

## Changes Happening with Tequila

I was invited to Guadalajara, Mexico (in tequila country) to attend a planning session for a tequila week activity in London. My contact, Dr. Javier Martinez, a tequilero (tequila producer) has his Doctorate degree from Oxford University. Surprising? Yes, and I found more surprises to come. Javier told me that the CRT (tequila regulatory council) wanted to pay my expenses. However, due to the challenge of getting all of the Council's approval quickly to authorize the payment, he asked if I could be paid in tequila. Local currency, I thought, and wondered if I had to drink it all ("spend" it all) while still in Mexico. I found out I didn't have to, but ended up drinking more than I'd expected anyway, a professional liability.

On my way to the two-day meeting, before I'd even arrived in Guadalajara, I learned that the people I were to meet there were in Mexico City! I learned early on, or rather remembered, to keep flexible and "go with the flow." In Mexico, time is fluid and an appointment at 10:30 may actually start an hour later with no problem to anyone. One man with whom I had an appointment, cancelled just because it was raining too hard. No problema.

The meeting scheduled for Thursday actually came off on Friday and the objectives were addressed. We adjourned at 2:00 pm for lunch and at 7:00 pm we were still at the restaurant, drinking the local currency. The men I met were full of pride and determination. Pride to keep "Mexicanidad" (Mexicanism) in their product and determination to use their views of what the market was demanding to adapt their tequilas. I refound the world of Mexico and tequila, which are one. Tequila drunk straight is an acceptance of tequila itself, as a drink, which is also an acceptance of Mexican culture.

The one thing that is said to be certain in life is change. The world changes surely and one can either be dragged along, kicking and screaming, or be at the furthest cutting edge of making the change. The Mexicans I spoke to recently are of the latter category. They are tequileros. Their position on change, changing tequila to suit the world (global) market (tastes) was somewhat unexpected for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Mexico, the country from which they come, is not one of those especially known for innovation and forward thinking. It is also a Latin country, known for following emotions rather than rationale. Furthermore, Mexico is a proud country known for its traditions, all noble attributes, but not those usually associated with change.

The tequileros I spoke to on their home turf, Guadalajara (one hour flight north of Mexico City) all spoke of their concerns, attentiveness and focus on the consumer (the market). I could have mistaken their point of view collectively as that of a group of Aussie winemakers (known for making wines that suit the tastes of the wine-drinking public).

They spoke of an acute awareness of what the world market is buying, broken down into gender, age group and socioeconomic levels. They have made the future trends and directions of the market a priority. They are developing, innovating, experimenting, looking, searching for ways to satisfy the consumer. (One company has spent \$5 million U.S. towards this end). All this with keeping to higher and higher quality and consistency standards, keeping the almost holy "traditonal" ways firmly in mind.

Sounds like a giant challenge. Ask any other company in the current spirits market and I believe you'll find it is just that. The tequileros have some advantages. Their product is unique. It takes eight or so years for the basic raw material, the blue agave, to mature. It is a natural product coming from centuries of tradition. Its taste is like no other and gives it a *versatility* in mixing with a number of ingredients. Fruit juices, non-alcoholic soda drinks, and the whole range of cocktail elements are all good mixers. Most tequila is and has been used in this category.

Recently, in the past 15 years, a new trend has gone toward sipping and savouring tequila, as one would do a fine Cognac or Single-Malt Whiskey. This has been important to the tequileros as Mexicans. It has given tequila a new respect and therefore given Mexico itself a new status, as tequila and Mexico are synonymous. It is also important because this new way of drinking tequila has stimulated new markets for the product.

The more that quality is valued in these sipping tequilas, the more attention the makers are giving to what elements produce this quality. The tequileros are studying all the steps and details throughout the process, from growing agave to cooking, fermenting, distilling and ageing. This is paying off, as more and more sales are being made in this category. The wide range of types of tequila from young and strong to refined and aged suits a broad spectrum of occasions from wild parties to more serious contemplative moments such as after a fine meal.

As tequila's popularity is relatively recent, especially in the sipping/savouring class, the market remains underdeveloped. This is true domestically within Mexico, as well as in Europe (including Eastern) and Asia, both markets which are now being targeted. The U.S. market, the largest, is the most mature and has even shown some decline in sales in recent years. This may be a result of rising tequila prices due to the rise in raw material costs (i.e., agave) and higher taxes in Mexico on tequila.

All the producers I spoke with were keen to promote their own well-being through their own brands, yet beyond that they showed a strong solidarity. Within this, each was focusing on working together within the structure of the CRT to keep norms and standards enforced in an effort to keep quality and image high around the world. This is heartening to see both for the good of tequila and to see that "competitors" can become partners.

Finally, tequila would seem to have a large advantage based on its image. Tequila is not only a drink, it is an image, making it much more. Just what is that image? To each person it is somewhat different, but taken as a generality, a distinct profile emerges. Tequila is a drink associated with merriment, fun, adventure, and even a slight side of danger is attached for some. It is a drink that can be linked to non-conformity, wildness and sex. All alcoholic beverages have some association to sexuality, ever since Greek times. But tequila would seem to have it more than the others. Positive, if handled responsibly. Across my many interviews and readings, I consistently found the reminder that drinking alcohol (tequila) has many, many positive attributes if used responsibly. There are many reasons not to drink to excess. Concerning sex and alcohol, look what Shakespeare says: "...provokes desire but it takes away the performance" (Macbeth, act II, scene 3, verse 34).

What is the flip side of tequila, its disadvantages? It has been mentioned that the U.S. market is "over" developed, making competition fierce. The agave shortage and

Mexican taxes have raised tequila shelf prices so that it is harder to compete with other spirits, such as rum, which is less expensive.

The reputation of tequila in the past has been low, due to poor product quality (now being rectified by norms and standards). Today the same is happening with “fake” tequilas. There are producers and end users (bars) who pass off other alcohols as tequila, which is damaging to tequila’s name. The CRT, Mexican government and governments around the world are working together to enforce agreements on *appellation controlee*, (name control), not only for tequila, but for other protected names as well, such as Cognac, Port and Scotch Whiskey.

What about the taste of tequila? Is it an advantage or a disadvantage? It depends on the taste of the consumer and the tequila being tasted. For example, there are young robust tequilas that differ greatly in taste from fine, aged tequilas that strongly resemble status Cognacs. Of the younger tequilas, it is true to say that one needs to “acquire” a taste for it. The flavour is unique and distinctive, which puts it in a class of its own, advantage or disadvantage not being an issue.

What are the changes that are now coming our way? This is uncertain, out of our control. The one thing that we can control is our attitude toward the change. Do we go along grudgingly or move with, and even in front of the change, smiling? How we go forward creates an important difference, impact. The Mexican tequileros are showing us a good example. They are combining old-fashioned traditional ways with modern innovations to create a quality product which will stand out in global markets.