

Tequila – A Brief History

Historical Background

Experts commonly trace the emergence of Tequila to the early 16th century. While there was a long tradition among the indigenous population in what is today known as Mexico of fermenting the sap of the agave plant, it was not until after the Spanish Conquest that the antecedent to modern Tequila was developed.

Tequila's origins may be found in a marriage of traditional fermenting practices developed by the native population of the Tequila region with the knowledge of European style distillation brought by the Spaniards into the New World. Legend has it that the emergence of Tequila came when local Conquistadors encouraged the process once they began to run out of their supplies of imported brandy and other spirits. The result: Tequila, North America's first distilled drink.

The Tequila region in and around today's state of Jalisco was originally dubbed New Galicia by the Spanish conquerors. The town which now bears the name "Tequila" was originally founded in 1656. By the 1700's, Tequila was already being exported to further flung locations as the town of Tequila lay directly on the route from the interior to the recently established Pacific port of San Blas.

By 1758, the Spanish Crown was granting rights to tracts of land specifically for the cultivation of the agave plant. By 1821, when Mexico gained independence, Tequila began its rise to prominence within Mexican borders due in part to a sudden decrease in access to Spanish imports.

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It was not until the Mexican Revolution during the early part of the 20th century that Tequila became so strongly identified with national pride and secured a place as Mexico's choice spirit. In both factual narratives and dramatic myths surrounding the victories and deprivations of the Revolution years, Tequila plays a central role as the patriotic beverage of celebration, identification and unity.

During the revolutionary period efforts were initiated to regulate the Tequila industry. Initially two regulatory bodies were formed that eventually evolved into the Tequila Regulatory Council (www.crt.org.mx). In 1944, the Mexican government stipulated that any product bearing the name "Tequila" must be distilled from agave grown in the state of Jalisco. In 1947, the first written standards for Tequila production were established stipulating that no Tequila could contain less than 51% blue agave. Top of the line Tequilas are made of 100% blue agave, a fact that must be shown on the label.

Tequila in the United States

Today, Tequila is making a significant mark in the U.S. marketplace. In 2004, Tequila sales increased by a notable 8.6% throughout the United States. This dramatic growth is attributed to several factors. Restaurants featuring genuine Mexican cuisine have proliferated and gained in popularity in recent years. Coupled with this culinary boom, diners and drinkers are becoming better acquainted with the intricacies and subtleties of Tequila. No longer is Tequila considered merely the base ingredient for margaritas or consumed in shots. Tequila is now enjoyed and savored by aficionados the way one might drink premium single malt whiskies and other high-quality spirits.

While sales figures for Tequila have demonstrated remarkable growth over the last decade, American consumers are embracing premium brands in particular. In fact, the super and ultra-premium market segments are anticipating another year of double digit growth as U.S. Tequila drinkers continue to learn about and savor the pleasures of these refined distillations.

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Three Categories of Distillation

Blanco

Also known as white, silver or “plata” – this clear Tequila is not aged. The Blanco’s clear color is attributed to the fact that it spends no time in aging casks or barrels.

Reposado

Literally, “rested.” Reposado is the legal qualification indicating that the Tequila has been aged in wooden barrels for at least two months.

Añejo

“Old” Tequila. The Añejos are premium Tequilas and must be barrel aged for at least one year.

Tequila Facts

Some common misconceptions about Tequila remain, regardless of the beverage’s emerging popularity beyond the Mexican border. For instance, Tequila must be made from the juices of the blue agave plant. Other slightly less refined spirits, including mescal, may be rendered from five different varieties of the agave. By utilizing only blue agave, Tequila distillers can be assured of a higher quality taste and texture.

The juice from which Tequila is derived is from the sugar-rich heart of the blue agave plant. This core is known as the piña. To create Tequila the blue agave piñas are baked or steamed in above ground ovens, or autoclaves.

While blue agave thrives in desert like conditions, much like cacti, it is actually a relative of lily and amaryllis. The mature blue agave plant is normally 7 to 12 feet in diameter and has a life span of 8 to 15 years. The blue agave is scientifically known as the *Agave Tequilana Weber Azul* named for the German botanist F. Weber who studied and classified the agave family of plants at the turn of the 20th century.

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