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This popular spirit is being taken seriously for its flavor and versatility.

Tequila was once pretty much relegated to margaritas and shooters with a side of lime, but there's been a change. Distilleries today are focusing on creating 100 percent blue agave tequila, avoiding additives such as sugar and color – the culprits for the nasty after-effects many people associate with tequila.

And because master distillers are serious about quality tequila, the consumer is getting serious about it as well. “People are learning more about tequila and its unique flavor profile,” says Vince Satkoff, co-owner of [Salpicón restaurant](#) with his wife, Priscila. “They're also understanding that a 100 percent blue agave tequila is a much different animal than the mixtos that gave us those terrible hangovers in college.”

“A quality spirit comes from a master distiller who knows how to properly age their agaves – taking quality from step one to step 10,” adds Jacques Bezuidenhout, national brand ambassador for [Partida Tequila](#).

Blanca Bretón is global brand manager of [Olmeca Altos](#), a 100 percent pure agave tequila made in the Los Altos region in the state of Jalisco, Mexico; she believes that, in an example of the consumer responding to the market, awareness among people grew when the level of luxury tequila increased. Olmeca Altos is currently launching in Denver and Chicago in restaurants including The Drawing Room, Mercadito, De Cero and Adobo Grill. “People are starting to appreciate a good tequila versus a bad one,” Blanca says. “They're also looking for tequila cocktails. Before, they were very interested in shooters.”

Although tequila is most popular in margaritas, it's also used in place of other liquors in cocktails. “Bartenders are now substituting tequila for vodka or gin. It's very versatile,” Blanca remarks. “It can go



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with spices, herbs or fruit. They like how it mixes, enhancing the other flavors in the cocktail.”

Elizabeth Mendez, wine director at [Carnivale restaurant](#), agrees that the spirit has matured past margaritas. “It blends well in drinks, and at any age can be enjoyed by itself,” she observes. “The spirit is so diverse; a blanco [aged less than two months] is a perfect aperitif, while an añejos [aged for over a year] is an excellent way to end a meal.”

Carnivale offers a martini with reposado tequila (aged from two months to a year), lime juice, pomegranate and a dash of mango puree; another popular drink is their mojito made with tequila. A little further north at Salpicón, Vince offers a choice of five tequila flights – blancos, reposados, añejos, ultra-premiums and connoisseurs. “Our guests enjoy comparing the different brands and flavor profiles,” Vince adds. “They’re popular because a flight is a fun and less expensive way of tasting various tequilas.”

But don't expect to get a frozen margarita at Salpicón. “We encourage our guests to enjoy tequila in its natural state,” Vince emphasizes. “We don’t even have a blender in our bar!”

And not all tequilas taste the same. Some can be infused with peppers like Jalapenos and Serranos. A local label, Agave Loco, stationed in Highland Park, uses this recipe, resulting in a tequila containing depth of flavor, sweetness and heat.

Another 100 percent agave label, Partida, has found its way into great dining establishments. [Sable Kitchen & Bar](#), for example, offers La Perla (Partida Reposado tequila, Manzanilla sherry and Mathilde pear liquor), a Partida specialty cocktail that Jacques helped create. “You can take tequila in many directions other than the margarita,” Jacques says. “That's what I enjoy most about it.”

“No one taught me how to drink tequila because there isn't any certain way,” Jacques adds. “There's no correct setting – you can be at a local bar or the Ritz-Carlton. It can be a very serious spirit or a fun one. Tequila has no boundaries or borders.”



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