

NEW WORLD INGENUITY MESHES WITH OLD WORLD TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE

TEQUILA

A plantation worker chops up an agave cactus on a plantation in Arandas in the Mexican state of Jalisco.



LEGEND HAS IT THAT TEQUILA WAS CREATED WHEN THE GODDESS OF AGAVE RODE DOWN TO EARTH ON A BOLT OF LIGHTNING. THE MYTH HAS A KERNEL OF TRUTH: “WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IS THAT A LIGHTNING BOLT HIT AN AGAVE PLANT,” SAYS ANAMARIA CESEÑA, SENIOR BRAND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER FOR JOSE CUERVO INTERNATIONAL. “THAT WAS HOW PEOPLE DISCOVERED THAT AGAVE COULD BE COOKED AND THAT THE JUICE THAT CAME OUT OF IT WAS SWEET.” SO MEXICO’S NATIVE AMERICANS STARTED COOKING AGAVE ON PURPOSE AND FERMENTING THE JUICE. MANY YEARS LATER, WHEN THE SPANISH INVADDED MEXICO, “THEY BROUGHT DISEASE AND DEATH,” SAYS RENE VALDEZ, BRAND MANAGER FOR DON EDUARDO, “BUT THEY ALSO BROUGHT DISTILLATION.” WHEN SPANIARDS DISTILLED THE NATIVE PEOPLE’S FERMENTED BLUE AGAVE JUICE, TEQUILA WAS BORN.

Tequila was first produced commercially in 1795, and many current producers use techniques that have been passed down for generations. The Orendain family got into the business in 1840 and now produces 25,000 liters of tequila each day under a variety of brand labels, including Don Eduardo. “My grandfather, Don Eduardo, started with the company 70 years ago,” says Javier Orendain Lopez, a fifth-generation tequila producer whose father, two uncles and an aunt currently helm the family business.

Tequila is made from blue agave, one of the 136 species of agave that grow in Mexico. The plants, which look like cactus but are actually members of the lily family, take up to ten years to mature. Harvesting is done by *jimadores* using a *coa*, a razor-sharp disk at the end of a long stick. The entire plant is pried from the ground; then the tough, fibrous, thorn-edged leaves are cut away to expose the central *piña*, which weighs between 80 and 200 pounds. A jimador harvests an average of 100 piñas per day, loading them onto donkeys or trucks for transport to the distillery, where they are cut in half or quarters (depending on size) and the bitter

core is discarded. Next “we then put them in old-fashioned brick ovens,” says Lopez, “where they cook at 200 degrees Fahrenheit for 33 hours. The agave cools for 12 hours and then is crushed to extract juice that is then filtered.” To jump-start fermentation, “We use our own yeast, nothing artificial,” he says. After 48-72 hours of fermentation, the fermented juice is distilled. As with cognac, the bitter first and last liquids (or heads and tails) are discarded. Tequila is distilled at least twice and, depending on the style desired, is either bottled immediately or aged in wood.

Many tequila producers employ the same basic techniques. The Tequila Regulatory Council sets certain requirements and has a representative on site at all tequila distilleries to verify that the guidelines are met, but there is some room for variation. For example, Herradura doesn’t add yeast to speed up the fermentation process of its tequilas. Gran Centenario selects blue agave plants that are 10 to 12 years old. Don Valente harvests blue agave after a couple of rains, so plants are moist but not bloated. Other factors that vary by producer and can influence a tequila’s taste include the type of soil where the plant

THIS UNIQUE SPIRIT

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BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Image credit: Daniel Aguilar/Reuters/Corbis



grew; the cooking method; the size, volume and shape of stills used; characteristics of water added; types of barrels used and so on.

The Orendains check quality at every step. “We have even stricter standards than the government,” says Carlos Orendain Hernandez, a fourth-generation tequila producer. Ask a simple question about quality and you may be escorted to the Orendains’ quality-control lab, where technicians analyze color, sugar and alcohol levels.

A few years ago, rumor had it that Mexico was running out of agave, but Don Eduardo’s Lopez sets the record straight. “Right now we have a lot of agave that has reached maturity. In five years, however, that will no longer be the case,” says Lopez, referencing the plant’s eight- to ten-year maturation cycle. “So we have to have a lot of stock of tequila ready to avoid problems supplying that future demand.”

In 2006, U.S. tequila sales shot up by ten percent over the previous year, to approximately nine million cases, beating the one-year growth rates for vodka (6.7 percent) and rum (5 percent). Americans have discovered that tequila is tasty on its own, not just in a margarita.

HOW TO TASTE TEQUILA



“To get to the richness and sophistication of tequila, I suggest a snifter glass,” says Valdemar Cantu, brand business manager for Tequila Herradura. Pour the tequila into the glass and then “treat it like you would treat wine: swirl it, let it breathe, sip it.”

“Use all of your senses,” says Ceseña, “Check for color and clarity, how it shimmers and sparkles in the glass.” Tequila shouldn’t appear cloudy and should form legs or teardrops on the glass. Hold the glass away from your nose a bit further than you would with wine, and sniff its contents with your mouth open to minimize burn. You should detect agave aromas, which are green and herbaceous. If sampling an aged tequila, you may also pick up some smoke or oak notes. Other common tequila aromas include toasted almonds, cinnamon, cloves, vanilla, butterscotch, red apples, chocolate and pepper. The mouthfeel is normally viscous. The finish should be warm and soothing, not bitter. “Never judge by the first sip,” says Ceseña. “It can be a bit of a shock. With the second sip, you can judge.”

“Tequila has been misunderstood for some time,” says Cantu. “People have a perception that it’s a rough drink. It is as noble as other fine spirits.”



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TEQUILA LABELS DECODED

As determined by the Tequila Regulatory Council, only spirits made in five Mexican states can qualify as tequila: Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit and Tamaulipas.

Tequila must be made of blue agave. Mezcal is not tequila; it is also made of agave, but can be made of any of five types of agave. Mezcal is sometimes bottled with a larva or scorpion, a gimmick often mistakenly associated with tequila.

There are two types of tequila: 100 percent blue agave and *mixto*. Mixto is made from 51 percent blue agave sugars and 49 percent less expensive sugars such as sugar cane. Both of these types of tequila are then divided into the same five categories:

- * **SILVER, BLANCO OR PLATA** tequila is bottled immediately after distillation. This clear spirit is “the purest expression of the agave,” says Lopez. Don Eduardo Silver is distilled three times, a process developed by Tequila-Orendain that has now become a standard production method for several other tequila brands.
- * **GOLD OR ORO** has colors and flavors, such as caramel or oak tree extracts, added prior to bottling.
- * **REPOSADO** has matured or rested at least two months in barrels.
- * **AÑEJO** or aged tequila has spent at least 12 months in wood containers (typically used bourbon barrels) no larger than 600 liters.
- * **EXTRA AÑEJO** is a new classification recently created to distinguish tequila that has been aged in wood for at least three years.

Which type is best? They’re equal in quality, insists Lopez. The difference is how the agave is expressed, so determining which tequila to drink is ultimately a matter of personal preference and your mood.

Price is often a reflection of quality, “but not in every case,” says Bill Peryer, international sales and marketing director of Tequilera la Candelaria, which produces Don Valente Tequila. “Generally, the higher the price the better the quality. But one distiller may have ten brands, which can be like comparing apples to oranges.” At press time, there were 712 registered tequila brand names and 113 active tequila distilleries. Each producer is assigned a numerical code that will appear on all its labels no matter the brand name.

A Mexican tequila worker checks for quality

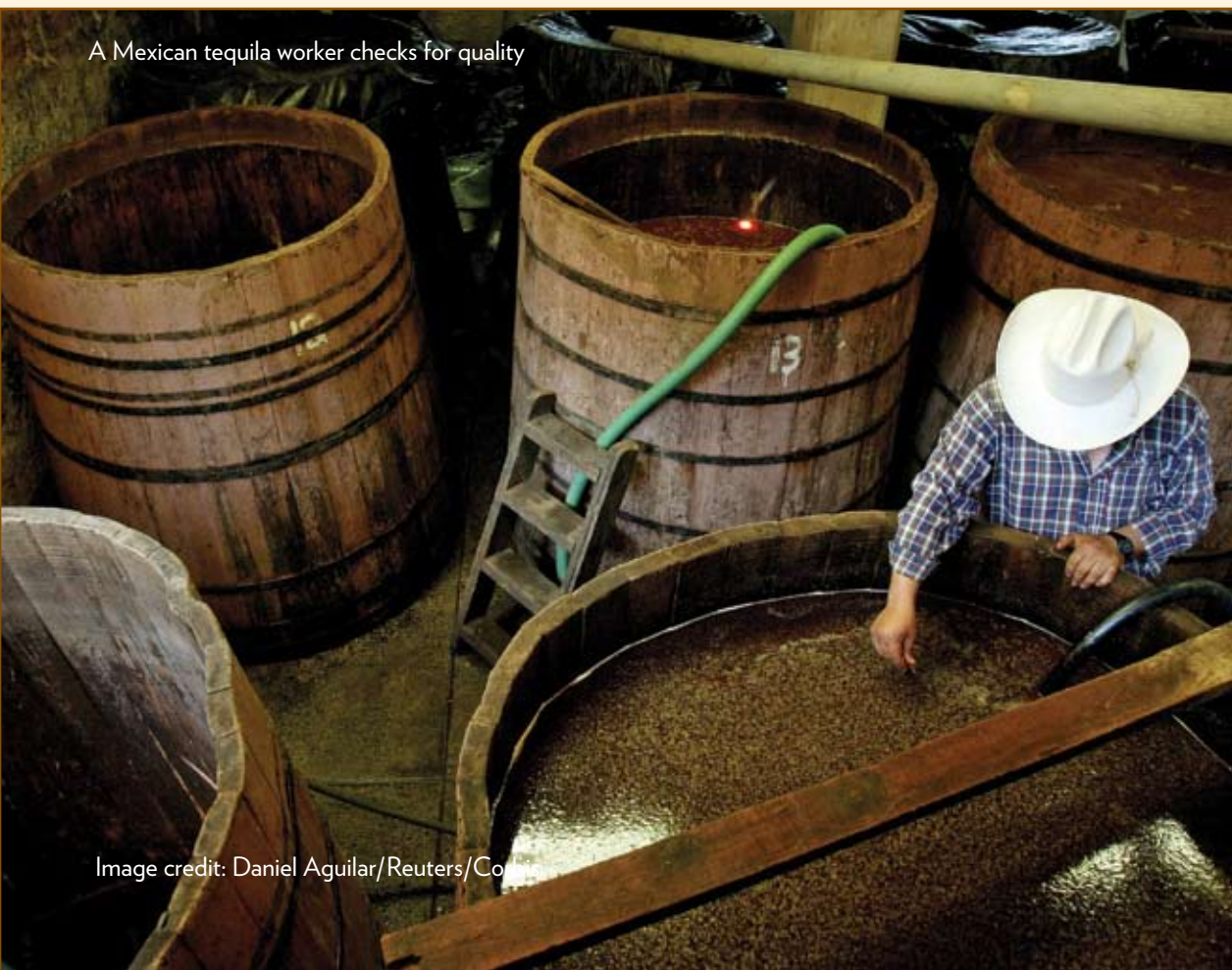


Image credit: Daniel Aguilar/Reuters/Corbis



THE MOST EXPENSIVE TEQUILA IN THE WORLD

Last year, a private collector paid \$225,000 for the first bottle of the exclusive Pasion Azteca Tequila, produced by Tequila Ley.925.

The hefty price tag has much to do with the packaging. The spiky bottle, designed by Tequila Ley.925 CEO Fernando Altamirano, was handmade with gold and platinum and adorned with a label featuring original art by Alejandro Gómez Oropeza.

The 100 percent blue agave tequila inside had been aged six years. Only 66 bottles of the limited-edition tequila were produced, the first of which sold for the world-record-setting price. Thirty-three others were listed at \$150,000 retail (some of which are still available, if you’re interested). Thirty-two gold-and-silver bottles with the same exclusive tequila inside were made available at a lower price; one of these babies will only set you back \$25,000.



CEO Fernando Altamirano holds a certificate of authenticity for the most expensive tequila ever sold



PUTTING TEQUILA TO THE TEST

To learn more about tequilas and the differences among them, WINE REPORT's editorial staff met in our conference room for an informal tasting. For expert guidance, we invited Eric Simpkins, bartender at TROIS in Atlanta, to lead us through the tasting process. Our discoveries are described below. Tequilas marked with a * are the tequilas we most highly recommend.

BLANCOS/ SILVERS

ASOM BROSO EL PLATINO \$40

Starts out cotton-candy sweet, then ramps up with notes of spice, earth and cocoa before a rough finish.

DON DIEGO SANTA TEQUILA BLANCO \$38

Clean and smooth, this tequila has a somewhat oily mouthfeel and starts out bland but gains some complexity on the finish.

* DON EDUARDO TRIPLE DISTILLED SILVER \$40

Smooth floral notes expand into cucumber, banana leaf, corn and white pepper before lingering long on spice with a touch of sweetness.

DON VALENTE LICORERA BLANCO \$60

A barnyard funk on the nose almost overpowers the earth and white chocolate notes that quickly open on the palate. The finish delivers a touch of cumin and smoke.

* FINA ESTAMPA TEQUILA BLANCO \$44

Subtle yet complex layers of earth and nutmeg roll over the palate then finish with rich, pleasant heat.

* GRAN CENTENARIO PLATA \$50

As if tarnished, this silver has a distinct, unusual greenish-gold tint caused by spending 28 days in French Limousin oak barrels before bottling. Inviting fruity and floral aromas lead to layers of spice, caramel and subtle fruit flavors that are smooth yet pleasantly warm.

J.B. WAGONER'S ULTRA PREMIUM 100% BLUE AGAVE SPIRITS (MADE IN THE U.S.A.) \$56

This aggressive spirit slashes and burns its way across the palate. Rubbery, overprocessed aromas and tastes seem to prove that only Mexico does tequila right.

QUINTA PENAS TEQUILA BLANCO \$30

Clean but not boring, this tequila delivers a midpalate flash of paprika and floral notes.

REPOSADOS

ASOM BROSO LA ROSA REPOSADO \$50

The unusual pink hue of this reposado is due to its being aged in used Bordeaux barrels. Flavors of strawberry, vanilla, white chocolate and butterscotch march along the palate pleasantly before an aggressive kick of heat.

DON DIEGO SANTA TEQUILA REPOSADO \$43

Agave takes a back seat to chocolate aromas, then almost disappears behind an unharmonious flavor mix of Brussels sprouts, malted chocolate and dusty earth.

* DON VALENTE LICORERA REPOSADO \$69

A strong peat note makes this one smell and taste as if part of the production process mimicked Scotch whisky. This fresh and muscular tequila shows some alcohol heat without burning and boasts notes of grass, cotton candy and green vegetables.

* FINA ESTAMPA TEQUILA REPOSADO \$49

Agave flavors consistently ride through subtle, exotic notes of spice, green vegetable, white pepper and minerals.

* GRAN CENTENARIO REPOSADO \$53

The cocoa, spice, caramelized pear and grilled pineapple notes in this complex tequila play all at once, jumping across the palate before settling into a pleasant, lingering finish.

* QUINTA PENAS TEQUILA REPOSADO \$35

Pretty pepper, spice and rose petal notes open up on the palate and build complexity while retaining smoothness through the finish.

VOODOO TIKI TEQUILA REPOSADO \$56

Notes of asparagus, cumin, cinnamon, rhubarb and processed fruit candy dominate the agave before lingering in a rather one-dimensional hot-sweet finish.

AÑEJOS

ASOM BROSO AÑEJO \$200

Masculine and aggressive, this tequila smelled and tasted like cream soda.

CABO WABO \$55

Sharp and disjointed, this tequila smelled of caramelized onion, apricot and litchi fruit and tasted of smoke, vanilla and pepper. A sticky mouthfeel preceded a bitter finish.

* DON DIEGO SANTA TEQUILA AÑEJO \$53

Nice after-dinner dessert flavors and scents like bananas Foster, dried apricot, chocolate and caramel are unified and softened by oak.

* FINA ESTAMPA TEQUILA AÑEJO \$56

Soft and elegant, this tequila tickled the nose with a whiff of salty seaside air before opening up on the palate with vanilla, white oak and a hint of juicy peach.

* GRAN CENTENARIO AÑEJO \$59

Reminiscent of a fine cognac, this tequila sniffed and tasted of cinnamon, vanilla, apricot, caramel and nutmeg with well-integrated, balanced and elegant results.

VOODOO TIKI TEQUILA AÑEJO \$60

Notes of oak, spice, light cocoa and green vegetables are subtle and restrained. Not complex, and perhaps not trying to be.

EXTRA AÑEJO

* GRAN CENTENARIO LEYENDA EXTRA AÑEJO \$250

This amber-hued tequila opens with fruity fresh orange aromas and lingers pleasantly on the palate with amazing flavors of orange, cinnamon, mace, nutmeg and cloves alongside light maple and almond flavors. Tasters described it as "tremendous," reminiscent of "the world's best carrot cake" and so complex it's absolutely worth the splurge.

EDITOR'S NOTES:

All the tequilas we tasted are made of 100 percent blue agave and prices are for a 750 ml bottle. We used a highly scientific method to determine tasting order. We arranged bottles from shortest to tallest.