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So Tequila wants to be fancy these days, to slip on heels and carry the real Gucci purse. But with untold millions of dollars poured into hype - and several metric tons of Tequila-related press releases filling our in-boxes this past month - has the shining-up of Tequila's image made for better drinking? Just as with vodka, if you take away the branding, which bottle reigns supreme?

With Cinco de Mayo fast approaching, we realized this was an important question to answer. Stat.Staff writer Stacy Finz, our resident margarita expert (see Page K4), and I were joined by a panel of three outside experts: Duggan McDonnell, owner of Cantina, which specializes in Latin American spirits; Matt Burbach, a bartender at Fonda in Albany and several other East Bay restaurants; and Rebecca Chapa, a wine and spirits consultant who specializes in Tequila. There are a lot of Tequilas out there. To limit ourselves, we decided to taste only unaged (blanco or plata), sold as they're distilled, without any barrel aging. This seemed the best way to focus on agave flavors and the quality of the distilling rather than the influence of aging in a reposado or añejo Tequila. And of course, we're talking all-agave Tequila; no mixto, any more than we'd put



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blended whiskey into a bourbon tasting.

We began with a list of our own personal faves and some well-known brands. And we reached out to San Francisco's high priest of Tequila, Julio Bermejo, for recommendations on some lesser-known don't-miss Tequilas. This proved to be a wise decision, as you'll see. (Bermejo didn't sit in on the tasting, in part because his wife has ties to one of the brands we tasted.) So we had a running list of 16. To focus a bit more, we split the tasting by price, using a \$30 dividing line. Above \$30, it seemed, you're getting into fancy Tequila. Below, you can buy a guilt-free bottle for the deck.

From the cheaper batch of five, three strong contenders emerged. Our top two came down to a philosophical debate: Should we credit the Tequila with more distinct agave flavor, or the one more likely to please a crowd? Agave love won out.

When the veil was lifted? Surprise. Our top pick was Milagro, a larger but estate-grown Tequila label from the town of Tepatitlan, owned in part by large British distiller William Grant & Sons. No shock to me, as I've been buying it for a couple of years. But it is a label, McDonnell and Burbach pointed out, perhaps too mainstream to curry favor with many Bay Area bartenders - like finding out that Smirnoff was running circles around Grey Goose. Choosing it, Burbach said, was a "huge coup."

What pushed it over was that distinct vegetal agave smell, a clear reminder that you're drinking Tequila and not vodka. "You're going to be able to smell the agave in a margarita," Chapa said. Our runner-up - the user-friendly pick - was another big name: Cazadores, part of the stable of rum



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giant Bacardi, which claims to be the fifth most popular Tequila brand in the world. It narrowly edged Tres Agaves, the newly unveiled, locally controlled brand produced for Eric Rubin, co-owner of the San Francisco restaurant Tres Agaves.

On to the spendy stuff. Again, we had three clear contenders. But shockingly, much of the rest ranged from uninspired (Patron was indistinct to the point of being a vodka cover band) to downright head-scratching (the Herradura evoked soft-serve vanilla ice cream, and not in a good way). Not to pick on those two, but, considering the prices, the lack of character in this flight was troubling, as though the mainstreaming of Tequila required a bleaching of its agave soul. "They're trying to round off the edges," Chapa said.

What we liked, however, was sublime. And again, our top two came down to a debate over style: powerfully earthy and musky or clean, edgy and elegant? This time, the styles were so divergent that we couldn't choose.

Those top two? A split between the relatively unknown Paquí, a new label based out of Los Angeles and run by Javier Martinez, whose family owns the El Charro brand in Jalisco; and **Partida, the boutique effort part owned by San Francisco entrepreneur Gary Shansby**. Martinez says he was inspired to create Paquí because some prominent labels were "making tequila too much like vodka" - damping down the agave presence.

Partida is plenty familiar to us - if you drink Tequila in San Francisco, you've run into it - but the Paquí was a pleasant surprise (recommended, natch, by Bermejo). Our third, also strong, was 7 Leguas, from Atotonilco El Alto, one of the region's oldest operating distilleries. It was powerful,



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pure and clean in its flavors, if just a bit less distinct.

To further stir the pot, we re-tasted the three cheaper finalists and the three more expensive. The spendier were a bit more refined, but the gap was narrower than expected; the panel generally liked the Milagro as much as the 7 Leguas. Considering an 80 percent price difference, that's a big thumbs-up for a cheaper choice.

As Tequila takes on the trappings - and price tag - of a fancy liquor, it was a relief to see that we could still drink well without crossing the \$30 barrier.

From the notebook- Our top picks among 16 Tequilas, tasted blind in two flights. Prices are representative of Bay Area retail shops but may vary.- *J.B.*

\$30 and under

1. Milagro Silver (\$25) A terrific all-purpose Tequila. Clear agave and exotic fruit and herb aromas give it an impressive nuance for the price.
2. Cazadores Blanco (\$25) A lighter, user-friendly style. Peppery spice adds interest but it's a good Tequila if you want agave flavors in small doses.
3. Tres Agaves (\$30) The agave flavor is rich and warm, with white-pepper and cucumber accents. The slightly bitter finish seemed a bit aggressive for the style. Also tasted: Hornitos; Pueblo Viejo



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Over \$30

1-tie. Paquí Silvera (\$40) Made at Autentica Tequilera in the town of Tequila from agave grown in the Tequila Valley. We loved how clean and intense its flavors were, with a balance of peppery, musky and fruity character.

1-tie. Partida Blanco (\$50) Refined and complex, a connoisseur's Tequila. A pure, subtle agave presence is matched with spicy notes of coriander, eucalyptus and pepper.

3. 7 Leguas (\$40) Powerful and weighty, with lots of spice. We detected the scent of ginger root and Asian spices. But panelists were split; some found the flavors less clean than the El Tesoro.



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