
Make It Mexican: Tequila, Sangria, and Beer

The only thing that sounds like more fun than eating Mexican food is drinking Mexican drinks. Mexican beers, sangrias, and tequilas are so popular that they are the gateway for many people to tasting Mexican food for the first time. After you've munched on chips and salsa at a couple of parties, why not take the leap to tamales and empanadas, or to cactus (nopales) salad, the next time you're looking for an accompaniment to that ice chest of Mexican beers?

Tequila 101

Tequila is the distilled spirit of the heart of the *agave* (ah-GAH-vay) plant — a spiky succulent of the lily family, not a cactus. To make tequila, the heart, or *pina*, of the agave is steamed in huge ovens, and the resulting sweet juice is fermented and distilled.

Making the grade

The Mexican government regulates tequila production so that all tequila meets the following conditions:

- It must come from one of five north central Mexican states: Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacan, Nayarit, or Tamaulipas.
- It must be at least 60 percent derived from the Blue agave or Tequilana Weber plant.
- It must be distilled twice.

There are five distinct types of tequila:

- **Plata, Blanco, and Silver** are the youngest tequilas. They are clear like vodka, not aged, and they are frequently used for mixed drinks.
- **Mixtos** are the cheapest tequilas, made from 60 percent agave.
- **Joven Abogado, or Gold**, are unaged tequilas that are colored and slightly softened or sweetened with caramel or food coloring. Use this variety when you don't want to spend the bucks for añejo.
- **Reposado** is aged, but not as long as añejo. It is stored for two months to a year in small wood barrels, where it acquires a light gold color. Reposados combine the spiciness of clear tequila with the smoothness of añejo.
- **Añejo**, the most costly tequila, must be aged in wood, preferably small oak barrels, at least a year but sometimes as long as 3 years. This is great for sipping

slowly, in the same way that people traditionally enjoy brandy. Although the complexity of a brandy can be overwhelming sometimes, tequilas are relatively simple and straightforward. They have a distinctive alcoholic flavor — with a slight sour edge.

Top-shelf selections

If you want to cultivate a taste for fine tequilas, check out this list of contenders for the tequila hall of fame:

- **Patrón Añejo**, with a smooth rich flavor, is Susan's favorite.
- **El Tesoro Añejo**, with its strong flavor of alcohol, is Mary Sue's favorite.
- **Chinaco Añejo** is named after the "Fighting Chinacos." With a name like that, how could we resist?
- **Porfidio Silver**, an elegant, crystal-clear plata, is distilled three times making it smooth as silk going down.
- **Del Dueño** is a slightly sweet añejo.

What is this thing called mezcal?

As you find out more about tequila, you may start wondering about mezcal — that mysterious beverage with the worm on the bottom of the bottle.

Mezcal, the form of tequila from southern Mexico, hasn't changed much since the Spanish introduced the still to Mexico in 1520. Unlike tequila, which must be made from a specific plant and is produced by large industrial companies, mezcal can be made from several types of agave and is still being made in small batches by tiny distillers. The resulting drink is more rough-hewn and less uniform than tequila. One premium brand is Encantado.

The worm, or *gusano*, found on the bottle's bottom, is not a worm at all, but a caterpillar. Once, locals may have believed that the gusano was imbued with magical powers. But today, it is merely thought to sell more bottles of mezcal.

Favorite Mexican beers

The Mexican approach to beer is closer to the American view of soft drinks: bubbly, refreshing beverages meant to be drunk throughout the day to quench a thirst rather than loosen inhibitions. In fact, beers are sold in 6-ounce bottles for quick snacks, and sometimes they're mixed with half lemonade or limeade for a bubbly morning drink. Beer is always served with a wedge of lime in Mexico, a custom that can be traced back to the Spaniards.

Best beer picks include the following:

- **Pacifico**: A slightly acidic, light-colored beer, made in an ale style. Try mixing it with half lemonade or half tomato juice for a great summer drink.
- **Bohemia**: Slightly darker than the ales, but still light-colored. This well-crafted, flavorful beer has placed first in blind worldwide beer tastings — no mean feat

against all those German brews. It has a smooth finish and slight aftertaste, best with just a rub of lime on the rim of the glass.

- **Dos Equis:** With its amber color, it is a nice cross between lighter and darker style beers. The recipe for this 100-year-old beer (named XX for the turn of the century) was created by a German brew master.
- **Negro Modelo:** A dark beer from the Yucatán. It has a hint of molasses, without being too sweet, and a strong flavor. For your complete drinking pleasure, coat the rim of a tumbler with salt, fill with crushed ice, pour in the beer, and squeeze in a few lime wedges. Leave yourself plenty of time to relax and enjoy such a carefully crafted drink.

On the lighter side: Sangria

A light fruit and wine drink, like sangria, is terrific for casual afternoon gatherings. Sangria looks especially nice when served in sangria pitchers.

Sangria

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 2 hours steeping

Yield: 4 servings

- 1 orange
- 1 lemon
- 1 lime
- 1 bottle fruity red wine, such as Pinot Noir
- 1 cup freshly squeezed orange juice
- 2 cups ice cubes

1. **Scrub the orange, lemon, and lime under running water and cut them into 1/4-inch slices. Cut each slice into quarters to form wedges.**
2. **Place the fruit wedges in a pitcher, pour in the wine, and let the sangria sit for about 2 hours at room temperature so that the flavors can combine. Alternatively, steep as long as a day in the refrigerator.**
3. **Just before serving, stir in the orange juice and ice cubes. Serve immediately.**

For sangria that stays cold longer, try making one large ice cube. Wash out a half-gallon cardboard milk carton and fill it with water. Add some thin slices of oranges, lemons, and limes for color. Stand the carton upright in the freezer and freeze. Empty the ice into a punch bowl by ripping off the carton just before adding the sangria.

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