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FROM THE CELLAR | *Chris Rubin*

Tequila Receives Cellar Treatment

New extra-aged category puts a cognac or scotch twist on one of our favorite spirits.

I love tequila. Tangy, slightly vegetal plata, or silver tequila, works for mixing, while añejo, or aged, provides the best sipping. And reposado, translated as “rested,” falls somewhere in between, offering a nice balance of the raw ingredients and vanilla and smoothness from oak.

If that doesn't make life complicated enough, Mexico's Tequila Regulatory Council recently created a new category — Extra Añejo. These high-end bottles, meant more for the snifter (or, ideally, the Riedel tequila glass) than traditional margarita stemware, have aged at least three years before bottling, imbuing them with complex aromas and flavors worthy of a long-aged whiskey or brandy. All the tequilas below are made from 100 percent agave, unlike the popular “gold” bottles that dominate the low end of the market and are little more than tequila-flavored vodka.

- **Don Julio** is a label highly respected by connoisseurs, and their Real was one of the first tequilas available in the extra añejo category. Aged three to five years in American oak barrels, Real has a golden hue and a light smokiness, along with notes of citrus, vanilla and agave. Pewter agave leaves wrap around the distinctive decanter. \$375.

- **Partida Elegante** from a venerable tequila house, is aged in American oak barrels. The bottle looks crafted for perfume more than liquor and is fitting for the delicate aromas within. Only 1,500 bottles were produced the first year. Each comes in a gift box that also holds a crystal stopper to replace the cork once it's opened. And tied around the neck of the bottle is a sterling silver spirit bird, which can be worn as a necklace. \$350.

- The agaves for **1800 Coleccion** come from a single field, and the young distillate goes into small barrels — just 200 litres — of deep-charred French Limousin oak for

five years of aging. Each bottle is accompanied by a special decanter designed by a Mexican artist; the current release showcases the work in pewter and glass of Alejandro Colunga. The dark amber spirit offers aromas from spice to almonds and even coconut. \$1,800.

- Only 450 bottles of Lot 15 of **Chinaco Negro** were

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produced, but more will be available in the future. A dozen casks lost in the cellar are the source for this single cask release, and each will have its own number. This five-year-old tequila comes in Chinaco's usual decanter, but it's black rather than clear. There's a hint of mescal in the smokiness of this unique liquor, which has an impressively long finish. \$250.

- **Gran Centenario Leyenda** ("legend") rests for four years in French Limousin oak before bottling. As Leyenda has it, this was once the private stash of the founder, pulled out only for close friends and family. The fluted decanter and elegant gold-toned embossed label hint at what's inside: Reserves up to 15 years old have been blended in for added complexity. Like virtually all the tequilas in this category, Leyenda has strong oak and vanilla notes and a long finish. \$250.

- A full seven years. That's how long **El Tesoro Aniversario** slumbers in American white oak barrels previously used for bourbon. This new bottle was created to honor the 70th anniversary of La Alteña, the distillery that is home to El Tesoro ("the treasure"). Third generation Master Distiller Carlos Camarena oversees production, fitting as it was his grandfather, Don Felipe Camarena, who began construction of the distillery in the mountains of Jalisco in 1937. All the old, traditional methods still have a home here (except for a tractor that replaced the donkeys that pull the stone wheel crushing the agaves). For the anniversary, only 2,007 cases (about 20,000 bottles) were produced, and this tequila is soft and sweet and lingers in the mouth and the memory. \$150.

- A Baccarat crystal decanter — a new level of prestige for tequila — houses **Dos Lunas Gran Reserve**. The dark amber color of the liquor owes to a decade spent in used sherry casks, making this perhaps the oldest tequila on the market. Gran Reserve is stashed in a hardwood box complete with a sterling silver key, a good indication of the worthy contents held within. Only 1,000 bottles were produced in the first release, but future years may yield as many as 4,000 bottles. \$2,500.

- **Cabo Uno** is far removed from Sammy Hagar's tequila swilling party boy image. This is one to savor, and that's implied by the ultra-elegant decanter, packaged in a hand-made leather box and complete with crystal stopper. Hagar looks to the Rivera family in Jalisco for his agave, and the batch that resulted in Cabo Uno came from a special plot. Once the unique character of these barrels was evident, the tequila was allowed extra time in wood — 38 months — to reach its peak. Delicate in hue, Cabo Uno has a long, smooth finish. \$250.

After the first sip of whichever bottle you choose from the extra añejo category, you'll never look at tequila the same way again. 