

This was my account of a trip with a journalist from the Guardian newspaper who wrote a two page article for G2 the Guardian supplement.

Dr. Javier Martinez (Ph.D., Oxford University), a Mexican tequilero, told me that after our night at Charro Tequila, he saw 10 empty liter bottles of anejo tequila. (There were only 11 of us drinking). Charro's facilities are a combination of a beautiful colonial hacienda with gardens and a modern tequila making plant. Their reputation for fine tequila is growing both in Mexico and the U.S.

All the drinkers were men except for one woman, a journalist, sent from London to do research in the local topic...tequila. Javier asked me if I thought the night's experience, of drinking *that* much tequila, didn't present too much of a stereotypical image. I told him I hadn't thought of it like that, but on further reflection, through the remaining tequila "haze," I realized that perhaps he had a point.

The stories of "Tequila Excess" are common and numerous. The journalist's first and only experience prior to this trip had been one of those "drinking-too-much-tequila – after-being-already-too-drunk." No wonder it was her only time. In Mexico City a Tequila Cuervo executive in charge of "on-trade" sales of tequila admitted that he had had to get over his earlier experiences with tequila in order to appreciate it. When he started his job with Cuervo, eight years ago, he couldn't even *smell* tequila because of his memory of his last encounter with it. He overcame this by drinking only good quality tequila.

Two current U.S. magazine articles about tequila tell the same story. So is this what tequila is really about? Well, yes, it is, because these are real stories. The important thing is that it is not tequila's *only* story.

While in the homeland of tequila, both in Mexico City and Jalisco, I found out some illuminating facts on the national beverage. More than 15 years ago in Mexico, tequila was a lower class drink. This has changed with the advent of the popularity of 100% agave and reposado and anejo tequilas. As the quality of tequila being produced and consumed increases, Mexican pride increases along with it. Tequila is now drunk at middle and upper class events, parties and celebrations.

At Herradura Tequila, the plant manager, Miguel Cedeno, told me that Herradura feels that it doesn't sell only tequila. It sells moments of pleasure, fun, celebration and partying. This instead of just getting drunk. When asked what his experience with people's drinking of tequila has been he said that outside of Mexico, because of low-quality and even fake tequilas, it has been negative.

Miguel, a scientist, told me that they were working diligently on higher and higher levels of quality for their tequila. It is being discovered scientifically which factors in the spirit result in undesirable after-effects (hangovers to you and I). For instance, one unpleasant effect happens when the agave is overcooked. When found, the producers eliminate these factors. Herradura wants the customer to have a consistent, pure, high quality product. Herradura has a long-held reputation for this. All tequileros I spoke to have this same point of view: of how to create better products consistently. They are succeeding and are being rewarded by a new, more modern image of tequila in Mexico. 90% of domestic sales are of reposado (much of it 100% agave). These consumers are mainly women and younger drinkers.

Herradura regularly does tasting panels at the factory and at the offices in Guadalajara. The tastings are done blind. There are 20 years of samples used and 25 different components are evaluated. How can they tell the difference? Because there actually is a difference and these are becoming more and more apparent and appreciated by discriminating drinkers.

Cuervo Tequila, the world's largest and best-known brand, also does serious, structured, in-depth blind tastings in their quest to continually improve their tequilas. Cuervo has achieved a fine balance between time-honored tradition (they are the first on record to have made tequila) and forward-looking innovation.

While visiting the C.R.T., I learned some new things. The C.R.T. is the regulatory body set up to control standards of tequila production from the raw material (agave azul) all the way through the production process to final delivery to world-wide markets. Through their efforts higher and higher quality standards are being achieved.

I was told that currently there are 104 tequila producers putting out about 700 different brands on the market. In the last five years they have found 120 cases of false tequilas in Spain, France, Greece, Belgium and the U.S.

There are 180 different varieties of agave in Mexico. 158,447,598 blue agave plants are growing in the demarcated region. How they know so exactly is a mystery. 92% of these plants are in the state of Jalisco where the town of Tequila is. About 10,000 farmers grow the blue agave. Many of the tequila houses grow their own.

Estimated “baby” blue agave plants planted in 2000 were 30M; in 2001, 35M; in 2002, 37M; and 2003, 39M. These plantings are projected to even out at 39M as 2003 begins to realize the balance of agave growth to demand. There has been a shortage of raw material (blue agave) which has affected the worldwide market which seems to be finding a new equilibrium of supply to demand. Domestic and U.S. sales have been down as a result of the shortage and some companies lost as much as 40-80% of their prior sales levels.

The good news is that with more products on the market, two good things should happen. The price should go down and new innovative types of tequila will likely show up to compete for the consumer’s attention. The tequila producers themselves told me that the agave shortage is history for them.

Miguel Cedeno told me that people are afraid to consume drinks that they are unfamiliar with. He said that Helmut Kohl, the former premier of Germany, came to Herradura for a visit and said he didn’t want to drink tequila. The owner of Herradura, Guillermo Romo, offered him a taste. Kohl took the taste and the two stayed up into the night enjoying the continuing moments of pleasure.

In a Mexico City restaurant, the London-based journalist re-told the horror story of her “never again” first tequila encounter. At the same time, she realized how much she was enjoying her snifter of Grand Centenario reposado. Her opinion of tequila had already changed.

Glossary

Anejo: Tequila aged more than 12 months in small oak barrels.

Jalisco: State in West Central Mexico which is the center of tequila production.

100% Agave: Tequila made only from sugars from the blue agave plant.

Tequileros: Tequila producers.

C.R.T.: Consejo Regulador del Tequila, the council that controls standards and norms for all levels of tequila production.

Tequila: The town in Jalisco which is the center of tequila activity.

Reposado: Tequila which has been aged more than two months.