



TEQUILA

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One of the places I stop at for a cold beer is “Just Tacos Mexican Grill & Cantina” located in the Mililani Town Center Shopping Center. I like the Mexican Pacífico lager draft beer – it is always served very cold, it is stronger than Coors Light and it tastes good. The manager Chris and his staff are friendly and I always enjoy myself when I’m there. Some of the customers tell me that the food is exceptional but I have never tried any yet – I just sit at the bar and drink my beer. Behind the bar there are over 300 bottles of tequila.



Just Tacos Mexican Grill & Cantina

Once in a while I will drink a shot of tequila – usually when a friend at the bar is having one. To tell you the truth, I don't know one Tequila from another so I just have the same brand as my friends. If I decide to have a shot when I'm by myself, I ask the bartender to recommend a good tequila that is not too expensive. I always check the price before ordering a shot of tequila. Why you might ask? Well, I found out that some of those bottles of tequila cost \$2000 for one bottle and one shot can cost up to \$160. I'm not rich enough to drink that tequila! Most shots are in the \$6 to \$10 range. Straight tequila is strong but no stronger than a shot of whiskey. It tastes different but it is pretty good and besides, I only drink it because I heard it has many health benefits.

I decided I didn't know much about tequila and it was about time I learned more about this mysterious beverage. In this article, we are going to discuss the history of tequila, how it is produced, how it is served and a few interesting facts and statistics along with pictures and my comments.

History

As the first spirit to be distilled and commercially produced in North America, the history of tequila is undoubtedly rich. What began as a small, localized drink in Jalisco, Mexico, nearly 500 years ago has had a long and fascinating history as it's developed into the beloved spirit we know today.

The agave plant was a major part of Aztec life in pre-Hispanic Mexico, producing a dense fiber used by native Aztecs to make mats, clothing, rope and paper. As early as the 16th century, Aztec tribes were already experimenting with agave spirits. The most common was known as pulque, a fermented, rather than distilled, cousin of tequila. It is believed that the development from pulque to tequila began with Spanish conquistadors, who began distilling pulque into a more potent liquor after they ran out of brandy.

The origin of the word tequila is a mystery, but it is believed to have originate with the Nahuatl people, an indigenous tribe from the area now known as Tequila.

Did you know that all tequila is produced “only” in Mexico? Tequila is the specific name for a distilled beverage made from the Blue Agave Plant, primarily in the area surrounding the city of Tequila, 40 miles northwest of Guadalajara, and in the highlands (Los Altos) of the north western Mexican state of Jalisco. See maps below:



State of Jalisco, Mexico



Mexican laws state that tequila can only be produced in the State of Jalisco and limited municipalities in the states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas. Tequila is recognized as a Mexican designation of origin product in more than 40 countries. It is protected through NAFTA in Canada and the United States and through bilateral agreements with other individual countries around the world. Any country trying to produce and sell a beverage called “Tequila” will be sued by the Mexican government.

Mexico also has a law called the “Norma Oficial Mexicana (NOM)” that applies to all processes and activities related to the supply of agave, production, bottling, marketing, information, and business practices linked to the distilled alcoholic beverage known as Tequila. Tequila must be produced using agave of the species “Tequilana Weber Blue” variety, grown in the federal states and municipalities indicated in the declaration.

Blue Agave Plant

The red volcanic soil surrounding the Jalisco region is particularly well suited to the growing of the Blue Agave Plant, and more than 300 million of the plants are harvested there each year. Agave tequila grows differently depending on the region. Blue agaves grown in the highlands Los Altos region are larger in size and sweeter in aroma and taste. Agaves harvested in the lowlands, on the other hand, have a more herbaceous (plant – non-woody) fragrance and flavor.



The Blue Agave Plant

Planting, tending, and harvesting the agave plant remains a manual effort, largely unchanged by modern farm machinery and relying on centuries-old know-how. The men who harvest it, the Jimadores, have intimate knowledge of how the plants should be cultivated, passed down from generation to generation.



Jimadore using a Coa to harvest an agave plant

By regularly trimming the several-meter high stalk that grows from the center of the plant, the Jimadores prevent the agave from flowering and dying early, allowing it to fully ripen. The Jimadores must be able to tell when each plant is ready to be harvested, and using a special knife called a Coa (with a circular blade on a long pole), carefully cut away the leaves from the piña (the succulent core of the plant). If harvested too late or too early, the piñas, which can average around 150 pounds in the lowlands to 240 pounds in the

highlands, will not have the right amount of carbohydrates for fermentation.

A mature agave has leaves 5–8 feet tall, is 7–12 feet in diameter and has a life span of 8–15 years. There are 136 species of agave in México, of which the blue agave is the only one allowed for use in tequila production. Several different species of agave are allowed for use in mezcal, including tobala, a rare and wild species. And just for the record, no Mexican alcoholic drink is made from cactus as some people think.



Pinas or Hearts of the Blue Agave Plant

Mezcal versus Tequila

Few understand the difference between tequila and mezcal, and many don't even know there is a difference. While traditionally, all tequilas were known as a type of mezcal. Today, they are distinct products, differentiated by the production process and taste, much the same way rye whisky differs from Scotch whiskey. Most mezcal is made today in the state of Oaxaca, although some is also made in Guerrero and other states. Tequila comes from the northwestern state of Jalisco (and a few nearby areas). They both derive from varieties of the Agave plant. Tequila is made from only agave tequilana Weber, blue variety. Mezcal, on the other hand, can be made from five different varieties of agave. Tequila is double distilled and a few brands even boast triple distillation. Mezcal is most often only distilled once.

To make mezcal, the sugar-rich heart of the agave called the piña, is baked in a rock-lined pit oven over charcoal, and covered with layers of palm-fiber mats and earth, giving mezcal a strong, smoky flavor. Tequila piñas are baked or steamed in aboveground ovens or autoclaves.

Tequila and mezcal share a similar amount of alcohol in the bottle (around 38-40%), although mezcals tend to be a little stronger. Because mezcal feels a little more like lava as it flows down the back of your throat it is not quite as popular. This is evident in the number of brands of each type of drink. Currently there are over 1300 different brands of tequila while the manlier mezcal boasts only about 100 brands.

The Worm

Another interesting error is an urban legend is related to a worm. The worm-in-the-bottle myth is old and tired. The truth has been broadcast and expounded for years by the people who know tequila, in newspapers, magazines and on the Internet. Yes, it's true, some American-bottled brands put one in their bottle to impress the gringos and boost sales, but it was a marketing ploy developed in the 1940s, not a Mexican tradition. There is no worm in a tequila bottle.

Sometimes there is a worm, actually a butterfly caterpillar, in some types of mezcal. You may also get a small bag of worm salt and chile powder tied to a mezcal bottle. There are two types of worms in mezcal: the red, gusano rojo—considered superior because it lives in the root and heart of the maguey—and the less-prized white or gold gusano de oro, which lives on the leaves. The red gusano turns pale in the mezcal, the gold turns ashen-gray. Both larvae are commonly eaten as food and are sold in Zapotec (Indian tribe) markets.



Yes, you're supposed to eat the worm in mezcal. But don't worry - it's quite well pickled and free of pesticides (they're often raised just for use in mezcal, cooked and pickled in alcohol for a year). But dispel any idea it has any magical or psychotropic properties, that it's an aphrodisiac or the key to an

"unseen world." It's merely protein and alcohol—but it's very rich in imagery.

How is Tequila Made

After harvesting, the piñas are transported to ovens where they are slowly baked to break down their complex fructans into simple fructoses (fruit sugar). Then, the baked piñas are either shredded or mashed under a large stone wheel called a tahona. The pulp fiber, or bagazo, left behind is often reused as compost or animal feed, but can even be burnt as fuel or processed into paper. Some producers like to add a small amount of bagazo back into their fermentation tanks for a stronger agave flavor in the final tequila product.



Stone Wheel called a Tahona

The extracted agave juice is then poured into either large wooden or stainless steel vats where it stays for several days to ferment, resulting in a wort, or mosto, with low alcohol content. This wort is then distilled once to produce what is called "ordinario" and then a second time to produce clear "silver" tequila. A few producers distill the product a third time, but most connoisseurs consider this third distillation a mistake because it removes too much flavor from the tequila. From there, the tequila is either bottled as silver tequila, or it is pumped into wooden barrels to age, where it develops a mellower flavor and amber color.

Usually, the differences in taste between tequila made from lowland and highland agave plants is noticeable. Plants grown in the highlands often yield sweeter and fruitier-tasting tequila, while lowland agaves give the tequila an earthier flavor.

Types of Tequila

The two basic categories of tequila are mixtos and 100% blue agave. Mixtos use no less than 51% blue agave, with other sugars making up the remainder. Mixtos use both glucose and fructose sugars.

Tequila is bottled in one of five categories:

1. **Blanco ("white") or plata ("silver"):** white spirit, unaged and bottled or stored immediately after distillation, or aged less than two months in stainless steel or neutral oak barrels.
2. **Joven ("young") or oro ("gold"):** unaged silver tequila that may be flavored with caramel coloring, oak extract, glycerin, or sugar-based syrup. Could also be the result of blending silver tequila with aged and/or extra-aged tequila.
3. **Reposado ("rested"):** aged a minimum of two months, but less than a year in oak barrels of any size.
4. **Añejo ("aged" or "vintage"):** aged a minimum of one year, but less than three years in small oak barrels.
5. **Extra Añejo ("extra aged" or "ultra aged"):** aged a minimum of three years in small oak barrels.

The Aging Process

Reposado tequilas may be rested or aged in oak barrels or casks as large as 20,000 liters (5,280 gallons), allowing for richer and more complex flavors. The preferred oak comes from the US, France, or Canada, and is usually white oak. Some companies char the wood to impart a smoky flavor, or use barrels previously used with different kinds of alcohol (e.g. whiskey or wine). Some Tequila can also be aged in new wood barrels to achieve the same woody flavor and smoothness, but in less time.



White Oak Barrels for Aging Tequila

Añejo tequilas are often rested in barrels previously used to rest reposados. These barrels cannot be more than 600 liters (158 gallons), and most are in the 200-liter (52-gallon) range. Many of the barrels used are from whiskey distilleries in the US or Canada, and Jack Daniels barrels are especially popular. This treatment creates many of the aspects of the dark color and more complex flavors of the añejo tequila. After aging of at least one year, the añejo can be removed from the wood barrels and placed in stainless steel tanks to reduce the amount of evaporation that can occur in the barrels.

With 100% blue agave tequila, blanco or plata is harsher with the bold flavors of the distilled agave up front, while reposado and añejo are smoother, subtler, and more complex. As with other spirits aged in casks, tequila takes on the flavors of the wood, while the harshness of the alcohol mellows. The major flavor distinction with 100% agave tequila is the base ingredient, which is more vegetal than grain spirits.

Did you know that without bats we would have no tequila? Do you enjoy Tequila? If so, then we need to raise our glass to the pollinating Mexican long tongued bat that helped to bring it to us! Tequila is made from the agave plant, which relies solely on bats to pollinate its flowers and to reproduce. While the bats certainly drink a lot of nectar from the agave plant, you don't have to worry about them getting drunk! To make tequila, the base or "heart" of the blue agave plant is steamed and minced before being fermented. This part of the plant is quite removed from the giant flower stalk that the bats come in search of.

Brands of Tequila

There are more than 1300 registered brands from 150 producers. I will show you some of the more popular and interesting ones.

Here are five popular tequilas:



Silver Patron

High premium grade/cost

- **From the finest 100% Weber Blue Agave**
- **Silver Patron is handmade in small batches**
- **Presented in hand-numbered glass bottles**
- **40% alcohol by volume**
- **Unparalleled smoothness**

\$55 per 750ML bottle



Don Julio



1800 Reposado



**Jose Chervo
Especial**



Sauza Hacienda

High premium grade/cost

- Made from 100% Blue Agave
- Don Julio is double distilled
- Carefully matured in small oak barrels
- Its aroma is a mixture of pear, apple, and lemon
- The finish is very smooth and rich

\$50 per 750ML bottle

Super-premium grade/cost

- Made from 100% Weber Blue Agave
- Aged for 8-12 years and harvested at their peak
- The liquid is double distilled
- Blended for added complexity and character
- 1800 Tequila is a premium tequila with a smoother, more interesting flavor.

\$40 per 750ML bottle

Mid to High premium grade/cost

- Founded in 1795 by Don Jose Antonio de Cuervo
- Jose Cuervo is the bestselling tequila in the world
- Has a 34% share of tequila in the U.S.
- Uses 100% blue agave plants
- Aged 2 to 12 months in Oak barrels

\$30 per 750ML bottle

Mid to High premium grade/cost

- Sauza Hacienda Reposado Tequila uses 100% blue agave plants
- Aged in oak wooden barrels for 2 to 12 months
- Bright yellow gold color
- Old spice and caramel taffy aromas
- Very smooth and a great tequila for the price

\$20 per 750ML bottle

Recommendation: Only drink tequila that is made from 100% blue agave plants. Don't drink cheap low grade tequila – usually bottles costing less than \$20. Remember, tequila producers are only required to use at least 51% blue agave and you never know for sure what you are getting in that other 49%.

Here are few interesting and/or unusual brands of tequila:

The Guinness World Record for the most expensive bottle of tequila in the world, the Ley .925 Tequila Pasion Azteca Ultra Premium Anejo tops the list. The bottle, which is worth a reported \$3.5 million, is made of 3.6 kilos of pure platinum and is covered with 6,400 diamonds. This bottle of tequila easily surpassed the previous record holder which was worth only \$225,000.

Guess what it costs for just one shot glass of this tequila from this bottle? You guessed it - \$225,000 per shot.



Ley .925 Tequila Pasion Azteca Ultra Premium Anejo

In the second paragraph of this article, I stated that the local Mililani “Just Tacos Mexican Grill & Cantina” had bottles of tequila that you can buy for \$2000. Well, as I have found out, there are several brands of tequila that sell for \$500 or more. Here is a partial list:

- **Tres Quatro Cinco** - This tequila is a blend of 3, 4, and 5 year aged tequilas. It is packaged in handmade crystal decanters. They are numbered and signed by the artist. A bottle of this tequila will go for \$500.



Tres Quatro Cinco



AsomBroso Reserva Del Porto

- Every drop of **AsomBroso Reserva Del Porto** tequila has been aged for five years in a special oak barrel, which gives it its distinctive flavor and aroma. Price is \$2400 which includes the wood case holder.
- The **Jose Cuervo 1800 Collection** tequila is a brand owned by the Beckmann family. This tequila's pedigree doesn't stop there, as its distinguished pewter decanter was specially designed by respected artists working in Mexico. And if you're wondering why it's called 1800 Tequila – part of the reason is its \$1800 asking price.



Jose Cuervo 1800 Collection



**Barrique de Ponciano
Porfidio**

- **Barrique de Ponciano Porfidio** is said to be manufactured utilizing a complicated chromatographic chemical process that refines and separates the tequila for the highest quality flavor possible. As you might guess, this process can be a bit expensive – \$2000 a bottle, to be exact.

Here are some interesting tequila bottles:



How Tequila is Served

In Mexico, the most traditional way to drink tequila is neat, without lime and salt. It is popular in some regions to drink fine tequila with a side of sangrita—a sweet, sour, and spicy drink typically made from orange juice, grenadine (or tomato juice), and hot chiles. Equal-sized shots of tequila and sangrita are sipped alternately, without salt or lime. Another popular drink in Mexico is the bandera, named after the Flag of Mexico, it consists of three shot glasses, filled with lime juice (for the green), white tequila, and sangrita (for the red).

Many of the higher-quality, 100% agave tequilas do not impart significant alcohol burn and drinking them with salt and lime is likely to remove much of the flavor. These tequilas are usually sipped from a snifter glass rather than a shot glass, and savored instead of quickly gulped. Doing so allows the taster to detect subtler fragrances and flavors that would otherwise be missed.



Tequila Snifter Glasses

Outside Mexico, a single shot of tequila is often served with salt and a slice of lime. (See picture at the top of this article) This is called tequila cruda and is sometimes referred to as "training wheels", "lick-sip-suck", or "lick-shoot-suck" (referring to the way in which the combination of ingredients is imbibed). The drinkers moisten the back of their hands below the index finger (usually by licking) and pour on the salt. Then the salt is licked off the hand, the tequila is drunk, and the fruit slice is quickly bitten. Groups of drinkers often do this simultaneously. Drinking tequila in this way is often erroneously called a Tequila Slammer - which is in fact a mix of tequila and carbonated drink. Though the traditional Mexican shot is tequila by itself, lime is the fruit of choice when a chaser must be used. The salt is believed to lessen the "burn"

of the tequila and the sour fruit balances and enhances the flavor. In Germany and some other countries, tequila oro (gold) is often consumed with cinnamon on a slice of orange after, while tequila blanco (white) is consumed with salt and lime. Finally, as with other popular liquors, a number of shot-related drinking games and "stunt" drinks are used, such as body shots.

Top 10 Tequila Cocktails

1. Margarita

- 1 1/2 ounce tequila, 1/2 ounce triple sec, 1 ounce fresh lime juice, Lime wedge for garnish (optional), Salt or sugar to rim the glass (optional).



Margarita

2. Tequila Sunrise

- Tequila mixed with orange juice for a tart citrus, and then you get extra fruity sweetness from the grenadine.



Juan Collins

3. Paloma

- Grapefruit juice and lemon-lime soda are ideal pairings for tequila.

4. Juan Collins

- Reposado tequila with lemon, sugar and club soda.

5. Tequini

- Martini-like drink in which tequila replaces gin. Use a good blanco tequila.



Tequini

6. Brave Bull

- Tequila and Kahlua on the rocks.

7. Envy

- Tequila, blue curacao, and pineapple. Shaken and served in a cocktail glass.

8. Bloody Maria

- Substituting tequila for the vodka.

9. Toronha

- Grapefruit and tequila.

10. Passion Cocktail

- The classic Cosmopolitan made with tequila.



Toronha

I enjoy a few margaritas every now and then. I like the basic margarita with salt on the rim. I have not tried any of these other tequila cocktails but it looks to me that you can use tequila for any cocktail that normally uses vodka or gin.

Some tequila statistics and interesting facts:

- 1. Serious tequila aficionados don't do shots. Instead, they sip tequila from a special tequila glass or brandy snifter. That way, the agave flavors and aromas can be properly enjoyed.**
- 2. In Mexico, tequila is drunk neat without lime and salt.**
- 3. A bottle of tequila can last unopened for years. It does not spoil! However, if you're planning on opening a bottle of tequila, you'd better be in the mood to consume it entirely relatively soon. Basically, after about a month or two, oxidation and evaporation diminish the quality of the tequila and destroy the agave profile of the alcohol.**
- 4. Many people believe tequila is made from cactus, but the Agave plant is actually in the lily family not cactus.**
- 5. Color is NOT a guarantee of tequila quality. Tequila turns color from aging in barrel or by the addition of color additives. A premium white tequila will taste much better than an artificially colored young tequila.**
- 6. July 24th of each year is National Tequila Day in Mexico.**
- 7. Tequila is made by steaming the hearts of the blue agave plant, one of approximately 136 species of agave grown in Mexico.**
- 8. It takes blue agave about 8 years to reach maturity sufficient enough to be harvested and distilled into tequila.**
- 9. The 1918 flu epidemic led to a tequila boom in Mexico as doctors advised ailing patients to drink tequila, lime, and salt as a remedy.**
- 10. Whiskey shortages in the U.S. have often led to increased demand for tequila and its sister spirit mezcal, as was the case during the Civil War, Prohibition, and World War II.**

11. Tequila is most often made at a 38–40% alcohol content (76–80 proof), but can be produced up to 55% alcohol content (110 proof).

12. Tequila labeled “Gold” is your indicator (i.e. red flag) that it is a mixto tequila, unaged silver tequila that has been colored and flavored with caramel to give the appearance of aged tequila.

13. The 1958 song, “Tequila” was the first, and only, #1 hit for a band called The Champs.

14. Tequila is Mexico's national drink. While Mexico is where tequila originated, the United States now consumes 3 times as much tequila.

15. Good tequila, supposedly, does not result in hangovers. That said, it does have a mild hallucinogenic effect.

16. The Aztecs discovered “pulque” when lightning struck an agave plant, cooking the insides of the plant and causing the juice to seep out. Seeing as how it was sweet and mildly alcoholic, the Aztecs believed the drink to be a gift from the gods that opened communication between mortals and them.

17. Mexico is deeply concerned with the future of Tequila production. As mentioned earlier, the blue agave is ridiculously fussy about its environment and is also easily prone to disease. To make matters worse, it only matures after 8-12 years so over-estimating or under-estimating the future demand for the drink is likely to cause some serious fluctuations in the market.

18. Recent studies have shown that if consumed in moderation, tequila can cut the risk of dementia by 37%. It also has a component that can help lower LDL levels, aka bad cholesterol. Unlike other forms of alcohol, tequila is not a depressant.

19. More good news. As with most alcohol, tequila can reduce the risk of developing diabetes by 30-40%.

20. The blue agave plant has components that can help stimulate the immune system and fight obesity.

21. If you're a fan of the elegant lifestyle, scientists have recently found a way to turn tequila into diamonds. There is one catch however. These synthetic diamond crystals are too small to be turned into jewelry.

22. May 5 is Cinco de Mayo and Mexico is excited about celebrating with some classic traditions including parades, mariachi music, street festivals and, of course, tequila! Cinco de Mayo celebrates Mexican heritage and culture and honors the Mexican victory over France in 1862 at the Battle of Puebla during the Franco-Mexican War which, in fact, didn't end until 1867. We love that Cinco de Mayo is becoming more inclusive and its celebration extends further, as Mexican-Americans embrace their history.

23. Something we are not grateful for is the future price of tequila. Rumor has it that the prices on agave are expected to rise by more than 100% over the next four years. This means the drink could become as expensive as a 50-year old scotch. Keep your fingers crossed that this prediction is wrong!

Since I'm now aware of all the health benefits derived from drinking good tequila, I plan on visiting my favorite Mexican bar and drinking a lot more tequila. I have figured out that the drink I want is a Reposado (aged) Tequila that uses 100% blue agave plants that come from the highlands. Maybe the reasonably priced Sauza Hacienda Reposado Tequila will be good. However, if you drink a lot of tequila, **BE WARNED** - Tequila is known to have been the cause of antics and behavior not normally observed in human beings.

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