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## Premiums lift the spirits of tequila

### From gold to blue

There are four types of tequila. (A fifth type is called gold or young, but connoisseurs barely give it a sniff because it's not made entirely from the fermented juices of blue agave plants in Mexico.) Some of the newer offerings:

#### Blanco (silver)

Not aged, bottled immediately after distillation

- ▶ Trago
- ▶ Tezón
- ▶ Asombroso

#### Reposado (rested)

Aged in oak barrels from two months to less than a year

- ▶ Milagro, Select Barrel Reserve
- ▶ Partida
- ▶ El Diamante del Cielo

#### Añejo (aged)

Aged for at least a year

- ▶ Gran Patrón Burdeos
- ▶ Jose Cuervo Black Medallion
- ▶ El Mayor

#### Extra Añejo

Aged for at least three years

- ▶ Gran Centenario Leyenda
- ▶ 1800 Colección
- ▶ Chinaco Negro

## Food & wine

# Drink's 'hangover' image dissolves

By Kelly Carter  
Special for USA TODAY

NEW YORK — On a Friday night at La Esquina, a hip, subterranean candlelit brasserie and tequila bar in NoLiTa, a 30ish, well-dressed man with slicked-back hair strutted up to the bar and asked, "What's your best tequila? I want top, top, top-shelf."

The bar chef recommended Milagro Tequila Romance, grabbed a bong-like, hand-blown crystal bottle and filled each of three glasses with 1.5 ounces.

"Cool bottle," the patron noted.

The tab for the trio? \$156.

Welcome to today's world of tequila, where super-premiums rule, snifters supersede shot glasses, sales soar thanks to an influx of ultra-premiums, and infused and flavored tequilas add a new twist. And yes, the bottles are cooler than ever.

A staple on bar shelves for years, tequila is now the third-fastest-growing spirit (behind single-malt scotch and Irish whiskey) in the nation, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. Expect plenty more to be consumed Saturday at Cinco de Mayo celebrations across the USA.

The greatest jump in sales comes in the super-premium category, where the 2.6 million gallons sold in 2006 was a 50% increase from the previous year, according to the spirits council.

Tequila, distilled from the fermented juices of blue agave plants in Mexico, still suffers from a not-so-illustrious past. Blame it on the hangover-waiting-to-happen stuff loaded with impurities and sugar that has long thrived at frat parties.

Laurence Kretchmer, author of *The Mesa Grill Guide to Tequila*, says he hears people complain about "a very bad experience" with tequila. "I say, 'You didn't have a bad experience with tequila. You had an experience with a bad tequila.'"

Tequilas fall into two categories: 100% agave tequila, which must be bottled in Mexico, and tequila of 51% agave

sugars and 49% other sugars, which can be bottled outside Mexico.

Some of the pure tequilas are meant to be savored like cognac or single-malt whiskey. The rage these days is aged, or añejo, tequilas, which rest for at least a year in oak barrels that bring on more complex tastes and warm, smooth finishes.

But some aficionados prefer blanco, which is bottled immediately after distillation.

"Blanco is just the way it is right out of the still and really tells you about the quality of the manufacturer," says Anthony Dias Blue, executive director of the San

Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Tequila bars and tastings are more popular than ever. Your name needs to be on the list at La Esquina, where the only thing lacking is a velvet rope. Once-a-month tequila dinners at Salud Tequila Lounge in Chicago became so popular that a second night has been added. Café Coyote in San Diego has a tequila ambassador to help customers sort through the menu's 110 tequilas. And at Las Ventanas Al Paraiso, A Rosewood Resort in Los Cabos, Mexico, guests (most from the USA) can take tequila lessons with tastings.

Along with more sophisticated consumers has come more sophisticated (and pricier) packaging. Patrón unveils its \$500 Gran Patrón Burdeos this month. The limited-production añejo, aged 12 months in Bordeaux barrels, comes in a crystal bottle with a crystal stopper presented in a handcrafted black walnut box. Gran Centenario's Leyenda, which retails for \$249.99,

is aged an average of four years in French Limousin oak barrels and is packaged in a beautiful leather and burlap case. Both are a bargain compared to 1800 Colección, aged in deeply charred barrels of French oak and presented in a pewter and glass decanter designed by renowned Mexican artist Alejandro Colunga — all for \$1,800.

Kretchmer, for one, has expressed concern. "I don't want tequila to become identified as this super expensive premium," he says. "I want it to remain something that people drink all of the time."

Organic also has entered tequila's lexicon. Tequila-maker 4 Copas received its organic certification last month. 4 Copas and Partida also are marketing organic agave nectar, a natural fructose sweetener extracted from the blue agave plant that can be used in place of simple sugars and such in cocktails.

New, too, are infused tequilas. Orange slices and chili peppers are visible inside 267 Infusions' two tequilas. Tequila followed the path of rum and vodka last year with the debut of flavored tequilas. Margaritaville, Milagro and Jose Cuervo are a few of the brands to tout tequilas in a variety of flavors, including orange, lime and tropical fruit.

"I understand flavoring vodka, but flavoring tequila?" Dias Blue asks. "Tequila has a really distinctive flavor, so why mess with it?"

It's another way to jazz up cocktails. Margaritas are still the favorite tequila-based drink, but mixologists create fancier concoctions.

"If I mentioned to someone five years ago I was mixing tequila with champagne, they'd think I was mad," says Naren Young, a cocktail specialist and consultant. "Now bartenders are looking for more interesting spirits to work with that have more character, and tequila fits that mold perfectly."



**Toast of Chicago:** Salud might add a third monthly tequila dinner.

"You didn't have a bad experience with tequila. You had an experience with a bad tequila."

— Laurence Kretchmer, author of *The Mesa Grill Guide to Tequila*, on when he hears people complain of a memorable hangover