the juice from another and ferments them together while geisting involves oaking an expensive plant in cheap alcohol for a prolonged period to give the cheap alcohol aromas from the expensive plant.

Most commercial tequilas need to be blended. Simply known as 'Tequila', the law states this spirit must be made as a Warm Blend of Blue Agave juice and molasses (or increasingly, corn syrup) fermented together.

Examples of blended agave spirits are Tequila Cuervo, Tequila Sauza (excluding Tres Generaciones), Tequila Olmeca, Tequila Pepe Lopez and Tequila Sierra. Examples of pure agave spirits available in Australia are Patron, Tequila Casa Noble, Porfidio and Cazadores. The latter is a Super Jalisco and is produced as a pure blue agave spirit and geographically restricted to Jalisco.

Consumers generally assume that one of the agave spirit categories above is superior to others, based on their preference for one type of agave over the other. The taste difference between these spirits – at present – is due to regional differences in distillation and fermentation technology. Consumers have moved towards a preference for Blue Agave spirits over the last two decades, in particular Tequila and Super-Jalisco. This is probably due to production technology advancements for Tequila, and Super-Jalisco above other agave spirits. The future and international scale of agave spirits is unlimited because the agave is one of the few industrial crops that does not require irrigation and is thus ideally suited for cultivation in most hot, semi-desert environments throughout the world.

## The benefits of ageing

Most alcoholic beverages and spirits can be aged, including agave spirits. There are three purposes for ageing; to make the product smoother and softer through a natural process of oxygenation (naturally slow evaporation through the pores of wood barrel), to pervade the product naturally with a wood flavour and to imbue the product with an element of natural caramel sweetness, as certain types of wood contain wood sugar which is transformed into natural wood caramel by toasting the barrels on the inside (sugar + heat = caramel). The question of to age or if not to age is a century old question and the 'correct' answer is re-interpreted every decade depending on prevailing fashion trends. Price sensitive spirits are 'aged' after distillation by means of "fast track" injection of oxygen and the addition of "tea bags" which contain oak chips and caramel coloring. High quality agave spirits are naturally aged. These agave spirits are identified on the label as Anejo. Low quality "brown"