

## AFFORDABLE LUXURY— EXTRA AÑEJO TEQUILAS SET A NEW STANDARD



The first sniff, sip and swallow will quickly reveal why 100% blue agave tequilas are so tremendously popular. Ounce for ounce, these ultra-premium tequilas are comparable in quality and allure to vintage malts and well-aged cognac. Their extraordinary characters are so remarkably rich and vibrant that you're left with the unmistakable conclusion that this is how tequila is meant to taste.

These are the best of times for the category. Interest in handcrafted tequilas has been nothing short of phenomenal and propelled the category to grow a robust 10% in 2007, the steepest increase of the light liquors, outpacing the growth of vodka (6.7%) and rum (5.1%)—this according to the Beverage Information Group.

Considering that tequila constitutes only about 6% of the American spirits market, there is tremendous opportunity for continued growth.

"I'm confident that in the foreseeable future tequila will challenge vodka as America's spirit of choice," contends Gary Shansby, founder and chairman of Partida Tequila. "Tequila has everything consumers are looking for in a spirit—body, texture, enticing aromatics, layers upon layers of sensational flavors, and unlimited drink applications. Vodka simply can't offer consumers the same enticements."

As their labels clearly state, 100% agave tequilas are single-ingredient products. They're distilled using nothing other than blue agave, a majestic green succulent related to the aloe. While there are nearly 360 varieties of the agave, tequila can only be made from the Weber blue agave. Imported into the United States by Bing Crosby and Phil Harris in the early '60s, Herradura was the first 100% agave tequila available in the U.S.

Crafting great tequila is a labor-and time-intensive process. Agaves mature at their own pace irrespective of demand. It takes the plant between eight to twelve years to reach maturity and optimally is harvested when the plant's natural sugar content has peaked at about 21-25 brix. The agave thrives in rich volcanic soil, and a warm and dry climate. As it is with wine, the appellation and growing region where the agaves are cultivated is a point of distinction between brands.

The differences between brands of 100% agave tequilas are years in the making, and taking shortcuts during the production process consigns a brand to mediocrity. From harvesting agaves to the un-barreling of an añejo, the production cycle can exceed 15 years.

Like Champagne and cognac, tequila has its own appellation, Denominacion de Origen, which delineates growing regions and specifies

[Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

ingredient content. Since 1993, the production of tequila has been strictly regulated by the CRT (Consejo Regulador del Tequila), whose symbol appears on every label of tequila. The agency rigorously enforces quality standards throughout all segments of the industry; including agave growers, distillers (tequileros), bottlers, and marketers.

The growing legions of tequila aficionados are likely as attracted to the romance of discovery as they are to the irresistible appeal of the spirit.

For many, the appreciation of fine tequila requires sampling new brands and styles. There's a joy to the discovery, a process without limitations; and if your retail shelves provide the visa and port of entry, you'll be the long-term beneficiary.

"Tequila enthusiasts revel in discovering new and exciting brands, proving themselves to be ahead of the curve by introducing them to their circle of friends," says Christopher Zarus, president of the International Tasting Group, importers of six small batch, limited production reposados. "Consumers are using the internet to learn about rare and fascinating tequilas, which has further fueled interest in the category. The steadily increasing sales of ultra-premium brands confirm that we've developed a taste for the good stuff."

## SENIOR CLASS AÑEJOS

After more than six-years of deliberation, the CRT has created the designation of Extra Añejo, which signifies that a 100% agave tequila has been aged for three-years or more. For generations these ultra-luxurious spirits were reserved for the private use of the maestro tequilero and family, but now any commoner with a few extra hundred dollars in their pocket can afford what many consider the epitome of the craft.

Well before this new designation was put into effect, a handful of these rare añejos were thriving in the States. Among them is the acclaimed **Herradura Selección Suprema**, which was likely the first extended age tequila Americans had ever experienced...and it was good.

Introduced in 1995 in honor of the company's 125th anniversary, Herradura's present to mankind is a masterpiece handcrafted from estate-grown

agaves; aged 49-months in select white oak barrels. Production of Selección Suprema is limited to less than 2000 bottles a year, which partially accounts for the \$250 price tag.

Scarcity and demand doesn't begin to explain the tequila's intrinsic value. With its wafting floral bouquet and bakery-fresh flavors, Herradura's famed extra añejo is a celebration of style; an homage to the terroir of Amatitán. Appropriately enough, Selección Suprema is presented in an individually numbered decanter.

Also making its American debut in 1995 was vintage-dated **Jose Cuervo Reserva De La Familia**. As the name suggests, for two centuries this highly prized spirit remained the private domain of Jose Cuervo and his descendants. It was finally released to commemorate their 200th anniversary.

The arrival of limited edition Reserva de la Familia had the same impact on American drinking trends as the Selección Suprema. Few in this country had ever tasted a tequila of this magnitude and intensity. The Reserva is an engaging spirit with a lustrous amber color, generous bouquet, and a spicy, oaky palate that gradually subsides into a cognac-like finish.

This noble añejo is crafted from a blend of the finest aged tequilas in their cellars, all of which have been matured for a minimum of 3 years in both new charred French and American oak barrels. Underscoring its artisan nature, Reserva de la Familia is bottled, labeled, numbered, and sealed in wax by hand.

These museum grade tequilas redefined our concept of luxury living. By the time 1996 rolled around, Americans in droves were trading in their shot glasses for brandy snifters. Salt and limes were soon discarded, and as a nation we've never looked back.

Many of the perennial heavyweights in the category hail from the rugged highlands of Jalisco. **El Tesoro De Don Felipe Paradiso** is a 5-year old extra añejo handcrafted from a blend of aged tequilas selected for their distinctive characteristics. The extra añejo is then further matured in French oak casks previously used by A. de Fussygnay Cognac, with an effect appreciated throughout its sultry character. If it's true that ingenuity is the mother of invention, then double-barreled Paradiso is a stroke of genius.

[Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

Equally exquisite is **Don Julio 1942**, a highly acclaimed ultra-premium made at La Primavera distillery under the supervision of legendary tequilero, Don Julio Gonzalez Estrada. Issued to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Don Julio's first distillery, the limited edition extra añejo spent a minimum of three years in oak, during which it develops a satiny, medium-weight body, and the enticing flavors of vanilla, fruit, spice, and toasty oak. The lingering finish is sweet and sublime.

The world's bestselling brand of 100% agave tequila recently launched its most inspired and compelling marque to date, **Gran Patrón Burdeos**. Debuting at around \$500, Burdeos is made from a blend of añejos aged more than a year in American and French oak. The tequila is then transferred to ex-Bordeaux barrels and racked for a year or more in the cellars of Patrón's hacienda in the highlands of Jalisco. Over that time the tequila develops a dark honey/amber hue and a bouquet of lightly spiced, floral and fruity aromas. It has a velvety, surprisingly light body, and a captivating palate of nutty, and wine-induced flavors. The finish is long and thoroughly satisfying. Be fully prepared to be impressed.

Hacienda Los Camachines has extended its range of tequilas with the release of **Gran Centenario Leyenda Extra**, a highly seductive añejo aged for an average of four-years in French Limousin oak. To enhance the depth and complexity of Leyenda's blend, the maestro tequilero adds rare reserve añejos selected from the Hacienda's 150-year old cellars. The result is a world-class extra añejo with a dark amber color, aromas of vanilla, clove and oak, and long, flavorful finish.

Award-winning **Milagro Select Barrel Reserve Añejo** is triple-distilled exclusively from estate-grown agaves and aged no less than three-years in new French oak barrels. Made in the town of Tepatitlán in the highlands of Jalisco, this ultra-sophisticated extra añejo has a voluptuous body and a bouquet brimming with oaky, peppery and herbaceous aromas. The tequila quickly fills the mouth with the appetizing flavors of toffee, honey, and vanilla with delightfully spicy notes; all of which thankfully linger on the palate for an impressively long time.

Also worthy of *grand cru* status is **Casa Noble Añejo Limited Reserve**. Made in the town of Tequila at the La Cofradia Distillery, this regal añejo is triple-distilled in alembic stills and matured for five years in French White Oak barrels. Produced in limited quantities, the añejo has a silky texture, delectably spicy palate, and a sweet, slightly smoky finish.

## ULTRA-PURITY, ULTRA-PREMIUM

Partida is the fastest growing brand of premium tequila in the country, and recently released **Partida Elegante** will certainly fan the flames. One of the first tequilas to bear the extra añejo designation on its label, Elegante is handmade under the direct supervision of maestro tequilero Enrique Partida at the family's estate outside of Amatitan, Mexico. The savory tequila is distilled entirely from estate-grown agaves and matured in American oak barrels for 36 to 40 months. It has a radiant golden hue, captivating layers of dry spicy flavors, and a long memorable finish. Partida Elegante is too marvelous to share with the in-laws.

Another brand on the charts with a bullet is 4 Copas, a masterfully crafted range of 100% agave tequilas. Made at La Quemada Distillery in the lowlands of Jalisco, **4 Copas Extra Añejo** is distilled using certified organic agaves and matured for a minimum of 54 months in American white oak. It is redolent with the aromas of vanilla, honey, and ripe red fruit, and a leisurely finish loaded with dry, spicy flavors. The thoroughly enjoyable añejo retails under \$200, which makes it an affordable slice of heaven.

Created in 1996 by ex-Van Halen rocker Sammy Hagar, super-premium Cabo Wabo 100% agave tequilas have generated considerable excitement in their brief, yet illustrious careers. Fans of the brand will delight in **Cabo Uno Añejo Reserva**, an extra añejo aged 38 months in both French and American oak barrels. Limited in production to only 1,800 cases a year; the tequila has an herbal and spice bouquet, a dry full palate, and a slightly smoky finish.

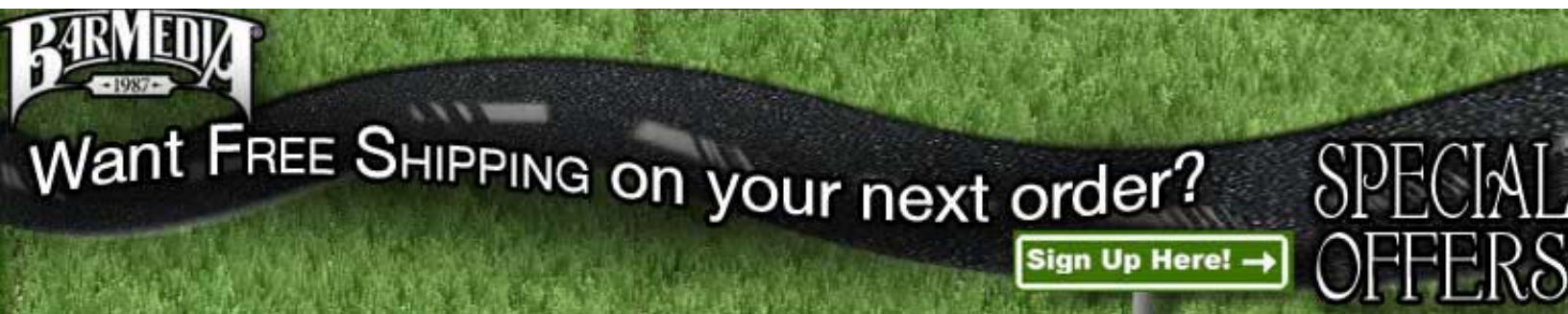
[Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

Ultra-premium ***El Diamante del Cielo Añejo*** is triple-distilled in state of the art pot stills from estate-grown agaves, then aged up to four years in oak. The limited production tequila is a handcrafted treat possessing a brilliant array of spicy, semi-sweet aromas, and an expansive palate loaded with the flavors of caramel, black pepper, and succulent fruit. The warm finish is long and flavorful.

Although not a tequila, ***Scorpion Añejo Gran Reserva Mezcal*** is a magnificent 100% agave spirit that merits mention. Made in Oaxaca, the small

batch mezcal is triple-distilled and aged 7-years in charred, American oak barrels. The limited edition Gran Reserva Mezcal has a captivating bouquet of vanilla, black cherries, baking spices, and peaty smoke; an oily, medium-weight body; and a semi-sweet palate of maple, and caramel with a lingering dose of smoke on the finish. The FDA approved scorpion exoskeleton inside the bottle is a harmless observer.

Sipping any one of these spectacular añejos reinforces why so many people are enamored with tequila. We should all have futures as bright.



---

**ROBERT PLOTKIN** is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and has recently authored his 16th book, *Secrets Revealed of America's Greatest Cocktails - The Hottest Spirits, Freshest Places and Coolest Drinks*. He can be reached at [www.BarMedia.com](http://www.BarMedia.com) or by e-mail at [robert@barmedia.com](mailto:robert@barmedia.com).

---

[Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)