

# Getting into the Spirit of Mexico

By **BECKY PASKIN**

FOOD AND DRINK CORRESPONDENT

This historical, artisanal spirit that is at the heart of Mexican culture has grown to become one of the world's most respected drinks

Mexico's national spirit has worked tirelessly over the last decade to shrug off its reputation as a "shooter". Once widely drunk alongside a lick of salt and suck of lime by partygoers all over the world, tequila has been unfairly blamed for causing one too many hangovers in modern times.

But this historical, artisanal spirit that is at the heart of Mexican culture has grown to become one of the world's most respected drinks, and is in hot demand as a refined, sipping spirit in both western and emerging markets.

In fact, tequila, as well as its distant cousin mezcal, is now so popular among "millennials" that it has become the latest fashion accessory for the stars of Hollywood, including the likes of actor George Clooney, rapper Sean "P.Diddy" Combs and The Kenny Everett Show actress Cleo Rocos who all own their own brands. Full bottles are now ordered to tables at some of London and LA's hottest nightclubs – for sipping slowly rather than shooting, and any hipster worth his beard knows his blanco from his añejo.

Its modern popularity has propelled tequila exports by 16 per cent to US\$568 million in the first six months of 2014, compared to the same period in 2013. The reason, explains Jeff Parrott, brand director for Tequila Don Julio, is consumer experimentation, a

growing interest in craftsmanship and an appetite to discover new flavours. "The tequila segment has been constantly evolving as consumers educate themselves into the category and realise tequila is one of the most complex and unique spirits in the world." And just as tequila is enjoying a revival, its Mexican cousin, mezcal, is also finding favour among consumers, albeit with a much more niche appeal.

Jesse Estes, owner of El Nivel bar in London, and Tequila Ocho, a single-estate, artisanal tequila, notes: "To me, mezcal has the 'bad-boy' image that tequila had for so many years, whereas tequila is perhaps now perceived as being more refined."

Tequila's – and mezcal's – success would not be possible if it weren't for the collective drive of the entire industry – of which there are over 200 producers, who consistently strive to raise the quality of tequila and ultimately its reputation. Just like Scotch whisky or cognac, tequila must be produced to a strict set of guidelines that are governed by the Tequila Regulatory Council (CRT), run as part of Mexico's Agriculture Secretariat.

"Since Tequila has an appellation of origin it has to be distilled in Mexico, unlike other categories like vodka or rum," explains Rodrigo Braun, PR director of Jose Cuervo, the world's largest tequila brand. "Nowadays

many of the most important brands in those categories are not from the same country of origin. That will never be the case with tequila. Mexican culture plays a fundamental role in the company and we are very committed to it."

In order to carry the name tequila on the bottle, the spirit must be made from blue Weber agave, which grows indigenously in the Mexican state of Jalisco. Once fully mature, the agave plant is harvested by skilled 'jimadors', who hack the sturdy leaves off the plant to expose the heart of the agave, or the piña, beneath. An experienced jimador can



Thirsty work: an experienced 'jimador' can harvest over 900kg of 'piñas' every day

Opposite: a Tahona wheel, pulled by mule or ox, is traditionally used to crush the piñas before cooking

work through over 900 kilograms of piñas every day. The agave is then cooked, usually in ovens, to convert the agave sugars into fructose and sucrose.

The piña is then crushed, sometimes by a traditional Tahona wheel pulled by a mule or ox, and its juices extracted for fermentation where the sugars are converted into alcohol. The liquid is then distilled in copper or stainless steel stills before either being diluted and bottled as a blanco tequila with a fruity, vegetal flavour, or aged in oak casks – usually those left over by the American bourbon industry – for reposado (rested for at least two months), añejo (rested for at least one year) or extra añejo (rested for up to three years). Ageing the tequila imparts sweet notes of vanilla as well as woody tones that complement the spirit’s characteristic earthy, vegetal flavour.

Mezcal meanwhile is controlled by the Consejo Regulador del Mezcal (CRM), which has lofty ambitions to raise mezcal as the most premium white spirit in the world. Just like tequila, the spirit is made from agave, but while tequila may only use blue Weber, there are around 30 varieties available to mezcal producers. The cooking process is vastly different too – mezcal distilleries roast their pinas in oven pits dug into the ground, which gives the spirit its trademark smoky, earthy flavour.

The close monitoring of these processes is seen as a vital role that not only protects tequila’s quality and heritage, but could very well see the spirit become as big as Scotch whisky one day. For now, its home market of Mexico and bordering US are tequila’s biggest fans – almost 90 per cent of all tequila drunk throughout the world is done so in the Americas, and the amount of money Americans are willing to part with for a high-end bottle is only increasing.

As Don Julio’s Parrott notes: “The US has the most highly developed ultra-premium tequila segment in the world, and we see this continued consumer-driven premiumisation of the category continuing as a large growth opportunity for the brand.” Don Julio, which has six different expressions in its range, saw sales grow 21 percent in 2014, driven by strong demand from US consumers for high-end tequila. The most expensive expression by Don Julio, which is owned by British drinks group Diageo, is Don Julio Real at \$360, although expect to pay anywhere between \$200-\$250,000 for a bottle of ultra-premium tequila.

A thriving bar scene in the States is also driving interest in tequila as bartenders experiment with mixing their favourite brands into both traditional and unique cocktails. The Margarita – made with tequila, lime juice and Cointreau – is one of the most popular drinks in the US today.

And the trend is starting to take root in countries outside the Americas. Specifically, the UK has

developed such a strong taste for tequila and Mexican culture that a whole wave of themed bars have opened across the country in the last few years. From Neon Cactus in Leeds, which stocks over 100 varieties of Tequila, to Crazy Pedro’s Part-Time Pizza Parlour in Manchester and down to El Nivel in London and Pull and Pump in Brighton, tequila madness is sweeping across the UK.

El Nivel’s Estes explains: “In the UK – and in London in particular – we see more and more people drinking good quality tequila, and with that there is also a growing understanding of how to drink tequila (not just as a shot at the end of a night out).

“Many people have had bad experiences with tequila and have been ‘put off’ from drinking it. That could be due in part to its past ‘shooter’ image. What I’ve seen is that through education and introducing people to good tequila, generally people change their minds.”

The UK’s tequila scene has grown to the extent that last year London hosted the country’s first ever Tequila & Mezcal Fest, a celebration of all things agave and an opportunity for the industry to truly educate consumers through tastings, seminars and food and cocktail pairings.

Eduardo Gomez, founder of Tequila & Mezcal Fest UK, says that despite a growing interest in agave spirits, the industry must do more to dispel the common myths associated with the products. “Our main objective is to educate trade and consumers; unfortunately there is a big misperception about tequila and mezcal in the UK,” he explains. “Therefore, it is our task to show all these new products to the general public, teaching them about it through seminars, master classes, tastings and a lot of fun.”

**The UK has developed such a strong taste for tequila and Mexican culture that a whole wave of themed bars have opened across the country in the last few years**



Photo: Mexico Tourism Board/Ricardo Espinosa - RFO

The UK aside, the next big market on the horizon for tequila is China, which recently lifted its trade embargo on the spirit to allow imports

The UK aside, the next big market on the horizon for tequila is China, which recently lifted its trade embargo on the spirit to allow imports. A ban on 100 per cent agave tequila was implemented in 2008 over fears the drink contained dangerous levels of methanol. However, the law was thrown out in June 2013 by the Chinese government after President Xi Jinping signed a bilateral agreement, dubbed the “Tequila Pact” with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. The agreement means that China could become tequila’s second biggest export market behind the US, with an estimated 10 million litres expected to be shipped there by 2019.

Rodrigo Braun of Jose Cuervo, adds: “There is a huge opportunity for tequila in China, but at the same time it is a very peculiar market because of very marked consumption patterns and preferences. I am sure that we will find a way to become leaders in that market and to promote our products and our culture in that part of the world.”

However, a move into China must be gradual and considered to avoid an agave shortage, a cyclical situation that has plighted the Tequila industry for decades. Last year reports surfaced of farmers allowing their crops to rot in the fields as it was cheaper than harvesting them. Now agave, which takes up to 10 years before it is ready to harvest, is in such demand that the price of agave has shot up from 1 peso per kilo (£0.05), to 6.5 pesos (£0.30).

“Without any doubt China has now become a very important market for tequila brands,” explains Gomez. “However, the reality is that nobody knows how big this can be yet. What is worrying is that if Chinese tequila sales pick up, we could potentially face another agave shortage, as surely many producers didn’t expect the trade embargo to drop.”

If an agave shortage does kick in, shoving prices up even further, global interest in both tequila and mezcal is unlikely to wane. It may take slightly longer than anticipated, but perhaps tequila could well become the next Scotch whisky. **F**

The top tequila Bars in the UK and Mexico

- El Nivel, London
- Café Pacifico, London
- Crazy Pedro’s Part-Time Pizza Parlour, Manchester
- Neon Cactus, Leeds
- Mezcalería, London
- La Capilla, Tequila Town, Jalisco
- Happy Bar, Arandas Town Square, Jalisco
- La Fuente, Guadalajara, Jalisco
- Pare de Sufirir, Guadalajara, Jalisco
- Corazón de Maguey, Mexico City



Raising the bar: London’s El Nivel, a firm favourite among tequila and mezcal connoisseurs