

Serious products, serious barmen and some seriously good Tequila cocktails. The drink that launched a thousand hangovers has finally grown up, says **Kate Ennis**

THE NEW MEXICAN WAVE

Up until recently, if you were to mention the word 'Tequila' to any Brit, the likely response would be: been there, done that, and got the hangover. Poor quality products, and the dominance of shots made issues of quality and style almost irrelevant – until now.

'Tequila is so much more than the old stereotype – it has such variety and versatility,' says Tomas Estes, the man behind Tequila specialists La Perla and Café Pacifico, and bearer of the title 'Tequila Ambassador to Europe', conferred on him by Mexican officials for 30 years of tireless Tequila promotion. 'Cheap shooters are not the whole story,' he insists, 'the whole story is the wonderful premium Tequila that has been coming out of Mexico in the last 15 years or so.'

Certainly the latest industry figures from AC Nielsen show that Tequila is defying the decline experienced by the major spirits categories in the UK, with on-trade volumes growing by 5.7% last year, albeit from a smaller base.

Spurred on by this, a number of brands such as Don Julio, Don Agustin and Siete Leguas, have all been enthusiastically promoting themselves in the on-trade this year, with Partida from Inspirit Brands, the latest to join the party.

Tequila in ten seconds...

- Tequila is not made from cactus, but from the blue agave plant.
- And no, it doesn't have a worm in it – that's its half-brother mezcal.
- The flavour is affected by where the agave is grown (see below), how the harvested agave is cooked, the yeast that's used for fermentation and the wood that's used for ageing.
- All Tequila is produced at high-altitude. Tequila Valley, in Jalisco province, is situated around 1,600m above sea level, and produces 98% of all Tequila. The volcanic landscape produces Tequilas which tend to be more vegetal, earthy and spicy. The Highlands – also known as Los Altos – begin at 2,000m above sea level, and produce Tequilas which tend to be fruitier, richer and sweeter.

PHOTOS: ROB LAWSON / GREEN & RED

Mexico's bestselling premium Tequila, Diageo's Don Julio, has been in the UK since 2005, so why are things taking off now? 'Luxury Tequila is widely acknowledged among the trade to be the next big thing,' says Andy Gaunt of Reserve Brands, 'and that plays into the consumer's desire to be in the know.'

As trendsetters, leading bartenders have been crucial in turning Tequila's fortunes around. Specialist venues, such as Green & Red in London's Shoreditch, have helped to spread the word to both trade and consumers on how complex, yet versatile, good Tequila can be. 'When I meet a Tequila hater, my eyes light up,' says Green & Red co-owner Henry Besant. 'I'm 100% confident I can change their mind.'

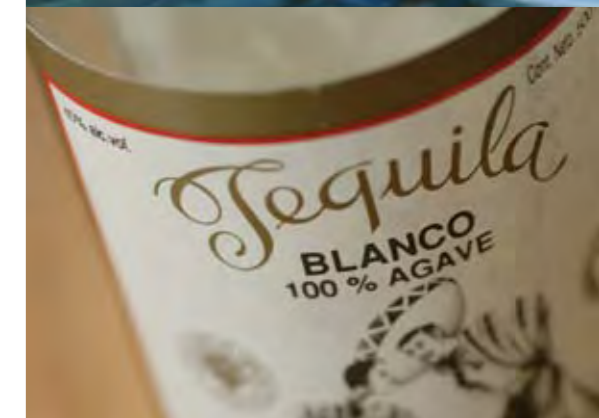
BENEFITS OF BLUE

A key factor in dispelling downmarket misconceptions about cacti and worms in the bottle has been the arrival of numerous premium brands made from 100% blue agave (a fact which will always be stated on the label). These offerings have a purer, more distinct flavour than the more ubiquitous 'mixto' Tequilas, which are made from at least 51% agave and up to 49% cane sugars.

And 100% blue agave versions have an inherent point of interest: namely, there is no other spirit that is made from an ingredient that spends between seven to 12 years growing in the earth, which make soil and climate key factors in Tequila's range of regional styles (see tasting pp 44-46).

The production itself is also highly complex. Quality, style and flavour are affected by the maturity of the agave selected by the *jimador* (agave harvester); how long the agave heart (*piña*) is cooked for, and what type of oven is used; how the sugars or *aguamiel* is extracted, and the type of yeast used for fermentation. Once the product is distilled (at least twice, by law), the type of oak used for ageing is also a factor.

Not, of course, that such technicalities are always a selling point for the public. 'The complex production is a message some want to hear, but my feeling is that it's also about talking from the heart and engendering a passion for Mexico and for tequila,' says Estes, who believes that bar staff enthused by Tequila can really 'bring it alive'.



'I'm 100% confident I can change a Tequila-hater's mind' *Henry Besant*

Various tactics can be used to coax people into tasting. Besant recommends matching the Tequila style to the Tequila-sceptic's usual spirit of choice: gin lovers may prefer blanco Tequila, bourbon fans might like reposado and Cognac and whisky drinkers may point in the direction of añejos or extra añejos. Some Tequilas – like Milagro and Corzo – are modelling themselves on super-premium vodkas by offering triple-distilled products with slick packaging.

SHAKING IT UP

Another stepping-stone to Tequila appreciation is through cocktails – and not just Margaritas. 'Tequila improves all the cocktails you'd normally have with vodka because it's got layers of flavour to it,' says Patrick O'Reilly, commercial manager for Patrón Tequila. 'We're promoting Patrón as a premium white spirit like Grey Goose and want vodka drinkers having Cosmopolitans with Patrón silver, or rum drinkers trying Mojitos with Patrón,' he says.

With the majority of new Tequilas at the premium end, some players in the middle ground like Arette, that offer good value and quality are needed. One of the few on offer is Herradura – a bartender favourite – which is currently shrouded in secrecy

while it awaits a re-launch at the hands of its new owners Brown-Forman.

An accessible long drink is also needed to drive Tequila sales, argue some. 'Tequila accounts for only 1% of white spirits because it hasn't got a generic mixer for long drinks,' points out Sauza marketing manager, Gareth Brown. 'With rum there's coke, with gin there's tonic, with vodka, there's Red Bull or cranberry.'

Taking inspiration from the Margarita and the Paloma, an authentic Mexican long drink typically made with Tequila, lime and grapefruit soda, Sauza is promoting the use of citrus because, the company claims, it brings out Tequila's natural flavour. Venues can choose to interpret that with lime and lemonade, Fanta Lemon, or Lilt, for example.

'Drinkers responding to Tequila mixed? That's the Holy Grail!' exclaims Brown.

Sauza believes well-made mixto products are the key to making Tequila accessible and preventing mainstream consumers from being priced out of the sector. 100% agave is important to get the quality message across in the wake of shooters, but good mixto Tequilas are not necessarily worse, but different, they argue. Just another style to add to Tequila's amazing versatility, then? 🍸



MARGARITA

Perfect the world's best-selling cocktail by using premium Tequila and agave syrup as the sweetening agent (see tasting overleaf).

A TWIST ON THE CLASSICS

Substitute the usual spirit in a Martini, Manhattan, Mojito, Mule or Old Fashioned with Tequila.

SIMPLE LONG DRINKS

Take inspiration from an authentic Mexican drink – the Paloma – by serving Tequila, fresh lime, grapefruit juice and soda water in a salt-rimmed glass. Also try a Batanga – a combo of Tequila, lime and coke – or Tequila with tonic and a wedge of lime.

TRY DIFFERENT SERVES

Accessible tasting opportunities are a good way to win over Tequila sceptics. Green & Red serve tasting flights of three 25ml measures arranged by theme, so customers can sample a blanco, reposado, and añejo from one producer, or three different Tequilas from the same age category or region. The idea is also to encourage sharing as well as sampling.

Serving a special Tequila at around the same price as a house Tequila can help to encourage experimentation, too.

It's Academic

Hosted by Tequila gurus Alex Fitzsimons and Tomas Estes, the Agave Academy is an opportunity for the trade to learn more about Tequila. 'The idea is to hold a relaxed event that places the spirit in context and breaks down all the myths,' says Alex. After a historical tour of agave spirits, the session moves on to a tasting of 14 different brands to compare and contrast, finishing with a cocktail workshop and a 'two-minute Margarita' competition offering the chance to visit some *tequileros* in Mexico.

This spring, Fitzsimons toured the country holding academy sessions in four cities over two weeks in Edinburgh, Leeds, London and Manchester, with over 150 people from the trade attending. The Agave Academy is also looking to visit other major cities like Bristol, Birmingham and Newcastle in the future.

If you're interested in booking an Academy session for your city, contact Alex Fitzsimons on 07971 085665



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