

THE SPIRIT OF MEXICO

If you thought tequila was only good for Margaritas or late-night shots, think again. Mexico's national drink today finds itself in all the high places with a wide range of exciting options, exquisite brands, and unique cocktail recipes.

By **Sandrae Lawrence**



It makes sense. When you consider that it takes an agave plant approximately eight years to reach maturity, the characteristics of the tequila it produces are very much dependent on the caliber of the agave and the soil that gives it life – think *terroir*, think wine, and you've got the right idea. In the highlands of Jalisco, the agave tends to produce a softer, smoother, infinitely rounded tequila, while in the lowlands, it makes for punchier, earthier, more vegetal expressions.

It's this diversity, anything from fruity and floral to earthy and vegetal, that's seen tequila earn its place as the tippable of choice for the smart set. No ugly hangovers for them, instead the discerning, modern-day tequila drinker savors the complexities of this distilled agave spirit by sipping it neat, or enjoying its many nuances in all manner of delicious cocktails, and not a Tequila Sunrise in sight. George Clooney is a huge fan. Along with a couple of equally influential friends, the star created his own brand, Casamigos. The tequila was snapped up by drinks giant Diageo for a cool \$700M in 2017, with another \$300M to follow, depending on performance in the next 10 years. As more and more people are switching to tequila rather than single malts, that performance looks set to be very impressive indeed.

“THE TEQUILA PRODUCED THESE DAYS IS OF AN INCREDIBLY HIGH STANDARD”

Tequila – once the drink that only got to come out at the end of an evening's partying – is increasingly appearing alongside luxurious small-batch whiskies and artful craft gins in some of the finest bars around the globe. Forget about the days when people “slammed” cheap shots of the stuff and wondered why they suffered from terrible hangovers the next day. Mexico's national spirit – so ingrained in its people's cultural psyche – is finally getting the respect it deserves, as discerning drinkers savor the complexities of this distilled agave spirit by sipping it neat, or enjoying its many nuances.

That's largely down to the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (or Tequila

Regulatory Council), which came into effect in 1993. Prior to that, tequila could be made by distilling the fermented juice from any of the 200 varieties of agave grown in Mexico. “The tequila produced these days is of an incredibly high standard,” says Enrique de Costa, Master Distiller at Don Julio, one of the largest global tequila brands. “In fact, it's one of the best regulated spirits in the world,” he continues.

He's right. To be classified as 100% tequila, the agave has to be grown in one of five states in Mexico, with Jalisco being the center of tequila production, and can only be made using a single type of agave: blue weber, renowned for its superior quality.



Pink Grape Tequila cocktail

GETTY



Farming the blue agave plant that is used in the production of tequila

AWL IMAGES



GETTY



Tomas Estes (left) with his son, Jesse

TEQUILA KNOW-HOW

It takes between eight and 16 years to make one bottle of tequila. The process starts with the agave, grown from seed until it reaches maturity (up to 10 years). It's a common misconception that agaves are cacti, which they aren't. Next comes the "jimadors," whose job it is to harvest and trim the hard, spiky outer leaves back to the *piña* (heart) of the agave. Then it's off to the distillery where six

processes take place: the agave is cooked before being crushed to release sugars. Fermentation then takes place in large vats before it is distilled. The liquor is then aged, mostly in French or American white oak barrels. Finally, the tequila is bottled. 100% tequilas *must* be bottled in the designated Mexican region and carry the "Made in Mexico" label.



Stacking tequila agave bulbs at Herradura Tequila Distillery

Not all tequilas are created equal

Always check the label: only tequila made with blue weber agave can be called 100% tequila; anything else is a "mixto," made with 51% agave and 49% of other sugars.

Know your tequila

There's more than one type of tequila. Get to know yours by name, character, and taste. If you're not sure where to start, try a Blanco if you're usually a vodka or gin drinker, and an Añejo if you're partial to the taste of whiskey, as its aging makes it a heartier drink.

Blanco, Silver, Platinum, Plata

White, spirited, predominately unaged tequila with a distinct taste of agave. It's good for mixing, and in the words of Greg Almeida, winner of 2017's Patrón Perfectionists competition, "Blanco boasts fresh, citrus, and even umami flavors – good for Margaritas and Palomas."

Reposado

Rested and aged in wooden casks (two to 12 months). Light vanilla and spice, and golden in color, Reposados are "fruitier

and earthier," as Almeida notes, and are bursting with character, making them perfect for sipping.

Añejo

Aged in wood (one to 10 years). Intense in flavor, also best enjoyed neat or in "stirred boozy tipples like an Old Fashioned."

Extra Añejo

Ultra-aged, kept in cask for a minimum of three years, and up to 10. Best sipped and savored at the end of a meal.



Stored tequila barrels at Jose Cuervo Tequila Distillery

ASK THE EXPERTS

Here are some top tequilas to have on your drink list, as recommended by the Tequila Ambassador to Europe Tomas Estes and his son Jesse, of Tequila Ocho. They have chosen these tequilas because they taste like agave: full, robust, and natural.

Tequila Ocho

The first tequila to designate both the year it was produced and the precise field from which the family-grown agaves were sourced. Ocho is a partnership between Master Distiller Carlos Camarena and me.

Fortaleza

Guillermo Erickson Sauza reopened his grandfather's distillery in the town of Tequila and produces the drink in much the same way that his grandfather did. Expect vanilla sweetness, citrus, buttery creaminess, and vegetal notes on the Blanco.

G4

Produced by Felipe Camarena at El Pandillo, one of the most environmentally friendly tequila distilleries. Peppery, floral notes, and light spice permeate the smooth, easy-drinking palate.

Siete Leguas

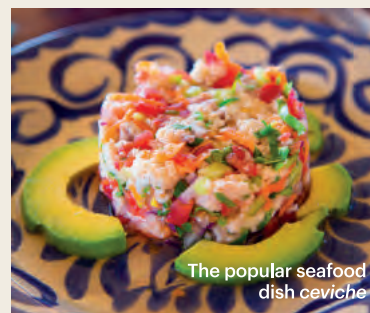
Siete Leguas is one of the only tequila producers to still use horses (or mules) to pull the large volcanic stone wheel (tahona) used to crush the agave. Its tequila is characterized by earthy, vegetal, and herbaceous notes.

El Tesoro de Don Felipe

El Tesoro is also made by Carlos Camarena. It is crafted in much the same way that tequila would have been produced in 1937, when Carlos's grandfather founded the distillery, La Alteña. You'll find poached pear, brown butter, and kaffir lime on the palate.

WHAT TO EAT WITH TEQUILA

Blanco and Silver tequilas work best with cold appetizers and chilled seafood dishes, particularly ceviches, while Reposados are perfect with spicy Mexican dishes like Enchiladas and Chipotle Chicken.



The popular seafood dish ceviche

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