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WHAT'S HOT

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IT'S EASY FOR VETERAN RETAILERS OR BAR MANAGERS

to be blindsided by the Next Hot Thing. To wit: it'd have been impossible to foretell that an elderflower liqueur would take the market by storm, let alone stay on consumers' radars years after it launched; meantime, brands that spiked in sales when a celebrity stepped to the fore as a spokesperson slip into the distance when the media blitz simmers down. The past year has seen a boost in popularity of the inky Fernet Branca, New England beers come to the fore in a big way, and a boost in the interest of gins made in the US. While stalwart brands will always be an indomitable presence in the market, a growing segment of consumers are getting restless and curious, seeking out boutique and craft products that have inched into their purviews. And that goes for all categories. This annual trends report holds several surprises about how consumers are becoming more interested in – and conscious of – what's going into their glass.



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TEQUILA GETS ITS PREMIUM DUE

Katie Krock, owner of KJ Baaron's in Worcester, said tequila is still overshadowed by rum and vodka, but nevertheless, she's seen an uptick in customers lingering in the tequila aisle. Sales definitely increase in the summer, but she's observed tequila become less of a seasonal beverage than in past years, as she's moved more tequila this past winter than the prior. Patron Silver remains the top seller, and she's taken that as a cue to bring in additional pricier marques. Perhaps that has something to do with what's going on nearby at Armsby Abbey, which draws a beer-centric crowd for its variety of microbrews. Sadowski has been bringing a variety of brands to the fore at her bar, like Don Julio, Don Eduardo, Tezon, El Tesoro, and Conquistador. None of it, she insists, is sold as a shot. "We feature lesser known products, and in doing that, it opens doors for people," she said. Reposados sell best, and they had a hibiscus margarita on the cocktail list in the spring.

At the Fields Corner Supreme Liquors, Wilkinson went from offering eight tequilas to 28 when he remodeled the store. Cazadores, Milagro, Tezon, Cabo Wabo, Herradura and Partida are just a few of the higher end brands he has on sale, despite that location being what he claims is "five years behind the time". But Wilkinson may be underestimating. Pederson at Charles Street said the category is dominated by two brands – Patron and Sauza. But even with the poor economy and people's penny-pinching hitting the tequila category harder than others, he insists on keeping the shelves stocked with a healthy selection of high-end tequilas such as Milagro and Oro Azul.

Slowly but surely, a few tequilas are arriving that are USDA-certified organic. Malone of Infinium Spirits noted the already strong performance of Casa Noble Tequila, a new addition to the distributor's premium tequila collection. There are five styles available, including Crystal, reposado, a two-year-old añejo and a single barrel añejo, which retails between \$80 to \$89. He said that they just received state approval for bigger accounts to hand-select a single barrel reposado for personalized bottling, a trend that's already taken off in the bourbon industry.

But that's not the only company offering a barrel selection program. Greg Neises, lead bartender at Masa, a Mexican outpost in Boston's South End, said that the restaurant teamed up with Bacardi's tequila brands to finish a tequila in a barrel in-house. He projected it would be very popular with his clientele, who have showed no signs of losing interest in tequila. "People are looking to trade up and go to more quality spirits or something with a different edge to offer, something with more complexity." When it comes to mixing tequila, chili peppers are an ingredient that's on fire. "People have been into pepper infused drinks," he said, noting that the Habanero-infused watermelon margarita was popular throughout the cold season, and the Anaheim margarita, with muddled peppers, lemon and lime, is a favorite in the warmer months. "It's got layers of flavor, but it's light and crisp. It isn't overly spicy, but has more of a green tone, so it's more about the flavor than heat."

At Drink, the cocktail bar in Fort Point, the tequila wave is still swelling, said John Gertsen, General Manager. As more guests develop an understanding that its uses go far beyond a shot or margarita, they get curious about it as a legitimate cocktail ingredient. "It's not just about using it as a base ingredient," he said. "We're looking at it as an ingredient layered with other spirits. You can do a double base with tequila and cognac or tequila or mezcal. A lot of bartenders are starting to get a more comfortable grasp as far as what to do with it," he said. And with the growth of interest comes an awareness of smaller, more boutique, single vintages and new zones. "The public is more educated and they're starting to ask good questions, like 'I know Jalisco, but what's up with other zones?'"

"Why is Chinaco so earthy and weird?" he said. "I think we're going to see a continued interest in the more fine points of production, like aging. Wood is starting to be more important and people are taking a more Scotch-like approach."

No discussion about tequila can be had without giving mezcal its proper due. More brands of the agave-based spirit have become available in Massachusetts. The Del Maguey line that started it all recently launched Vida, a more wallet-friendly marque made by some of the same farmers that Ron Cooper (the founder of the Del Maguey brand) has worked with in the past to produce the more expensive labels. The lower price point is due, in part, to the less fancy packaging. (Vida does not come in a hand-woven sleeve.) In the past few months, Massachusetts also saw the introduction of Ilegal Mezcal, which comes as a Joven and Reposado. "Mezcal is white hot, and it's not cooling off anytime soon," proclaimed Gertsen. "We were fortunate to get an early jump on the Del Maguey line, and now Vida has already been a great success."

"The next big thing is mezcal," avowed Mary Edes at Clio. They just added the two marques of Ilegal Mezcal to their shelf. "I've been playing around with it in cocktails. I used the añejo to make a Sazerac, with yellow chartreuse instead of absinthe." At Middlesex, Bernstein said he's gravitating away from some of the trendy tequilas in favor of brands like El Tesoro. He also picked up Ilegal, which he serves straight as a shot or as a floater in a high-end margarita. Hafferty at Bin Ends says the Del Maguey has been hard to keep on the shelf.

THE AGAVE ALLURE
CASA NOBLE TEQUILA
PARTIDA TEQUILA
DEL MAGUEY
ILEGAL MEZCAL

