

This is the text for the Wine and Spirits Educational Trust course on tequila leading to a diploma in spirits

TEQUILA 1871 Words

WHAT IS TEQUILA?

Tequila is a spirit unique to Mexico. It is made from the blue agave, a member of the lily family and not a cactus. It can be produced only in a few, strictly demarcated areas of Mexico. It is a diverse spirit, bottled young and aged, pure and mixed, good and bad, inexpensive and very dear.

The following are official Mexican governmental rules that control spirits defined as tequila:

To be called tequila

- the spirit must be distilled primarily from the fermented juice of the blue agave, also known as Agave Tequilana Weber. When containing sugars taken 100% from the blue agave, the label will make due reference. But the law allows the percentage of sugars from the juice of this agave to drop to 51% with remaining sugars coming from any other product, usually sugarcane, which is abundant in Mexico. This tequila is called mixto.
- It must be distilled at least twice for purity.
- It must be produced only in the demarcated regions in Mexico, principally in the State of Jalisco, where the town of Tequila can be found. Ninety-five per cent of all tequila is made in Jalisco. The other areas include villages in the states of Guanajuato, Michoacan, Nayarit and Tamaulipas.

HISTORY OF TEQUILA

The historical roots of tequila go back to pre-Columbian Mexican-Indian culture. When Cortez and his Spanish explorers arrived they found the Indians drinking a ceremonial beverage called pulque. This is a low alcoholic content drink of 3-5% made from fermented (spoiled) sap of the agave. Pulque continues to be consumed but slowly it's being replaced by beer.

The Spaniards, looking for stronger alcohol, applied their distilling knowledge to the agave plant and came up with mezcal wine (the agave plant is also known as the mezcal plant). The first mention of mezcal wine was made around 1550.

By the 1700's it had become known that the best mezcal wine or distilled agave wine was made in the region now situated around the village of Tequila, just north of Guadalajara. In 1795 the first commercial license to produce agave wine was granted to Jose Maria Guadalupe de Cuervo in this same town and, by around 1850, the name tequila was being widely used to describe mezcal from this area.

Until the early 1900's tequila production and consumption stayed small but by this time the blue agave was becoming more widely recognized as making superior tequila.

In the 1930's mixto tequila (tequila made up of blue agave and other sugars) began in order to ease the problems of supply and demand and to appeal more to the palate of Americans. The agave plant takes around 8 years to mature into a state suitable for producing tequila and so it is difficult to adjust the planting of new agave to changing market demand. For this reason mixto tequila has for long been the most common form of tequila in the major export markets such as the USA, which remains tequila's most important market.

During the first half of the 20th century, tequila was a drink for non-conforming adventurers. In the later 1950's, a cocktail named Margarita began to gain popularity in the Los Angeles area, expanding awareness and demand, as it continues to do. Tequila started to go "main stream" and by the 1980's designer/boutique tequilas were beginning to catch the public's attention. Tequilas, specially aged and packaged had existed before but these newcomers were marketed as 100% blue agave tequilas and usually produced in limited

quantities. The image became one of quality and exclusivity and the trend of tequilas being sipped and savoured has continued through to today.

HOW TEQUILA IS MADE

The process starts with the hijuelo, the offshoot/offspring produced by and separated from the mother plant. These are replanted in rows rather similar to vineyards but farther apart as the plants grow quite large. They are left mostly unattended for 7-12 years until the plant has matured. Some pruning is done to encourage growth to the center/core and to make them less dangerous (the ends of the sword like leaves have strong, sharp spikes on them).

At an average age of 8-9 years the plant will be mature enough to harvest, i.e. it will have high enough starch content to convert into the sugars needed to create alcohol. The mature plant creates a better quality, less bitter tasting beverage. Skilled workers harvest the plants by hand. First the dangerous leaves must be taken off close to the core and then the whole bulb is cut from its shallow roots. This core, weighing between 45 and 110 pounds, resembles a large pineapple and is called a piña in Mexico. These piñas are transported to the distillery where they are chopped up and cooked to convert the starches to sugars. How they are cooked, slowly in traditional fashion or faster in pressure cookers, will affect the quality. After cooling down, the juice is squeezed out and collected for fermentation. Yeast is added for the fermentation, which can take from 2 to 12 days if left to complete naturally.

Distillation follows with the heads and tails being discarded after the first distillation, to produce a higher quality spirit. After the second distillation, distilled water is added to bring the tequila to its desired proof, usually between 38 and 40%. After the tequila and water have "married", the tequila can be bottled or put away to age. Technological advancements have been introduced to the above process over the years to speed it up but, sometimes, this has been to the detriment of the final product.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE END PRODUCT

As stated earlier, all tequilas are not the same. The following factors contribute to the variations between one tequila and another.

- 'Terroir'-where the agave is grown, i.e. soil and climate.
- The agave plant needs to be mature enough to create ample sugar/starch content.
- Cooking of the heart (piña) - what kind of oven, duration of cooking and of cooling.
- Water to rinse the cooked, crushed agave and to dilute the finished spirit for bottling.
- Yeast used to begin fermentation of the agave juice, which can range from natural to artificial.
- Distillation process, the size and type of apparatus used and duration of distillation.
- Aging-how long and in what kind of containers. Various types of oak, French and American, new and used barrels and heat-treated wood will all give a different taste to tequila.
- 100% or mixto.

TYPES OF TEQUILAS

The following are names/terms used to classify different types of tequila:

Plata - means silver in Spanish

Joven - means young in Spanish

Blanco - means white in Spanish

Silver, white, young and their Spanish equivalents refer to tequila without any aging. The words describe the tequila's color or lack of it and its age. All of the terms above refer to the same type of tequila. Though there are white tequilas with as much as 30 days aging on them but they are definitely the exception.

Gold – means a young tequila with caramel added. This alters the colour and flavour.

Joven abocado – is the term used for gold tequila in Mexico. Some brands call their reposado tequila, gold. These inconsistencies are typical of Mexico.

Reposado – means rested tequila, aged in wood for between 2-12 months. Again there are exceptions regarding name and duration of aging.

Añejo – means aged for more than 12 months in oak barrels no larger than 600 liters. Tequila does not improve with aging above 5 or 6 years, so most aged tequilas will not be older than that.

Mixto – means the tequila is a combination of fermented agave sugars -must be minimum of 51%, and other sugars, usually from sugar cane.

Mezcal – means any spirit made from the agave plant. Tequila is a special kind of mezcal as Cognac is a special kind of brandy. Mezcal differs from tequila in the following ways:

- Different agave varieties used
- Different geography for growth and production
- Mezcal must be distilled only once
- Mezcal is made more traditionally than tequila. The piñas are cooked in earthen ovens that impart a smoky flavour to the drink
- Mezcal sometimes, but not always, has a worm (larvae) in the bottle

TEQUILA MYTHS

- Tequila does not have a worm in it. Mezcal sometimes does.
- Tequila is not made from a cactus. The agave plant is a member of the lily family and not of the cactus family.
- Tequila is not hallucinogenic although it is too often used by inebriated drinkers to get even more inebriated.

WAYS IN WHICH TEQUILA IS CONSUMED

Tequilas differ one to the other as do the ways in which they are drunk. The following are 3 general categories of tequila consumption:

- As a shot. Traditionally this was done with the ritual of a lick of salt, a shot of tequila and a bite of lime or lemon. In its extreme, this is done in a form called "slammers", mixing the tequila with a carbonated beverage, banging the shot glass on a hard surface and forcing the drink down in the fastest possible time. Young and/or inexpensive tequila is used for this way of drinking.

- As a cocktail. This has been the way and continues to be the way that tequila has gained most of its global popularity. This is usually made with young mixto tequila but is more and more commonly made with reposado and añejo, 100% agave tequilas.

- Sipped and savoured. This is the way most 100% reposado and añejo tequilas are enjoyed, often from a brandy snifter to enhance the experience.

THE FUTURE OF TEQUILA

Marketing will continue to play an important role in accentuating and/or creating differences between tequila brands and types. To accomplish this they will look at other alcoholic spirits and borrow ideas, such as using vintages, creating more specific regional classifications, using different ways to age the product and highlight the use of traditional as opposed to mass means of production.

100% blue agave will continue to grow as the public becomes more educated and discriminating.

A final point on the short- to medium-term future. Due to rising demand at the time of this writing and a dearth of blue agaves as a result of climate and pest problems, there is presently a dynamic change going

on. Many tequila companies are closing down and prices are rising. Some brands of the past no longer exist and others will surely fail. Tequila producers are forced to sell their products, sometimes at a loss, to keep their tequila prices within the competitive price range of other distilled spirits such as rum. When the supply of agave plants returns to fill the market then most likely a whole new league of producers will enter the game. This is expected to be around 2007 and 2008.

Tequila sales have shown their most dramatic growth over the past several years. The increase in sales is due to the popularity of the Margarita, the growth in high quality sipping tequilas and the match up of tequila's image to current life styles. This trend will undoubtedly continue if there is enough raw material to feed the growing market.