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Bay Area at crest of Tequila surge

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Gary Shansby, a successful San Francisco businessman, decided to build a spirits company from the ground up. With a little research he found that Tequila was the fastest-growing liquor category in the nation, although still a blip in the market compared with vodka or scotch.

Now, nearly eight years later, his Partida brand has won accolades from critics and competitors alike.

In the beginning it was only for Shansby's convenience that part of the Partida endeavor be headquartered in San Francisco. The product itself comes from the Tequila region of Mexico.

By law, producers can't call it Tequila unless the agave is grown and the spirit is distilled and bottled in the state of Jalisco and surrounding areas. But as it turns out, the Bay Area was a perfect place. In fact, the region has become the hub for a burgeoning Tequila trade, spawning some of the hottest brands in the world, including Cabo Wabo, Don Pilar and La Piñata.

Big market

Why here? Producers say California consumes the most Tequila outside of Mexico, making the state the world's best test market. With Cinco de Mayo coming up those numbers are bound to soar. Add that to the notion that the Bay Area is home to one of the most innovative and experimental bar



The True Spirit of Tequila
www.partidatequila.com





and food scenes in the country, and close to Mexico's agave fields, and you've got a good recipe for success. And it certainly doesn't hurt that Julio Bermejo, the National Chamber of the Tequila Industry's sole American ambassador, lives here.

"It's the most logical place - the most sophisticated for Tequila outside of Mexico," says Bermejo, who was appointed by industry representatives to spread the word on Tequila. He is building a distillery in Mexico to produce his own L & J brand, which will also have a base in San Francisco. For Eric Rubin, one of the founders of San Francisco's Tres Agaves Mexican Kitchen and Tequila Lounge, making 100 percent agave tequila was always the goal. He teamed with a farm and distillery in Mexico and this year released a blanco (unaged), reposado (required to be aged from two months to one year) and añejo (aged one to three years) under the Tres Agaves brand. He says being in San Francisco was integral to success. First, because California counts for 23 percent of Tequila consumption in the world. And second, bartenders here are willing to experiment with new, quality products.

In addition to California, Tres Agaves is being distributed in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Colorado. The next stop is Texas, Tequila's second-largest U.S. marketplace. Rubin plans to sell 10,000 cases of the spirit by year's end.

Mill Valley rock star Sammy Hagar had a jump on Rubin. By 2007 he had built his Cabo Wabo Tequila into such a recognizable brand that Gruppo Campari bought it for \$80 million. But the Italian company had no intention of moving the brand out of the Bay Area and left it in the hands of its San Francisco subsidiary, Skyy Spirits.

"There is a big openness to Tequila in the Bay Area," says Umberto Luchini, director of Skyy's Tequila unit, adding that San Francisco is often on the cutting edge, influencing the national market. "San Franciscans know that there is more to Tequila than a margarita or a shot, just like there is more to Mexico than mariachis and sombreros."

New brand

Skyy is so confident that the Bay Area's love of Tequila will spread that the company has acquired and is resurrecting Espolón, a small yet highly respected high-end brand distributed only in California, Texas and Florida before it went out of business in 2006. Skyy plans to launch Espolón in a blanco and a reposado next month.



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Lance Winters and Jorg Rupf of St. George Spirits in Alameda know a good thing when they see it. The company was the first American distillery to sell absinthe after it was legalized in the United States in 2007. Now Winters and Rupf have tried their hand at a 100 percent agave spirit called Aqua Azul, sold only in their tasting room. It can't be called Tequila because it's made in the East Bay. But they don't want to miss out.

"To have a market like this in your backyard is such a plus," Winters says. "We are home to the ambassador of Tequila. To be in the same location with a resource like Julio Bermejo with access to the food culture we have here is an unstoppable combination."

La Canterita

Makes 2 servings

Adapted by Tres Agaves. In Jalisco, this popular party drink is traditionally served in an earthenware dish called a cazuela. It's almost like a punch, so feel free to use whatever fruit you have on hand. You should also scale the recipe depending on the size of your glassware.

- 4 ounces Tres Agaves Blanco
- 1 ounces triple sec or other orange liqueur
- 2 ounces fresh-squeezed orange juice
- 2 ounces fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice
- 1 ounce fresh-squeezed lime juice
- 2 ounces soda water (substitute grapefruit soda such as Squirt or Fresca if you want to add more sweetness and citrus.
- -- Assorted citrus slices, as garnish
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Instructions: Combine all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake vigorously and strain into a cazuela with fresh ice. Go heavy on the garnishes and serve with extra-long straws.



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