



TOMMY'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT

5929 Geary Blvd (at 23rd)
San Francisco, CA 94121
415-387-4747
www.tommystequila.com

OWNERS

Tommy and Elmy Bermejo

GENERAL MANAGER

Candy Bermejo

BAR MANAGER Julio Bermejo

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES 25

BAR FOCUS

100% Blue Agave Tequila

AVERAGE DRINK PRICE \$6.50

SIGNATURE DRINK Herradura

Reposado Margarita, \$7

BEVERAGE COST 25%–28%

AVERAGE BAR BILL \$25

GROSS ANNUAL REVENUE, RESTAURANT N/A

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BAR WELL

Herradura Silver only

ALL-AGAVE academy

by rebecca chapa

When Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco opened in 1965, few would have foreseen its success and rise to landmark status. At first the restaurant focused on "Hofbrau-style meats" because that is what Owner Tommy Bermejo knew how to make. In 1972, he branched out by adding traditional Yucatecan dishes (Tommy's son, Julio, recalls a distinctive sign that his uncle painted—a roast beef on one side and two enchiladas on the other). Eventually, the Yucatecan dishes took off, the European menu items were eighty-sixed, and Tommy's reputation started to build. A major renovation in the mid-1990s and an emphasis on promoting the restaurant and bar scene have helped Tommy's flourish.

FOUNDATION AND FAME

Despite the restaurant's rocky start and its location in the "fog belt" of San Francisco's Outer

Richmond district, Tommy's has survived and developed a cultlike following. Many flock to Tommy's, drawn by a one-of-a-kind family-oriented bar scene. The Bermejo family (Tommy, Tommy's wife Elmy, Julio, and daughters Candy and Elmy) is integral to the success of the restaurant and the bar, and the mix of old-school perseverance and new-school passion is a key to its longevity.

Tommy and Elmy represent the history and core values of Yucatecan culture, including a strong work ethic (72-year-old Tommy can be found working the floor as a server, while Elmy handles the door most nights) and an unfaltering dedication to their concept; the two are the foundation of the restaurant's solid success.

But the "star" of the show, as wry and personable sister Candy is quick to admit, is Julio Bermejo; his exuberance and showmanship are

Above: Elmy and Tommy Bermejo are approaching their fortieth year as hosts of their ever-popular restaurant in San Francisco's Outer Richmond district.

an irresistible force. Just six months old at opening, he has grown with the restaurant, both literally and figuratively, and has made ever-stronger contributions with the support of his family and staff. His decidedly aggressive push to increase bar business has made Tommy's nine-stool, 300-square-foot bar a mecca for Tequila lovers from as far away as South Africa and Singapore. Julio travels often, but when he is in town, he will always be found behind the bar, and this commitment to Tommy's attracts a legion of fans.

STAFF AND CUSTOMER EDUCATION

The reward for traveling to Tommy's is a teeming backbar of Tequila—more than 250 all-agave Tequilas of the highest quality, including many rare selections. These spirits are served up in a snifter or in a margarita. The beauty of the drink is in the fresh lime and agave nectar expertly mixed with two ounces of the agave spirit in an eight-ounce “water” glass. The “house” margarita, made with Herradura Silver, is \$6; those made with reposados go for \$7 to \$8.50, while añejos start at \$8. Tommy's now produces a fresh mix called Tommy's Nectar of the Gods for home use (415-575-0800; info@tommysmargarita.com).

Tommy's perfect margaritas don't come without effort; three bartenders hand-squeeze 4,000 to 5,000 pounds of Persian limes a month. Despite the volume, the emphasis is on balance, to ensure that the taste of Tequila is not masked. Using meticulous and exacting proportions and tasting every single cocktail (the bar staff tests minute drops of their creations using bar straws) result in consistent drinks, even when the staff changes.

Julio's bar-staff training program is rigorous. For the first two to three weeks of training, new bartenders must concentrate on making the house margarita until it is perfect. They are trained to suggest and explain the different tequilas—perhaps with less flair than Julio but with the same acuity. When working with the largest selection of 100 percent agave spirits outside of Mexico, they need to know the product well.

Tommy's doesn't offer a host of specialty cocktails but instead

focuses on Tequila. This approach allows Julio to concentrate on guest education. As patrons cycle through the bar, Julio uses laminated flash-card props and a light saber to teach about the fermentation and distillation of Tequila. Julio developed the tequila “show” because he saw that few of his guests understood the difference between inferior and premium Tequilas. Education was a way to overcome tequila's under-served reputation as a low-quality spirit.

Eric Rubin, general manager and concept developer of Tres Agaves, Julio Bermejo's new restaurant concept, calls Julio “a true ambassador of Tequila, a tireless promoter of the entire category.” Bermejo's talent lies in his ability to establish an emotional connection with his customers and educate them on each Tequila's origin, distinct character or terroir, and production method. First-time Tommy's patrons soon find themselves sipping Tequila in snifters. Julio offers customers a higher level of knowledge so that they can become experts, thus creating a growing core of Tequila aficionados.

BLUE AGAVE CLUB

One of Tommy's strongest attractions (other than the tequila-based ones) is the “family” atmosphere that Julio creates among the clientele. He immediately welcomes each customer by name and loudly thanks them for coming. Out-of-town

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Tommy Bermejo serves up a Tommy's exclusive: a margarita made with habañero-infused 100-percent agave spirits.



Agave “Professor” Julio Bermejo spends a rare quiet moment in his “classroom.”

guests receive a personalized welcome on the backbar write-on board, and Julio introduces them to other bar patrons with similar interests.

Tommy’s Tequila guru bolsters the sense of community by offering his guests membership in the Blue Agave Club. Patrons can join the ranks of 6,000 Tequila aficionados in the Masters level with a \$10 tuition. They receive a blue punch card that lists tequilas in each category (joven abocado, silver/blanco, reposado, and añejo). After tasting 35 different Tequilas and passing a written exam covering tequila fermentation, distillation, regions, brands, and Blue Agave Club personalities, they graduate ceremonially with an oak-framed diploma and Masters T-shirt while the entire bar hums “Pomp and Circumstance.”

Masters graduates can continue their Tequila education and earn a Ph.D. or become a Ninja Master with more tasting and also earn access to rare Tequilas. The top degree, Demigod, requires a visit to Tequila distilleries. These “disciples of Tequila” are issued their very own business cards affixed with the Tommy’s logo. Other benefits of the club include an invitation to the annual Tequilapalooza event, a day of hard-core Tequila imbibing.

For those not interested in the Blue Agave Club, Tommy’s offers other frequent promotions. Rubin notes, “Julio is a huge believer in adding value but not discounting.” Tommy’s will give away T-shirts, shot glasses, and hats, but prices remain the same. All promotions are brand focused and always cobranded with the Tommy’s logo. To be immortalized at Tommy’s, guests can purchase a \$150 snifter of 1800 Collection or do shots of Habanero Tequila and have their names emblazoned on a board or printed on the Habanero bottle respectively.



TOMMY’S MARGARITA

- 2 ounces 100% agave Tequila
- 2 ounces freshly squeezed Persian lime juice
- 2 ounces agave nectar and organic cane sugar

Combine the Tequila, lime juice, and agave nectar/organic cane sugar in a bar glass filled with ice. Stir thoroughly and pour into an eight-ounce water glass filled with ice. Note: the 1:1 ratio of lime juice to agave nectar is a starting point. Adjust the lime juice, agave nectar, and cane sugar components to taste.

TEQUILA JOURNEY

Julio Bermejo’s vast knowledge of agave spirits and his charismatic personality have importers and restaurateurs clamoring for his services. He leads many trips to Mexico; consults for Las Vegas giant MGM Grand, Café One and Café Iguana in Singapore, and Salud in Chicago; and participates in charity events, always working to promote 100 percent agave Tequila and create a cadre of Tequila connoisseurs.

The challenge at Tommy’s is trying to maintain the restaurant’s special Tequila experience even as Julio’s schedule away from the restaurant increases. The business has become extremely profitable due to the tenacity of Tommy Bermejo and his family and Julio’s tireless efforts, which have fueled a Tequila revolution. The bar maintains a low profit margin (200 to 300 percent markups) but makes up for it in volume and by creating loyal customers, who continually move up the quality ladder. Julio Bermejo muses, “If you want to explore, I can take you on a Tequila journey to anywhere.”

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—julio bermejo