

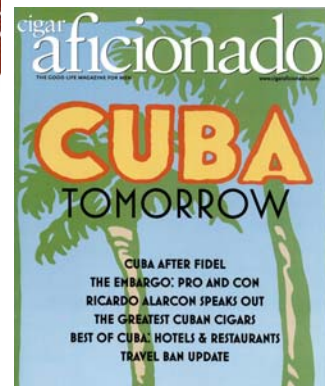
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good life guide drink



Top-Shelf Tequila

If you're thinking that the terms top shelf and tequila don't reconcile, consider this: the whimsical silver-and-glass decanter that stands atop the wicker box in the photo, looking like a surrealist Aztec mechanical man, is part of a box set designed by the artist Alejandro Colunga that celebrates the infrequently produced 1800 Colección. The numeral 1800 not only celebrates the first year in which tequila was aged, but prices the bottle in dollars—if you can find it. Some pretty tall agave, eh?

Once relegated to dive bars and frat parties, tequila is now the stuff of connoisseurs, especially since a new age designation—extra añejo, indicating an age of three years or more—was recently created by Mexico's National Committee on Standardization. Now, tequilas of uncommon character, costing upward of \$100 a bottle, are not uncommon. Purveyors like Julio Bermejo of Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco and Eben Klemm of the Dos Caminos chain think it's time the spirit got some recognition. It's arguably one of the most expensive to produce. The blue agave plants needed to make it take more than eight years to mature. Then the maturation process in Mexico's sweltering heat claims about four times the alcohol evaporation each year as Scotch aging. Some tequilas even source Cognac barrels for storage.

We sipped some of the best and made these observations: The 1800

Colección is a complex mix of flowers, pepper and sweetness, with a maple and ginger nose. Cuervo's Reserva de la Familia (the spirited box in the photo) comes out with flowers and caramel on the nose and turns to licorice, dry spices and candy on the palate. El Tesoro's Paradiso has a Cognac nose and a caramel palate. Gran Centenario Leyenda (foreground) has a bread dough and flower nose that becomes candy and brandy in the mouth, with a slight menthol. Don Julio 1942 (center) presents a bready nose that becomes perfume with hard candy and spice. Tres Generaciones Anejo's (atop box) vanilla bouquet roller-coasters onto the palate with licorice and marzipan. Partida Anejo's bready, hard candy nose turns to sweet berries in the mouth with a burst of spice in the finish. Cabo Wabo's new Uno has a big Bourbon nose and maple candy notes. Herradura Selección Suprema has a huge maple nose and sugar-and-spice palate. Corazón Añejo is all butterscotch with a spice finish

We felt that some of the essential tequila-ness was replaced in these offerings by delicate flavors. Klemm points out that the aging trend doesn't suit the tequila enthusiast who wants to taste tangy agave, not the mellow barrel aging. For him, there is also connoisseurship in tequilas like the brilliant Patrón Silver that eschews aging for agave taste.

Bermejo says the category has room for both points of view: "Mexicans have never told consumers how to enjoy their tequila."
—J.B.

Partida Anejo's bready, hard candy nose turns to sweet berries in the mouth with a burst of spice in the finish.

