



Añejo Tequila:

Mexico's Superstar Spirit

by rebecca chapa, cwe, dws

Tequila as a category is familiar to most, but the spectacular range of this noble Mexican spirit is often underappreciated. While blanco/silver and reposado Tequilas are consumed in immensely popular margaritas or downed with salt and lime, many fans of the spirit have not experienced the joy of sipping añejo Tequila.

One-of-a-Kind Spirit

Añejo is best understood in the context of the other two categories of Tequila. Blanco or silver Tequilas are clean and fresh with little or no oak aging; they showcase the fresh agave fruit qualities that make them so compatible with lime juice in the margarita. Reposado (rested) Tequilas are aged for at least two months in oak barrels, which rounds off the spirit and adds subtle nuances of oak. Reposado Tequila can offer a stronger flavor to margaritas, serve as a base spirit in other cocktails, and be enjoyed neat.

Añejo Tequilas are a different species. Aged in oak for a minimum of 12 months, these spirits are much more oak-dominated and can range from slightly smoky to downright toasty. The mellowing of the spirit by slow aging in oak promotes a remarkable complexity of flavors and produces a spirit that is ideal for sipping unadulterated. Extended aging melds oak flavor with the clean flavors of the agave, resulting in a beverage that is unique to the world. And because each añejo undergoes singular distilling and aging regimens, each product is as distinctive as each single-malt Scotch.

The origin of añejo Tequila is hazy, possibly because the production process is identical to that of the other styles up until the aging process. Herradura made its first commercial añejo in 1974 after producing the first reposado in the 1960s. Almost accidentally, the producer discovered that extended aging offered an interesting distinction to the spirit. Although Herradura often gets credit for this innovation, aging or transporting Tequila in wood barrels was done out of convenience for many years.

Oak Matters

Once a Tequila is made (see, "Making the Spirit of Mexico," p.67), determining how to age it is the choice of the Tequila master—and there are numerous options. Within the state of Jalisco, the lowland producers tend to use a higher percentage of new oak than the producers in the highlands (Los Altos), who often age in older barrels. Just as with wine, the more times a barrel is used, the less oak flavor and oak tannin it will impart to the spirit. In addition, the type of oak used can offer significant flavor differences. Mexican law allows any age or type of oak to be used. Although the tradition has been to use old bourbon or whiskey barrels, there has been much experimentation with French oak, including used Burgundy barrels.

Añejo Tequila has a further specification: it must not be aged in oak barrels larger than 600 liters in capacity. This regulation ensures that there is a distinctive oak flavor in the spirit and adds a consistency to the category. Even with this rule in place, there is considerable variation in the time añejos spend in oak barrels before release. Centinela uses nothing larger than 180-liter barrels for aging. El Tesoro prefers extended aging; its añejo ages for two to three years in underground cellars. José Cuervo tends to use barrels from Kentucky as well as new French Limousin Cognac barrels. Its *Reserva de la Familia* bottling has an average of seven to ten years of age in new wood, but its *1800 reserve* añejo is aged with a larger proportion of American oak. In an unusual approach, El Charro ages its reposado in bourbon barrels and its añejo in French oak.

Clearly the time a spirit spends aging in oak adds cost to the final product. Not only are there the costs of space, barrels, and inventory, but evaporation losses can be considerable. The Don Julio distillery estimates the evaporation at 8 to 10 percent, despite temperature- and humidity-controlled aging cellars. In cellars without such technology, losses can be greater.

Eastside West Looks South

Bartender Eric Johnson revels in the cornucopia of flavors offered by the six añejo Tequilas that grace the backbar at San Francisco's Eastside West—the prime ingredients for the mixologist's next masterpiece. He goes about creating a new drink by emphasizing the Tequila's "presence" rather than masking its flavors. "You can't get locked into the standards, there are so many flavors available," insists Johnson. "You can have the Crayola box with six colors or the one with 52 and the sharpener in the back; there's no black-and-white with cocktails." He focuses on the spirit as the base of the cocktail and adds elements such as the ripest fruit possible and agave nectar, a natural complementary sweetener. Using only the highest-quality ingredients is essential to Johnson, who comments, "Have a little reverence for what you're serving."

When it comes to appreciation of añejo Tequila, Johnson finds that most US adults he sees are neophytes. But he believes that the vanilla flavor derived from the oak character of añejos is easier to accept for someone new to Tequila. "Vanilla is friendly; it allows people to say, 'I'm about to make the jump,' or at least to be open and receptive," Johnson contends. He finds that these new Tequila drinkers have "an innocence" to their palate and that "the vast majority fall for añejo first."

All half-dozen añejos at Eastside West are fairly priced (their pour cost is generally 20 to 21 percent), with the well Tequila priced at \$8 and añejos all priced between \$8.50 and \$9.50 for a 2-ounce pour. The head bartender explains, "We don't scale our prices as dramatically upward as some bars. . . . We want more people to enjoy a quality drink." Johnson likes to offer his customers a straight-walled rocks glass, which allows the Tequila to open up, rather than a cordial glass, which concentrates the aromas more strongly. The head bartender believes that the wider-mouthed glass is better for Tequila novices because it makes the spirit smell less alcoholic.

For the 30- to 45-year-olds, Johnson takes a different approach. He finds that educating and sampling these customers on various high-quality Tequilas can help remove the unhappy experiences they had in the past with inferior Tequila. And knowing the spirit's flavor profile allows Johnson to use añejo adeptly as he composes his drinks. For example, the bartender avoids overly oaked spirits that would dominate a cocktail. Johnson insists that it is vital to taste each drink as it is made and concludes, "Balance is a very elusive thing."

According to Julio Bermejo of Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco, a typical distillery will produce 70 to 80 percent reposado and 5 to 10 percent each of blanco/silver and añejo. The aging regimen is strictly monitored by the Consejo Regulador del Tequila, which enforces the laws of the Norma Oficial Mexicana, the laws that govern Tequila production. During the aging process, the barrels are sealed by government officials to prevent tampering and ensure the required aging minimums. Bermejo believes that these aging regulations help make añejo Tequila the "most complex and expensive" spirit in the world.

Añejo Alone and Accompanied

The wide diversity of brands and styles of añejo Tequila make selecting a Tequila for a bar program challenging. Tomas Estes, owner of Café Pacifico and three La Perla bars in London, along with

RUMPUS

By Eric Johnson, head bartender, Eastside West, San Francisco

"The Rumpus is part of the informal verbal menu shared among the bar staff, one that changes as fresh produce becomes available. The agave nectar . . . pours like a light honey and dissolves in liquid very well; it [lacks] the refined sugar-candy taste most drinks have. The ginger is naturally spicy and balances out the heat inherent in the Tequila, while the grapes add an uncommon fruit flavor, which blends very well with the spirit. Citrus is essential to balance the natural sweetness of the other ingredients, and though lime will work, I find lemon to be slightly more elegant for this drink and less sharp in flavor, adding a more savory taste."

- 5 red seedless grapes
- 2 ounces Don Julio Añejo
- 1/2 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 ounce agave nectar (preferably) or simple syrup
- 1/2 ounce ginger syrup (or 2 bar spoons of fresh-grated ginger)
- Lemon twist garnish

In a bar glass, muddle the grapes with the Tequila, lemon juice, agave nectar, and ginger syrup. Add ice, shake, and double strain. Serve in an 8-ounce martini glass. Garnish with a lemon twist.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDY BREEN



Making the Spirit of Mexico

The production process of Tequila, an alcoholic beverage with a controlled appellation of origin like Cognac, is carefully regulated. The spirit may be made only in Mexico in one of five approved states: Jalisco, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas. In addition, Tequila can be made only with one of the numerous members of the Agavaceae family, *Agave Tequilana weber*, blue variety, which is a succulent, not a cactus as many believe.

Except for the aging step, blanco/silver, reposado, and añejo Tequilas are all made the same way.

Harvesting Blue agaves are harvested at maturity (8 to 12 years of age generally) by a *jimador*, who cuts off their spiny *pencas* (leaves) with a razor-sharp tool called a *coa*. This striking process uncovers the core of the agave: the *piña*.

Processing Piñas are transported to the distillery where they are processed by cooking in *hornos* (ovens) or autoclaves until the plant's starches are converted to sugars. The *piñas* are then milled to release the sugars and juice, called *aguamiel*.

Fermentation Using indigenous or cultured yeast, the *aguamiel* is fermented, usually in stainless-steel vats. El Tesoro and others use old wooden open-top fermenters.

Distillation Tequila is double distilled, but unlike Scotch or Cognac, any type of still is allowed. Copper or stainless-steel pot stills are widely used, but the majority of bulk producers use continuous column stills. Following the second distillation, the spirit is reduced to bottle proof (usually 40 percent alcohol) by the addition of water. Tequila can be labeled as blanco/silver without any additional aging.

Aging A variety of barrels are used for aging, including used bourbon and Burgundy barrels. Blanco/silver Tequila cannot be aged beyond 60 days. Reposados must be aged a minimum of 60 days and a maximum of one year. Añejos must be aged a minimum of one year and in a barrel not exceeding 600 liters.

Filtering and Bottling An important quality distinction exists between a Tequila that is 100 percent agave and one that is casually called "mixto"—a Tequila that is made with 51 percent agave (the minimum), with the remainder of the fermentable sugars from sources such as cane or molasses. There is a much less distinctive agave character to these spirits, and they lack the purity of 100 percent agave versions. A 100 percent agave Tequila will always be identified as such on the label, and it also must be bottled in Mexico.

Top: Harvested agave *piñas* prior to roasting. Middle: Copper pot stills impart unique characteristics to Mexico's Tequilas, similar to Scotland's single malts. Bottom: Traditional method of charring barrels for Tequila that will be aged in wood. Tequila aged in wood beyond one year is called añejo.



Left: Agave planted in five of Mexico's states (Jalisco, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas) can be used in Tequila production.

Right: A jimador harvests the agave piña after cutting away the plant's swordlike outer leaves.

interests in restaurant bars in Paris and Sydney, explains his selection process: "I look for nuance [and] complexity of flavors—i.e., that there are different flavors in the taste experience. . . . A new Tequila . . . should have some unique quality to its flavor to set it apart from the other Tequilas already behind the bar. When one has a range of 60 or so [Tequilas], this is an important point: to have a taste profile that can be communicated to the customer by the bartender."

Prices at Estes's London venues range from \$6 to \$200 a shot for *1800 Colección*. According to Estes, he is currently the largest consumer of *Colección* in the world, having sold over 600 shots of the prized Tequila. His markup in Europe is about three times. Estes fuels these sales with staff training to provide an understanding and appreciation of the product. He also offers a complimentary Tequila booklet to his guests and runs a Tequila-of-the-month promotion, offering the selected product at the same price or slightly higher than the house brand.

Being a relative newcomer to the backbar, añejo Tequila is still in the process of garnering the respect it deserves. Even though connoisseurs appreciate the flavors and nuances of añejo, purists sometimes argue that blanco/silver offers the purest expression of agave character—similar to wine geeks who disparage overly oakey Chardonnay. Apart from the incorrigibles, aficionados of blanco/silver Tequila cannot deny the merits of a superpremium añejo Tequila that shows true agave character in balance with the oak.

While many bartenders believe añejo Tequilas should be served unadorned, others find that they

offer a unique blending component for cocktails. "Stop thinking about Tequila . . . as something to be feared," insists Barman Eric Johnson of Eastside West in San Francisco. He finds it ironic that some bartenders would make all kinds of drinks with aged whiskey but not añejo: "There's no reason you can't do that with an aged Tequila." Andres Masso, London's *Worldwidecocktailclub.com* founder and co-author of *Margarita Rocks*, adds, "Bartenders tend to be scared to use Tequila, but we find it is probably the most versatile and interesting spirit to make drinks with."

Dressed to Thrill

The marketing of añejo is not an all-grassroots effort via bartenders. One of the most prominent methods is packaging. Like high-end vodkas, superpremium-priced añejo Tequilas are dressed up. Special packaging accessories—hand-painted boxes, humidors, stands, racks, and the like—are often available to on-premises accounts. Gone are the days of a small sombrero attached to the bottle; now dramatic design reigns—from the phallic shape of AsomBroso to the sleek feminine form of Casa San Matias. Labels have seen upgrades as well; for example, El Charro's green label featuring a serape has been replaced with a silk-screened, frosted bottle. These bottle design improvements make these brands more appealing to both consumers and bartenders, differentiating these products from the familiar swigging Tequilas.

Mexican companies are also working closely with affiliates in the US to ensure that their products are well received. Producers like Partida are partnering with distributors to ensure that education reaches the consumer directly. To launch its new brand, Partida brought artifacts and photos to a gallery in New York City to make a connection between the product and its origins. "It's not just about the product but about the lifestyle," comments Sofia Partida, president of Tequila Brands. "We want to give education and background to sell the product." She feels that Mexico is proud of Tequila but that message has not been conveyed clearly until now: "[Mexican producers] don't really pursue traditions or heritage of the brand." Partida's approach is to "uplift the entire culture of Tequila."

The high quality of añejo Tequila, supported by dedicated producers and barmen as well as better packaging and marketing, has the spirit growing at a steady pace. Añejo is poised to share the backbar as proudly as Scotch or bourbon and to shed its legacy as an inferior libation. Restaurant bars that celebrate this sophisticated form of Mexico's spirit by pouring añejo straight and featuring it in cocktails will gain the good will of their clientele.