



VINTAGE BY MAC GREGORY

The Art of Tequila

When searching for the world's finest tequila, there is only one place to look: Jalisco, Mexico. The six-region state of Jalisco, which includes the capital city of Guadalajara, is the only area sanctioned by the Mexican government to grow agave, which produces tequila. All of the distilleries here receive a "NOM" (Norma Oficial Mexicana) designation, which is administered by the government's Tequila Regulatory Council. NOM ensures the origin of the product, regulates production and establishes quality standards. A true premium tequila must have a NOM, which designates that bottling as authentic and "blessed" by the Mexican government.



photo courtesy of Partida Tequila

Just as many connoisseurs search for the best wines based on their region of origin, so is the method for tequila. Although agave can be cultivated in many areas of the world, a certain variety of the plant known as Weber blue agave is specifically chosen to grow in Jalisco to be used for all classified and registered tequilas. Any agave produced outside of that region may be used to create a distilled spirit; but by law, it cannot be called tequila.

The superlative way to taste tequila is at room temperature served "neat" or plain in a spirit glass or snifter. Any beverage served cold will limit its intrinsic flavors, while adding anything to the drink will take away from its signature qualities. Although salt and lime are commonly served with

a shot of tequila, they actually mask the flavors of the spirit. By sipping the tequila neat, every nuance and character of the product is experienced.

When tasting tequila, it is important to coat the palate to feel the initial burn of the white pepper and the heat that comes from the alcohol, in addition to the vegetal dynamic of the agave. After coating the palate, the next sip will go beyond the burn, showing characteristics of the aging process and the age of the spirit itself, presenting flavors of vanilla, leather and brandy.

As in a "blind" wine flight—where the individual tries to determine what each wine varietal is without being told—tequila can be tested the same. It is ranked by age, based on four "marques" recognized by the Mexican

photo courtesy of Alliance Beverage Distributing Co



government: silver, platinum, or blanco (zero aging); reposado (up to three months of aging); añejo (minimum of one year of aging) and "extra añejo" (minimum of three years of aging). The latter is a new brand category that has been acknowledged only for the last two years and showcases some of the most elusive luxury spirit products in the world. The aging process changes the color, feel and taste of the tequila. As a result, each style suits different palates.

What makes tequila even more special is that it is the only spirit that takes the life of a plant in order to be produced. After reaching full maturation at 10 years of age, the "piña" or heart of the agave is farmed

and macerated to begin the distillation process, and the remainder of the plant dies. Another agave must be sown in its place, taking another decade before a new plant is fully grown.

Tequila is a treasured spirit of Mexico, and it should be enjoyed as such. The next time a round of the good stuff is ordered, wave a polite hand to the passed lime and salt, and savor the nuances of this complex libation. It is the heart of its culture for so many reasons, and its spirit is one to be celebrated.

Thomas "Mac" Gregory is the Food and Beverage Director at The Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale. .SM



photo courtesy of Cruz Tequila