

## **This was written for a trade magazine to inform the readers of the 'state of play' of tequila at that time**

Tequila 9.14.02

Guadalajara's grown a lot since the last time I was there in the early 1990's. Mexico is growing rapidly in population all over the place, north and south of the Mexico/ U.S. border. The taxi driver who took us from the airport to our hotel was conversational and answered my questions in a soft, easy to understand Spanish.

When asked what he thought the best tequila was, he replied, "It depends on one's taste." I considered what he'd said and was taken by his wisdom. We spoke of the current state of the world and the need for change, positive change. When asked how he thought the change might happen he replied "Change starts with one(self)." I realized this 45 year old Mexican had a lot to offer.

I asked him about the agave shortage in the region. He replied that the shortage was demand driven. Demand for tequila which is made from the agave plant has been on an upward spiral in recent years. Tequila is one of the few spirits currently growing in sales while many others are in decline. Tequila seems to suit ideally the "life styles" of today's drinkers.

That the taxi driver had taken this point of view surprised me. Most persons, the media included have approached the shortage from the supply side. There have been a series of blights, pestilences and adverse natural conditions that have definitely affected the plants, which need eight to twelve years maturity time to produce good quality tequila. This obviously creates a long period of exposure to something/anything going wrong.

Despite what most of the public believes, the view of the professionals, the insiders is that the true problem of the shortage is that of demand. It is that the rather inelastic supply of agave plants hasn't kept up with the rising demand for tequila. Another point for the taxi driver.

We, my companeros and I were in tequila country to catch up on what the latest news was with tequila and to do a serious tasting of comparative tequilas. Anyone who has experience with this knows that it is hard work and potentially dangerous. We were hosted by our friends at Tequila Cuervo.

We visited the fields which are something special to see. Imagine rows and rows of large spikey, sword protected plants of an austere blue/green color. One is reminded of grape vineyards yet the two plants are radically different to see. Agave means in native language 'noble' and I understand the term as I view them and think of the high quality drink (tequila) that will come from them.

What is the present 'state of play' of tequila? Its image is expanding. I use this term instead of changing because the old image, that of a rot-gut drink which ends in "I'll never do that agains..." is still there. It may always be there yet that depends more on people's drinking modes than on tequila itself.

The expanding image of tequila is upward toward being a high quality and in some cases rare, expensive drink. The work on this is being done by producers, marketing departments and you and I, the consumers. Since the 1980's the makers of tequila have been paying much more attention to their work especially those details regarding quality. Things such as 'terroir' (where a plant is grown), maturity of the agave, the cooking process, types of water used, means of distilling, and aging are all being looked at much more closely. Much more experimentation is being done especially by the forward looking companies whose numbers are increasing.

The marketing departments are doing as they do with other products, creating as much differentiation as possible. With tequila this is done by means of

presentation(bottle shapes, labels and decoration) and stories,some factual and informative and some imaginatively fictional.

As with production, the 1980's changed the marketing approach to tequila with the advent of designer/boutique tequilas. These were often high quality tequilas repackaged ,renamed and altogether 're-imaged' to suit the U.S. market(the largest). As they have been highly successful the trend has been to grow this segment both in the U.S. and in Mexico. The fact that many longstanding tequila companies are now being bought wholly or in part by large globally awarecompanies will undoubtedly continue and accelerate this trend.

According to Peter McDougall, chief of TEQUILA Cuervo U.S. many marginal makers of tequila are dropping out due to the difficult economics of the market dealing with the agave shortage.Happily a large number of these are makers of low quality tequila so this is having a sort of purifying affect. Sadly there are still some fake tequilas which break the rules controlling the name(see glossary). Despite international legislation against these fakes enforcement has not been totally effective.The Mexican government and the Tequila Regulatory Council are taking more steps towards the more effective control of the name.

All the preceeding creates a marketplace of great variety for tequila. There are lots of relatively inexpensive tequilas to use as mixers.An important note is that the margarita has probably done more in promoting tequila than any other thing.There are middle range priced tequilas for 'upper shelf' mixing and sipping And there are the highly priced tequilas for savouring and prizing, something for just about everyone.

#### GLOSSARY

tequila-the twice distilled spirit which is a symbol of Mexican pride, made from theWeber agave plant and produced only in a demarcated region in Mexico

agave-a cactus like member of the lily family, hearty and rugged it takes years to mature for tequila making

Tequila- the village north of Guadalajara which is the center of tequila making, think of Tequila and Cognac in the same way

Guadalajara- a city of 8M and growing,one hour's flight from Mexico City and one hour by car from Tequila

C.R.T.-Spanish letters for the regulatory board for tequila