

TIME FOR VITAMIN "T"

Tequila, the spicy Mexican spirit that has been dressed up in a lot of fancy and not-so-fancy ways, seems to be finally returning to its traditional, "artisanal" roots

BY RICHARD NALLEY



Tequila agave "hearts" are harvested and crushed by grindstones to produce smaller-scale luxury bottlings

There's a war for the soul of tequila. Over the course of a generation, tequila's image has evolved from a working man's firewater, to the cocktail pour of margaritas and Tequila Sunrise, to an upmarket spirit that can boast the refinement of a malt Scotch or cognac. In Fall 2007, Patrón introduced its long-aged, US\$500 Burdeos bottling, and Dos Lunas, its even-longer aged \$2,500-a-bottle Gran Reserve. But what makes a better tequila? Though usually classed with vodka and gin, the cognac comparison is closer to the mark, for tequila is a farm product; it owes its flavor and character to the soil, not (usually) to the distillery. Whatever happens to a tequila on the way to the bottle, its quality starts and ends with the agave it is made from.

A relative of the lily family, the "blue" agave used to make tequila is a man-sized dessert succulent with spiny arms but with a sensitive heart. The flavor of agave hearts, like that of wine grapes, is said to reflect the earth, climate and altitude where they grow. For the giant brands that blend from fields all over the legal tequila growing zone, this doesn't matter much, for it all goes into the same vat. But for smaller-scale luxury bottlings, it's the start of something special. El Tesoro, which farms the iron-oxide soils of Jalisco, will start with different tastes and aromas in its agaves from those harvested in the volcanic soils of the Sierra Madre foothills for Sauza Tres Generaciones, or those for Chinaco in Tamaulipas. But herein lies the confusion: there are really two kinds of drinks labeled "tequila"; one is distilled from 100% agave juices (usually noted on the label), while the other is from 51% agave and 49% "other" sugars. This simple difference can be a big deal, and it takes us right back to the agave fields.

Agave plants take six to 12 years to reach maturity. Imagine inexpensive, 49% "other" sugar Brand X. Its producers are making a market-priced product, so they harvest their plants early, when they have just enough fermentable sugars to make it practical. Those plants won't yield as much flavor as more mature agaves, nor will sugar additives in the distillery help; nor will the fact that Brand X processes them in steel autoclaves and distills them in efficient industrial columns. Sure, Brand X's tequila still tastes pretty good, but they are blander and simpler than a fine 100% agave tequila. If you want to savor a "real" (not frozen) margarita, or love to sip the stuff straight, however, look to the other end of the spectrum, at 4 Copas tequila or Del Maguey mezcal.

From Tequilera LaQuemada, whose agaves grow in El Arenal region, Jalisco, 4 Copas is the world's first and, so far, only Tequila certified organic by the USDA. "This is not like a wine or vegetables," notes spokesman Enrico Caruso, "Those are easier. With

agave, you have to be organic for eight to ten years." 4 Copas uses composted agave mulch for nourishment, plants peanuts in the fields for nitrogen, and plows with horses instead of tractors. They ferment the juices with native yeasts and plan to run their steam ovens with methane from the compost. Needless to say, there are no additives in the finished tequilas.

Similarly, the gutsy mezcals by Del Maguey are a labor of love by passionate American entrepreneur, Ron Cooper. Though tequila is essentially a highly regulated mezcal made in the legal tequila production zone in northern Mexico, the Del Maguey spirits are miles away both geographically and spiritually. Produced from family stills in remote villages, the agave hearts are roasted over hot stones in an earth-covered pit, taking up a smoky character that, says Cooper, "is not the fire itself, but the oil essence of the wood that heats the rocks". The cooked agave is ground to a mash by a horse-pulled stone wheel, fermented in wooden vats, and distilled in wood-fired pot stills.

The return of the agave drinks to their artisan roots seem to signal that true connoisseurship has taken hold in the marketplace. And if it has sometimes been true that high-end tequilas found greater favor abroad than at home in



Mexico, those days are over with the debut of the tequila bar at the Presidente Intercontinental in Guadalajara. The bar functions as a kind of base camp for the hotel's tours of tequila agave growing areas. "The new bar is a very special place," notes the Presidente's bar manager, Francisco La Plascencia, "because we think of tequila as something elegant now."

Their prices are elegant, too, with 100 different tequilas ranging up to the \$40-a-glass Cuervo Reserva de la Familia. Such lavish tequilas aren't the only sensation on offer. Says La Plascencia, "The white tequilas have really become popular again; people are interested in getting closer to the tradition of tequila." So, the war for the soul of agave drinks rolls on, though a better idea might be to call a truce, sealed over a sipped and savored copita of each. ★



five to find [Prices are suggested or sample US retail]

1 *Dos Lunas Tequila Grand Reserve* (\$2,500) An early entry in the "Extra Añejo" category (comprising tequilas aged at least three years in oak), the Grand Reserve spends ten years in used sherry casks before being bottled in a Baccarat decanter. You can't drink the bottle, but what's inside is intriguing: not the most tequila-y tequila, the aroma has a caramelized, sea salt lilt reminiscent of a madeira, with a mellow feel and a fine balance of sweetness and acidity to give it lift.

2 *Patrón Tequila, "Gran Patrón Burdeos"* (\$500) The well-known Patrón brand ups the ante by aging selected lots of tequila in oak barrels for a year (it is technically an añejo), then giving it a third distillation and additional aging in used Bordeaux casks. Dark in color but very fresh on the palate, it has the classic tequila tang, leavened with atypical yet pleasing notes of vanilla and yellow apple. The price includes a crystal bottle and stopper, and a black walnut presentation box.

3 *Del Maguey Mezcal "Tobala"* (\$125) Made in very limited quantities from a small, wild species of cactuses that grow in shaded canyons in the mountains of Oaxaca, this wafts a base note of campfire smoke set against complex hints of lime, fermented pear — like Poire William — and a hint of mango. It is lighter-bodied than the tequilas here, but loaded with lingering, haunting flavors.

4 *Copas Tequila, Reposado* (\$66) Given a few months' aging in oak barrels ("reposado" means "rested" in Spanish), this certified organic tequila's mildly gold-tinged color — how DO some of its competitors' reposados get so dark from so little barrel exposure? — is a testimony to its honesty. Perfumed, creamy-textured and understated, almost delicate, it is no disparagement to its subtlety to say that it is a wonderful choice for tequila beginners.

5 *Casa Noble Tequila, Blanco* (\$46) This is what fans of unaged "blanco" (or "silver") tequilas look for: a direct translation of agave character, albeit done here with a sure-handed elegance. Ten-to-14-year-old agaves are slow-cooked in stone ovens, then triple-distilled, yielding this very smooth tequila with its penetrating classic aromas of herbs, salt, burnt kitchen spices, fruitiness and citrus.

