



Photos by Dante Barrera

TEQUILA

The Liquid Heart of Mexico

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*Who doesn't go down to the cantina
demanding his tequila and calling for a song?*

José Alfredo Jiménez

In Mexico tequila is more than simply aguardiente: it is a tradition, a symbol of our national character. The cinema popularized tequila as a friend of the solitary rancher who confesses his sorrows only to his glass, but which is also a must at any merry-making. Sometimes tequila is seen as alcohol for brawlers,

sometimes as the life of the party, or for sealing a ritual with one's *compadre*. Regardless, undeniably, this robust drink usually accompanies every important occasion in the life of any Mexican, and it has always been present in some way down through the country's history. Originally just a poor man's drink, it has now become a sophisticated international product that represents precisely the liquid heart of Mexico.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

Nowadays, most people know that the Mayan culture produced monumental architecture and developed remarkable mathematical calculations. Less well known, but no less significant, was their discovery of an alcoholic drink called "pulque," still widely consumed in Mexico. Pulque is the grandfather of tequila: a liquid that ferments due to the sugar content of the agave

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First came the glow of light in the sky; the evening was already dark.
 Then came the clap of thunder and a long moment of confusion.
 They approached reverently. The lightning had struck right at the heart of the maguey.
 The plant burned inside and nectar began to flow out.
 With fear and trepidation, perhaps even with a little disgust, they tasted the nectar.
 They knew at once that the gods thought well of them or, at least,
 that the gods were not indifferent toward them.
 They felt grateful because, in the arid wastes where the agave grows,
 any sign of hospitality is welcome.
 We will never know whether it was a miracle, fantasy or pure chance.
 However, today it has become a legend that bears witness to the gods' love
 for the children of the maguey.



Only mature blue agaves, about 8 years old, are ready for making tequila.

or maguey, members of the botanical family *agaveceae* that comprises about 400 species.

In pre-Hispanic times, pulque was the preserve of priests, medicine men, the elderly and warriors. It was associated with divination, health—in that health was a link with the universe—wisdom and strength on the battlefield. Even nobles and their children paid with their lives if they transgressed this prohibition. Getting drunk was a privilege justifiable only when related to the gods. Mayáhuel, a deity of Nahuatl origin, symbolizes the maguey and also gave her name to the plant.

The Tonalmatláhuatl Codex mentions that the Mexicas had learned to cook mezc-al-agave hearts, a technique well-suited to preserving liquids during prolonged forays into the desert. It appears that, even before the Spaniards arrived, the Mexicas knew how to make aguardiente using the plants to hand, secrets which they guarded with fervor and respect.

The Nahuatl Codex tells us that the ancient Indians could distinguish between different types of agave. One hieroglyphic mentions nine varieties which produced one type of liquor and countless types of alcohol.

Long before the Spaniards came to the Americas, the technique of cooking the heart of a plant and fermenting the juices was widely known among the different cultures that populated Mexico. Friar Toribio de Benavente, the author of *Las indias de la Nueva España* (The Indies of New Spain), writes, “If the [maguey] heads are well cooked by a good master, they have such a good head that many

Spaniards like them as much as if they were sweet cider.”

Among the varieties of maguey, one Nahuatl tribe found the most refined variety. The Tiquila people (Ticuila, Tiquilos or Tiquilinos as they were also called) who lived in Amatitán, Jalisco, cultivated the blue agave, which later came to be known as the *Weber tequila*, after the botanist who classified the plant.

The arrival of the Europeans to Mexico radically transformed the techniques of producing alcoholic drinks. Distillation, a process the Spaniards had learned from the Arabs, made it possible to produce a transparent liquor with a higher ethyl gradation from the maguey. This drink was called *mezcal*.

During colonial times, the Iberians controlled all distilling, cultivated large maguey plantations and created a domestic market for their product. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the large haciendas, originally exclusively agricultural, became centers of industry cov-

ering a good part of Mexico’s arable land. Since then, the ranches in Jalisco, particularly in the Tequila, Amatitán and Arenal valleys, have become the main producers and distillers of the blue agave.

In 1785, Viceroy Matías Gálvez persuaded King Carlos III of Spain to sign a decree banning the production and trade of native *aguardiente*. This favored the importation of wines and liquors from the old world. This attempt at putting a brake on New Spain’s flourishing *mezcal* industry was short-lived. Only a decade

later, the governor of the province of New Galicia, Juan Canseco y Quiñones, drew up regulations for the production and trade of *mezcal*. Then in 1795, José María Guadalupe Cuervo received the first actual concession from the King of Spain to manufacture tequila, even though the drink itself already existed. In fact it was a type of *mezcal*, differentiated from *mezcal* itself in that it came from a special kind of agave that was left between seven to ten years to mature, as opposed to the three years required by the *mezcal*-producing plant.

The first distillery where tequila was produced was at the Cuisillos Hacienda, owned by Pedro Sánchez de Tagle, considered the “father of tequila.” From the last decade of the eighteenth century, this branch of agro-industry grew tremendously. Production was concentrated in the west of the country and the tequila market grew immensely among peons and peasants. Its fame spread across the country and contributed significantly to the pros-



The town of Tequila’s main plaza.



The ovens, where *piñas* are cooked for 24 hours. (Casa Cuervo, Tequila, Jalisco.)



The *aguamiel* mixed with water ferments naturally because of its sugar content. (Casa Cuervo, Tequila, Jalisco.)

perity of the region where it was made.

Tequila became an international drink in the nineteenth century. The owner of the La Perseverancia Distillery, Don Cenobio Sauza, exported it to the United States for the first time. New Mexican soldiers had developed a taste for the drink during their invasions of Mexico.

Thanks to the growth of trading networks and the construction of the railway, it became enormously popular domestically as well as along the northern border in the times of Porfirio Díaz.

In about 1900, a European botanist named Weber classified the different species of agave, helping to determine which varieties were best suited to the production of tequila. In 1910, during an exhibition in San Antonio, Texas, the drink was named "Tequila wine," and from then on, this particular *aguardiente* has been called the name we know it by today.

The tequila industry has grown steadily during the twentieth century, becoming one of Mexico's most prosperous. Today, more than 90,000 acres of blue agave are under cultivation in the Tequila



Piñas, or *cogollos*, ready to be steamed.

region alone (mainly in a little town located about 45 miles northeast of Guadalajara), putting Mexico's annual production at over 55 million liters. In the 1990s, the European Union awarded tequila the status of "drink of origin," thereby establishing the difference between tequila and its imitators, particularly from Japan. Now a full fledged drink, tequila has become increasingly popular and is enjoyed internationally.

MANUFACTURE

The cultivation of the agave begins with the planting of *mecuates*, small roots that grow on the base of mature agaves. In commercial fields, between 1,500 to 2,000

mecuates are planted per acre of land. The mature agave, about eight years old, stands about 5 or 6 feet high and is ready to reproduce. This is the only stage at which the plant can be used to make tequila.

Then comes the *jima*, which consists of exposing the heart of the agave. *Jimadores*, farm workers specialized in this type

of work, cut through the sharp-pointed leaves of the plant with machetes to expose the heart, called *piña* or *cogollo*. The hearts, weighing between 50 and 150 pounds, are then sent to the factory in the traditional way, on the back of a donkey, although some farms now also use trucks.

Once at the distillery, the *piñas* are cut in half and placed in ovens, where they cook for 24 hours. After cooling for another 24 hours, they become soft and fibrous and turn a dark golden color. The cooking process has already transformed the plant's natural carbohydrates into the sugars required for fermentation.

The next step consists of grinding the *cogollos*, a task originally done in a sump of volcanic stone with a mule or horse



Alambiques, where tequila is distilled. (Casa Cuervo, Tequila, Jalisco.)



Tequila stored in wooden barrels is prized for the special flavor it acquires. (Casa Cuervo, Tequila, Jalisco.)

turning the grinding mechanism. The milling process produces a thick juice called *aguamiel* (honey-water), the raw material for making tequila. The *aguamiel* is mixed with water and left in large vats where it ferments naturally because of the sugar content of the plant itself (some species produce as many as 40 different types of sugars). Following a period of anywhere between 72 and 150 hours, the liquid is filtered and placed in huge steel containers called *alambiques* where a double distillation process takes place, after which the drink has acquired an average ethyl content of 110 proof. Once again it is mixed with distilled water to produce the required gradation, which varies between 76 and 90 proof.

The result of the process is called “white tequila,” although the correct term is “silver.” Some producers bottle the product immediately at this stage. Others wait a month or two. During that period, herbs may be added, giving it a particular flavor, aroma or color; the result is called “soft” or “golden tequila.” If the liquid is stored in wooden barrels (usual-



ly white oak) for at least three months, the product is called *tequila reposado* (rested tequila) prized for the special flavor it acquires in the barrel. A superior quality of tequila at least one year old is called *tequila añejo* (aged tequila). The rare varieties, aged for more than five years, go by the name of *tequila muy añejo* (very aged tequila), but some connoisseurs think these varieties have lost the actual “spirit” of tequila, and consider these very aged drinks too strong.

The Mexican regulations (Official Mexican Standard, or NOM) for tequila production, in place since 1978, determine that tequila must be fermented with at least 51 percent blue agave. Other varieties contain alcohol derived from maize, *piloncillo*¹ and other substances. Of course

the best tequila is manufactured solely from the blue agave.

Traditionally, tequila should be drunk straight or with lemon and salt, and occasionally together with sangrita, a drink made of tomato juice, orange juice, spices and hot sauce. In recent years any number of cocktails have been invented using a tequila base. Nevertheless, under any circumstances, tequila is a drink that should be consumed with respect, as it readily “goes to a person’s head” very suddenly and without warning. As a sort of caution to tequila drinkers, the following popular verse describes the effects of tequila drunk in excess:

*Water from the green plants:
You lose me, you kill me,
You make me need to go on all fours.*

NOTES

¹ A brown sugar derived from the processing of sugar cane. The sugar is pressed into a cone shape and left to cool. This sugar is used in desserts and cakes, and to sweeten some hot drinks. [Editor’s Note.]

THE GODS OF THE AGAVE

Ancient Mexican manuscripts make reference to the many uses of the maguey, which provided food, soap, fiber for textiles, paper for writing, color for painting and a very sturdy material for footwear. It was also used to make religious artifacts, needle and thread for sewing, ropes and *tejamaniles*,¹ so that the world of Man could be differentiated from nature and made less hostile. The maguey was so important that it was part of all ceremonies, and even became a citizen in its own right. People began to use it, and it yielded enough products to make a place for itself in Mexica society. Of course the Mexicas also recognized that the maguey's aroma was ritual. The plant grew in the earth, but its most prized fruit was cooked in heaven. The fount of this basic alcohol always remained greater than the people who procured it, and who paid tribute to their own work on the assumption that the euphoria the nectar induced in the best of men had some sort of meaning that surpassed those men and linked them to the cosmos.

In somewhat ambiguous hieroglyphics, the Tonalmatláhuatl Codex tells of the Aztecs' pilgrimage that began in 1116, when a tribe left Aztlán ("the place of herons") and set out in search of an eagle perched on a nopal cactus, swallowing a serpent. Those brave—or simply obstinate—men left the islands of Mextlitlán (also known as Mezcales in the loose Confederation of Chimalhuacán)

with the idea of pursuing their vague, foolhardy adventure. This strange document, also known as the "Pilgrimage Strip," suggests that the name "Mexico" was chosen by great defeated gods who talked to the agave of their secret tragedy. The god Huitzilopochtli ordered them to find a new name. The men obeyed because they knew the gods to be a primeval force. Not without modesty or fear at the dizzying change, they consented to call themselves "Mexicas." They trudged on for long days and tiring kilometers in search of the promised symbol and finally found it, or thought they had, in what is now the capital of Mexico. No one intended to forget—yet no one remembered—that primitive god Mextli (derived from *melt*, meaning agave or pulque, and *xichtli* meaning *quiote*) who was associated with duty, law and destiny. Throughout their arduous journey, those men fed and clothed themselves with the help of the maguey cactus.

In about 1325, this deranged but upstanding tribe founded the unlikely city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. In their language, its name means "where the gods of the agave reside."

NOTES

¹ A thin board, cut up into strips, used as roofing material. [Editor's Note.]

