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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: BEVERAGE & SPIRITS

SUMMER'S favorite spirit

by Maggie Steber

Herbacious and fruity tequila is the ideal companion for a summer cocktail

For restaurants, the return of warmer months means the patio opens up and fresh summer produce is in abundance. Naturally, this also signifies the return of the summer cocktail, best savored over ice as the sun goes down. A simple summer beverage can run on special alongside a few appetizers or an entrée to boost check averages for guests apt to linger on those 85°F evenings.

Tequila, an earthy, spicy spirit derived from the fruit of the agave plant, pairs well with the peak-fresh fruit juices and herbs that are widely available and inexpensive during the summer. Agave is a member of the lily family that is native to the highlands and valleys of Jalisco, Mexico. It typically reaches maturity after eight to 10 years, when the fruit or *piña* is harvested, cooked, fermented, distilled at least twice in steel tanks and aged when appropriate to produce tequila. Tequila has three main classifications: blanco (white, not aged after distillation), reposado (rested, aged two to 12 months) and añejo (aged 12 months minimum).

Blanco is the most popular form of tequila sold in the U.S. However, Jacques Bezuidenhout, master mixologist at Kimpton Hotels and brand ambassador for Partida Tequila (www.partidatequila.com) in San Francisco, actually prefers to use the lesser-known reposado in summer cocktails such as the Partida margarita (recipe, right) and his tequila-based riff on the mint julep because it offers a mellower expression of the cooked agave than its gutsy blanco counterpart, along with almond and vanilla notes from mild interaction with the oak. Indeed, reposado is the number-one selling tequila in Chicago, which Be-

zuidenhout attributes to Mexicans' greater understanding of the spirit.

"I think in Mexico, they've always understood the classifications in terms of blanco, reposado and añejo," he says. "They understand what reposado means, and I think they like it because it is that kind of middle point where you still get all that spice and fruit from the agave, and you get a little bit of the oak interaction. I don't think we understand it [in the U.S.] yet because we have grown up knowing tequila to be two things: silver or gold. It's only now that a lot of consumers are starting to understand what reposado is and that gold tequila isn't really the standard of anything other than the color."

Summer tequila cocktails

The margarita remains the darling of summer tequila cocktails, though Bezuidenhout says it is harder than ever to find a truly good one. "Realistically, there are so many bars where you just can't get a good margarita, which is amazing because it is still the number-one selling cocktail out there," he says. "And it really comes down to two very simple ingredients: quality tequila and fresh lime juice." In addition to Partida reposado and fresh-squeezed lime juice, the final ingredient in the Partida margarita is the sweetener: organic agave nectar, which Bezuidenhout says is one of the healthier fructoses available—an added appeal for health-conscious patrons.

"We put the Partida margarita on cocktail lists because people are blown away by it, which is kind of shocking because it's so simple. It just shows you how we've butchered the margarita so much by putting all sorts of weird syrups and sweet and sour mixes in there, and people still drink it."

For Chicago mixologist Tracy Miller, the margarita is always a top seller at the three bars where she moonlights. "People really seem to like the plain old margarita until I tell them, 'Let me take it up a few notches,'" she says. "I'll spice it up with different citrus juices, Cointreau, Grand Marnier, pomegranate schnapps—and really whatever I have that's in season."

At the start of the interview, she mixed this author a pink-hued summery cocktail blending Patron Silver tequila, St. Germain, Hum liqueur, fresh lime juice, fresh orange juice and three muddled strawberries. "I'm thinking of calling it '82 degrees and sunny,'" she quips. While all that fresh fruit juice requires several spent limes, oranges and plump strawberries, she says that if the fruits are in season, it typically doesn't cost the bar much more than a cocktail with premade juices.

"If you do it ounce per ounce and measure it out by price point, most of the time it will cost the same for premade and fresh ingredients," Miller says. "I could make this with Rose's lime juice and Tropicana, but for a little more effort, I would rather squeeze out lime and orange juice to give it that real fresh flavor we associate with summer."

She says that although she is working to refine her craft through mixology classes, her regular clientele at Victory Liquors (www.victoryliquors.com), DaddyO's Pub at the Hyatt Regency (www.chicagoregency.hyatt.com) and Stretch Run (www.stretchrunchicago.com) largely prefer premade margaritas.

"We don't usually have the high-end clientele that appreciates a hand-crafted cocktail," she says. "I want to keep broadening my horizons as a mixologist with classes and events,

but there will always be a place for the margarita with sour mix or the Jack and Coke because most people are afraid to branch out."



PARTIDA MARGARITA

Jacques Bezuidenhout, master mixologist, Sable Kitchen & Bar, Hotel Palomar, Chicago, www.sablechicago.com

Yield: 1 cocktail

- 1 3/4 oz. Partida Reposado
- 1 oz. fresh-squeezed lime juice
- 1 oz. organic agave nectar (cut 50/50 with water)

Method (1) Shake all ingredients with ice in a shaker. Strain over fresh ice into an Old-Fashioned glass. (2) Taste for balance, and serve immediately.

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