

ON THE TEQUILA TRAIL IN NYC

Words: Tomas Estes

I'm cruising easily down this avenue in the shadows of trees under the street lamps. The air is soft and mellow, even fluid - as am I. I half expect to pass young Bob Dylan, lurking, smoking along the sidewalk. Next moment it seems Jack Kerouac might come along, slouching in his Zen funkiness. My timeframe-perception switches between 60s hippy revolution to 50s Beat non-conformity. What the hell's happening to me? Does anyone else feel this in the Lower East Side of NYC when they haven't been here for more than 20 years?

I've come to town to check out the tequila scene and see what kind of fun can be stirred up. How many others have presented themselves to this magic city and for how many different reasons? Naren Young - young Aussie, all round cool dude and bar maven and Kelley Slagle - younger still and up-and-coming bartender and artist have helped me by preparing a rather impromptu tequila happening at Naren's then place of work, Bobo's.

Here in NY not only do I have my decades shuffled around in my reality but my geographical point of reference is playing 'mix-up', 'stir-up' and 'shake-up' with me. Passing various N.Y. corners in a cab I sense Guadalajara, Paris and London at each turn. At Bobo with its 'bel etage', half a floor up from sidewalk level and its 'souterrain' - half down from the sidewalk - I could easily mistake being in Amsterdam, and no, I wasn't smoking anything.

The day I arrived, Kelley met me and took me to what I was to later make out as the "Cradle of Contemporary Bar Civilization in NYC". This being Audrey Saunders' Pegu Club. Having heard numerous stories of who had trained, worked and been inspired in and around her place - her 'home' - I likened Audrey's seminal bar to my own in Amsterdam. Steve Olsen who joined us at the tequila happening at Bobo stated that according to his perception, my Cafe Pacifico in Amsterdam was the first bar of its kind devoted to tequila. We started in 1976. Since that time so much energy and ideas flowed from that place outward into the culture mix that we put a sign by the front door calling it, "Madre Pacifico".

Behind the bar at Pegu I noticed some of Audrey's awards and accolades placed among the carefully chosen bottles, glasses and mirrors. I love back bars with drama, with fantasy where a comfortable drinker can lose oneself in sweet



A youthful Tomas Estes stands proudly with his Triumph

reverie. As both the day outside and the lights inside dim, I realize the class of the place. It is discreet; the service, the style, the ambience.

Kenta, the bar manager at Pegu is looking after us. He is attentive and friendly, present without being invasive. He is a pro. I check out the tequila selection, Sauza Blanco, Partida, Herradura, Hornitos, Don Julio, Tesoro and Patron, the ultra-premium market heavy-weight. I'm told that for the first two years they didn't carry it and then gave in to customer demand. It's hard to resist giving the customer what they want.

I ask Kenta for a 'Mexican 55' - my latest amusement. To his immediate question I answer, "It's a French 75 with tequila instead of gin and do anything else creative with it that you fancy."

Kenta's drink:

Glass: Champagne flute

1 ½ shots Tesoro reposado [damn good start]

½ shot Freshly squeezed lemon juice

½ shot Sugar syrup

¼ shot Liqueur 43

Top up with Perrier Jouet Gran Brut

The reason that I'm so enamoured with the Mexican 55 is because I find tequila's flavour profiles compliment and accentuate those of champagne. Also the classy image of champagne elevates the image of tequila by a few bubbly notches. There is, and has been for some time, the fashion to mix tequila with lime juice. I myself, in most cases prefer to use lemon juice. In Amsterdam when I started my first bar in 1976, limes were bloody hard to find and pay for since they were very expensive so I started off using lemon juice for my tequila drinks, notably the margarita. As a result, my tequila mixing and drinking taste is pretty well fixed to lemon rather than lime. I find the flavour elements of the lemon and tequila match up better. Surprisingly lemons have overtaken limes in price for the last few years, why - I have no idea. The Meyer lemon is my current favourite as it has a distinctive flavour all of its own.

Next Kelley takes me to a hot dog joint to get our next drink. We walk since everything seems close. We enter this brightly lit, old-fashioned fast food eatery

and go directly to the telephone booth. Remember how many of those used to be around before the advent of the cell phone? We close the phone booth door and pick up the phone. On the other end of the line is a female voice - what's next, something kinky? She asks if I want to enter to which I reply, "Yes" in my best 'please let me in' voice. The wall opposite the phone booth door swings open revealing a dark, hidden, seemingly forbidden pleasure room inside. I enter in awe. This is "Contemporary Speakeasy" - for me a world filled with mystery and intrigue.

James Meehan is at the bar. He and his business partner, Brian Sebairo set up P.D.T. (Please Don't Tell) - the perfect name for this neo-speakeasy hideaway. Brian had the idea of the hot dog eatery 'cover-up' and the genius phone booth passage. Jim says they're like yin and yang. Brian is the 'creative nut' (Jim's terms) and Jim is the 'straight guy' - also his words. They compliment each other. Brian is a risk taker. He runs the administration and the physical plant. Jim does the operational part, bar, service and ambience. Jim is a natural at PR too. David Slape behind the bar made me a Mexican 55. The last one at Pegu was a bit sweet for my taste and this one too. We talk about the sweetness factor of cocktails. Jim tells me that the 'mix' used to be ¾ sour, 1 sweet and 1 ½ parts spirit in a cocktail. This has changed presently to ¾ sour, ¾ sweet and 2 spirit. This I am told is the general trend - to make cocktails that are stronger and drier. My general rule is to mix a margarita with 1 sour, 1 sweet and 2 spirit. This has grown around me during my 30 plus years mixing and drinking in Europe.

David's take on the Mexican 55:

Glass: Champagne flute

1 ½ shots Partida blanco

¾ shot Freshly squeezed lemon juice

½ shot Agave syrup

2 dashes Fees Brothers grapefruit bitters

Top up with Moet Chandon champagne

Agave syrup can be very, very sweet. I'm going to state something controversial and wake some of you up that may have been put to sleep by any of the foregoing.

While I respect agave syrup for its health benefits and flavour, I do not think it mixes that well with tequila. Many feel that because the agave syrup and tequila come from the same raw material that they naturally compliment each other. I do not find this to be the case with my taste. I find that the agave syrup can easily overpower the delicate nuances of a fine tequila. To each his own.

It is snug and dark and the low ceiling holds the ambience intimate and cozy. We speak with another guest at the bar who knows David Kaplan of Death & Co. David recommended that this guy come to P.D.T. The N.Y. bar scene seems to me to be a close-knit circle of kindred spirits. I am told that the P.D.T. and Death & Co founders are from Pegu Club, Madre Pegu, which reinforces my impression of one big NYC bar family.

I try a spirit called Agave Azul produced in Alameda, California made from 100% blue agave. According to Mexican law this is not allowed to be called 'tequila' since it is not produced within the strictly demarcated tequila region in Mexico. This spirit is different to most tequila flavour profiles I have experienced. It has almost no nose but the palate is complex and concentrated, smoky like a mezcal with mint and menthol elements.

Next drink I have is offered to me and I try it 'blind' as I'm not told what is in it and I'm guessing. I say that it is a mezcal drink understanding that the bar knows my preference for Mexican agave spirits. I am fooled, the smoky flavour that I sense which is so characteristic of mezcal comes instead from 2 oz of the house-made Benton's bacon bourbon. Cooked bacon fat is actually put into the bourbon to give it a smoky flavour. After enough 'steeping' time the fat is skimmed off the top. Added to the bourbon is ¼ oz maple syrup (grade B since it's flavour profile mixes best), 2 dashes Angostura bitters. This is stirred and strained and an orange twist is added. Now catch this, I hope to again awaken the slumbering, the ice cube is crystal clear, is 2 inches cubed and costs 69 cents apiece. That is dedication to getting a unique product. Don Lee of P.D.T. is the creator of this innovative drink.

Back to tequila we go with an "El Fuente", blanco tequila, fresh grapefruit and lime juices, St-Germain, mezcal and

bianco sweet vermouth. The selection of tequila is Siembra Azul, Don Julio, Tesoro, Traditional, Partida, Gran Centenario and Reserva de la Familia. Siembra Azul is the house pour at P.D.T. It has a nose of anise and spearmint and that hard to describe aroma of agave. The nose develops as it sits. It goes to powered sugar and then to overripe tropical fruits. The yeast leads, this one I'm told coming from the Champagne region in France. Ah, the link of tequila to Champagne again.

David Suro the owner of Siembra Azul uses French oak for ageing. The palate is creamy, sweet and smooth and turns into citrus (orange and orange blossom) and violets. The Siembra Azul reposado has a nose of red candied fruits, yeast, honey and is strongly wood led. As we sit at the bar, Jim asks me what I'm getting in three words only from the nose and palate of the Siembra Azul. I tell him and he puts together a cocktail of tequila, pineapple juice, lime, simple syrup, shiso and absinthe. The drink reflects the three words I'd given to Jim from my impressions. Jim gets this three word creative process from a Gary Regan workshop he'd attended in the N.Y. countryside. Jim says, "We are all imitating each other" in the cocktail community. I completely agree and realize this is the creative process for all fields. The neo cocktail scene has been going four years. Pegu was fundamental in the renaissance and Audrey ran it like a family.

Next Kelley and I stroll over to Mayahuel, a new Mexican restaurant and bar. I keep an eye out in the shadows for Bob or Jack along the way. At the entrance we are greeted by the doorman, who Kelley convinces that we belong inside. Before we even order our first drinks a small glass of water is served. I saw water with my drinks in all the bars I visited. I realized that this practice was significant in that it is socially responsible to the possible detriment of alcohol sales since customers may drink the water instead of a second or third alcoholic drink.

I meet Phil Ward the owner of Mayahuel who is engaging with his intense see-all, know-all eyes. He focuses on Kelley and I despite the fact that he's



got a bar/restaurant that is a volcano in its early stages of big time eruption. Phil likes to mix tequila and mezcal, he says its like tequila on steroids. He also likes to mix spicy and savoury. Phil tells me he has been offered a quadruple distilled tequila. Tequila distilled enough would become agave vodka. What an incredible variety of taste experiences that the current tequila market now affords.

As soon as I described the Mexican 55, Phil was off towards the bar with that ironic, mirthful look he can get on his face. I had said, "Do as you wish with it". He said back at me over his departing shoulder, "I already have it" and ran off.



His 'Raspberry Charade' is:

Glass: Wine goblet

1 ½ shots blanco tequila infused with Raspberry Nectar Tea (from Tea Forte)

¾ shot Freshly squeezed lemon juice

¾ shot Sugar syrup

Top up with Cava (sparkling Spanish wine)

The result is tart and yummy like a dessert. We agree that the sparkling wine amplifies the flavours the tequila.

Next Kelley and I are joined by a band of merry makers from this close feeling bar community. We go to ELO, which is a top class place with an Old-European feel. Their tequila selection was Gran Centenario, Tesoro, Patron, 1800, Partida, Herradura, Chinaco, Don Julio, Jose Cuervo Reserva de la Familia, Herradura Seleccion Suprema and one 'single village' mezcal. Patron was on the drinks list but was placed away from the other bottles of tequila on the back bar. Bar owners and bartenders have mixed feelings about Patron. It is necessary to stock for those millions of customers who ask for it and yet there is a resistance to it also due perhaps to its mass appeal. ELO was in the process of doubling its tequila selection.



ELO's version of the Mexican 55:

Glass: Champagne flute

Garnish: 3 brandy soaked cherries

2 shots Don Julio anejo

¼ shot freshly squeezed lemon

¼ shot Sugar syrup

Top up with Dry Prosecco

The brandied cherries added rich depth to the taste without overpowering the other ingredients and upsetting the balance.

At ELO we order an assortment of dishes to give more strength to our drinking. I am surprised at the high quality food that this bar serves and how well cocktails and fine food go together. The merry crowd next moves on to Death & Co. Along the way I am trailing behind the rest, lost in my New York fantasies, reveries. By this time it is late night and across the street I eye a sort of apparition glowing under the streetlight. It is a curbed, stripped-down 1964 Triumph motorcycle. This is the sort of bike Marlon Brando, James Dean, Warren Beatty, Steve McQueen and yes, Bob Dylan have all ridden. My heart races, as I haven't seen one of these wild rebellious symbols for decades. This expands New York's appeal 1000 times for me. I too have ridden such a bike and remain longing to have another.

Outside the door of Death & Co are 3 girls that look to be about 15 years old. They are lolling on the sidewalk, backs against the facade and I'm reminded again of the hippy days, the 60s when cities like San Francisco and New York were magnets to searchers and seekers as well as avoiders and drop outs. I hope to see David Kaplan, one of the owners and a friend. He's not there and we get well taken care of. We sink down into a plush booth and I ask for my Mexican 55. What I get - it is explained to me - is a play on a "Dark and Stormy" which is:

Glass: Champagne flute

1 ½ oz Siete Leguas reposado tequila

¼ oz Freshly squeezed lime juice

½ ginger syrup

Top up with Cremant d'Alsace (sparkling wine)

Naren shows up at Death & Co later than the rest of us, having sworn earlier that he was going home. He talks about the spirituality of tequila and the land from which it comes. He chronicles his time in Tequila Country and what it's done to him. I was lost in both places with him; in his stories of Tequila Country and of NYC - both simultaneously, geography and chronologically all mixed, stirred and well shaken. Timeless.