



Wine & Spirits

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Tequila High & Low

by David Wondrich



When applied to wine, the concept of terroir makes perfect sense. What's in your glass should reflect the microclimate and geology of the site where the raw materials were produced. After all, what's wine but pure grape juice, fermented and bottled? Grapes grow in soil (the geology) and absorb sunlight and rain (the climate); that's got to affect how they taste. Applied to distilled spirits, however, it's not so obvious. Spirits begin with fermentation, to be sure. But then they're boiled into steam and condensed back into a liquid, only part of which is retained. That fraction—the so-called "hearts"—is then heavily filtered or aged for years in barrels (or both) before getting watered down and, finally, bottled. How can something that processed still taste of the soil?

In most cases, it doesn't. Take vodka, the most popular spirit on earth. Only the most expert tasters can even tell what species of plant it's made from, let alone where that wheat or rye or barley (or those potatoes, grapes, soybeans, what have you) came from. With whiskey, anyway, you can usually tell the grain, but as for the source of that grain—well, it rarely matters, since the distillers themselves tend to source their material from all over (the exception being, of course, something like Islay Scotch, where the peat in the water supply is as important as that used to roast the grain). Cognac has a terroir

expression (grapes from the various subregions of the area tend to make different brandies), but that character is usually obscured by blending. Artisanal Brazilian cachaças have it in spades, but good luck finding them here in the US. Some other rums have it, too, although with so many different islands, styles and terroirs, the stuff it's hard to inter-budt tell you or make any. Then there's Tequila. Mexico's "vino de agave" is a new one; in fact, this very

on Tequila terroir way back *Tequila*, by David Lynch). In geography of Jalisco, the Mi almost all Tequila is produced into Los Altos (the highland Valley, also known as the Camper English's story in the Recently, we held a blind New York offices, where blanco Tequilas, divided flight and a lowland one. chosen to try to mitigate the with Tequila and its terroirs sourcing of agave. We chose than the oak-aged reposado order to minimize any out-ofing the flavor.

Our panel (made up of David Lynch and myself and spirits writers Jack R. John Frizell) had no trouble determining which flight highland Tequilas were, sharper and brighter in flavor deal of acidity and green p notes, while their lowland

ingly intense Tequila redolent of olive brine, if olive brine could be this clean; on the palate, it's sweet and nicely acidic at the same time, with loads of agave flavor. It's like a Margarita in a glass, complete with salt rim (\$38; Beam Global Spirits & Wine, Deerfield, IL). We also liked the *Reserva de Don Julio Blanco*. Less intense than the *El Tesoro* (it would rather have to be), it still has the same bright cleanliness and vegetal notes—think asparagus—in the nose, with some tongue-nipping tannins from the agave to temper its sweet juiciness (\$45; Diageo North America, Norwalk, CT). The *Siembra Azul Blanco* adds some grassiness to the mix, and a bit of heat. But its clean, citric nose brands it as a textbook highland Tequila (\$35; Suro International Importers, Philadelphia, PA). The *El Tequilaño Blanco*, on the other hand, gave little hint to the briny/fruity richness it develops in the mouth (\$25; Cabrera Imports, Newport Beach, CA). Our final recommendation from

The panel also liked the *Partida Blanco* for the way it combined a sweet, dusty minerality with a lot of rich agave sugar (\$50; Partida Tequila, Newport Beach, CA). If the *Partida* shows the elegance lowlands Tequilas are capable of, the *Casa Noble Blanco* shows how intense they can be. All kinds of funky aromas here (chocolate? pork? daisies?), with an eccentric, intriguing palate that reminded some of Peruvian pisco (\$46; Infinium Spirits, Aliso-Viejo, CA).

So. Two Tequilas. Sharp and sweet and vegetal, or earthy and fruity and rich. Is one better? We certainly didn't think so; it's like choosing between sauvignon blanc and gewurztraminer. We'll take both. ■

more variation than the highland one. Among the excellent ones, there were a few that were simply undrinkable, something we hadn't found in the first flight. (Descriptors included "gingko nut," "diapers" and "pencil shavings.") But let's focus on the good ones. We were unanimous in our liking for *Cabo Wabo Blanco*, a well balanced Tequila with textbook lowland mineral/earth/wet cement scents but also some pine needles, pickle brine and other things one associates with a highland Tequila. On the palate, it's clean and stony, with a little tannic nip in the finish (\$49; Skyy Spirits, San Francisco, CA). We also liked the *Cuervo Reserva de la*

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