

Los Angeles Times

WINE & SPIRITS

January 23, 2008 | Betty Hallock, Times Staff Writer

WALK into an L.A. tequila bar and your head starts spinning even before you see the bottom of your first caballito (Mexican shot glass). Just the numbers are astounding -- 96 blanco tequilas, 130 reposados, 121 añejos, a pour of a tequila named 1800 for \$10 or of one called Tres-Cuatro-Cinco for \$175.

On the heels of the tequila boom, tequila bars are multiplying, especially here in Los Angeles. And ever since Corzo tequila hit the bottle-service scene, it seems you can't go to the mall without bumping into a temple of agave spirits. It's a tequila lover's paradise, but who's helping the not-yet-aficionados distinguish 4 Copas from 7 Leguas or a Hacienda de Oro from a Hacienda de la Flor?

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Some bars, such as Pink Taco in Century City with its panuchos (pink tacos) and rowdy Guadalajara-goes-Vegas atmosphere, are capitalizing on tequila's good-times reputation. Others such as Amaranta Cocina Mexicana in Canoga Park are more ambitious Mexican restaurants for whom the wide selection of fine tequilas is as much a requirement as an impressive wine list is at an upscale Italian place.

But before you jump off the margarita wagon and start sampling those sippable tequilas, plenty of which are priced in the \$25- to \$35-per-shot range, take note -- you're often on your own when it comes to picking your three-year añejos or limited-production reposados.

Amaranta opened in a Westfield shopping center in Canoga Park in June with a selection of more than 350 tequilas. Six-month-old Pink Taco (also in a Westfield mall) has more than 100 tequilas. "We just bumped up the tequila list with another 12 last week," says Pink Taco chief executive Harry Morton.

There's the new **Mucho Ultima Mexicana** in Manhattan Beach, where the Bermuda shorts-in-winter crowd can choose from 150 tequilas. Owner Michael Zislis says he plans to have 250 ("that's all the bar can hold").

Come spring, Jimmy Shaw, owner of Loteria Grill in the Original Farmers Market, is opening a second Loteria -- this one with a full bar featuring tequila.

"I don't want a selection of more than 100," Shaw says. "I think that's overwhelming. I want a staff that really knows what we're presenting."

What's hip to sip

EVEN choosing from among 100 tequilas can be daunting. It's not enough anymore to know your silvers or blancos (not aged) from your reposados (aged from two months to a year) from your añejos (aged for a year or more) from your golds (which can contain additives). There's extra añejo (aged for three years or more), gran reposado, blanco suave, platinum, even flavored tequilas.

The classification extra añejo, or extra aged, was approved by Mexico's National Committee on Standardization only about two years ago (along with flavored tequilas), so there are more añejos aged five years or even longer that are arriving on the market.

High-end mixologists are adding añejos to their cocktails, whereas bartenders once were loath to pour the aged stuff for anything other than sipping. Meanwhile, it's ever more hip to sip your blancos and reposados, so every category in the market is trendy.

"It's still an evolving market, but you have to watch out because there's a lot of marketing that doesn't

necessarily have to do with the product," says Ian Chadwick, who runs a tequila forum on his "In Search of the Blue Agave" website. "Gran reposado doesn't mean anything. Blanco suave doesn't mean anything."

Then there's lowland style, highland style, double- or triple-distilled tequila, tequila aged in wine barrels, private labels, limited production runs and more showcase bottles than you can shake a lime at.

Help?

"I try to do personalized tastings with myself or my staff so that people can better understand -- and get what they want," says manager Matthew Dickson at Malo in Silver Lake, where the tequila list runs upward of 170 tequilas (plus 22 mezcals).

"People should feel comfortable getting tequilas. It's an extensive menu -- no two tequilas are the same -- and it can be intimidating."

There are no set flights on the bar menu at Malo; you have to ask for a tasting. "If somebody's new to tequila, I'll do all silvers or reposados," Dickson says. "A lot of people are caught up in the añejos, but the agave flavor of a good silver is fantastic. . . . I don't serve it in a shot glass. Ever. It comes neat, in a whiskey glass, at room temperature. No lime or orange or salt on the rim."

That 'special one'

NOT everyone at every tequila bar is helpful. It's not uncommon to walk into a tequila bar, ask for a recommendation and have the bartender tell you, "I don't really drink tequila," or look back at the wall of tequilas behind him with an expression as befuddled as yours might be.

"It's in the best interest of the tequila bar owner to make sure that their staff is knowledgeable," says Darin Jones (a.k.a. Mr. Agave) whose website, tequila.net, reviews tequilas and tequila bars. "It would be difficult to pick that 'special one' when entertaining hundreds of selections. . . . A professional trained in the history, production and tasting profiles of tequila is a must for a tequila bar offering 375 selections, wouldn't you think?"

At Amaranta, pours of tequila come served in Riedel flutes, without lime (but you could ask for the house-made sangrita, or "little blood," a popular "chaser" made with tomato juice).

A shot of Partida Elegante, for \$110, is served on a silver plate with cinnamon-dusted orange segments and fresh cucumber as a palate cleanser between sips. "And dinner's on us," says general manager Frank Tognotti.

As for the other hundreds of tequilas on the menu, "we try to engineer our menu to help both the servers and customers in the process," Tognotti says. "We have the menu broken up into categories [blanco, reposado, añejo] and subcategories [gentil, moderado, agresivo]."

Within those subcategories, tequilas are organized within flavor profiles, such as "slight oak, fruit nose." Forty-two reposados fall under the heading "vanilla, honey, caramel, butter" -- still, it's something to work with.

In the red glow of the atmospheric lighting at L.A. tequila-bar standard-bearer El Carmen on 3rd Street in Los Angeles, reading the list of tequilas -- for the uninitiated -- might be like being blindfolded, handed a stick and asked to swing at a piñata. It can lead some down the path of blended margaritas.

"I didn't know what else to order," shouted an attractive blond over the din bouncing off the lucha libre-mask-covered walls.

Some efforts have been started to help guide consumers through the tequila morass.

Mexico's Tequila Regulatory Council, or CRT, awards its "distintivo 'T' " certification to establishments worldwide dedicated to promoting the culture and quality of tequila.

The program establishes standards to uphold quality; part of the program includes an examination of a staff's understanding of tequila. It's a good idea, but the application process and costs can be prohibitive,

says Julio Bermejo, beverage manager of the renowned tequila bar at Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco, who has been designated "ambassador of tequila to the U.S." (not a paid position) by the state of Jalisco.

"The intention of the program is excellent," he says, "but it costs to get certification, and some of it is nitpicking. The CRT wants you to destroy all your bottles so that people don't refill them, which is good. But some of them are works of art and I just don't want to throw them away. The customer who has the last drink from a bottle gets that bottle."

The Academia Mexicana del Tequila, or AMT, plans to open a U.S. chapter in San Diego this year. Its "AMT 100% tequila" certification for restaurants is part of its educational program. "One of the requirements is that the staff speak intelligently about the product," says Phillip Soto Mares, AMT USA president and owner of a tequila company.

Tequila sommelier

BUT even the effort to clarify quality standards has inspired some affectations and confusion. The term tequilier (tequila sommelier) has been thrown around lately, but it has nothing to do with formal training.

"The wine world has the master of wine program," Bermejo says, "but in terms of tequila, there's nothing like that. Some people call themselves that, but there's no way of knowing what their experience is."

The website of L'Scorpion in Hollywood says that its tequiliers offer food pairings and tequila flights.

But on a recent evening, the bartender there chuckled and shook his head when asked if there were any flights (so I didn't bother asking what he thought might go with the nachos libre). But he picked out several of his favorites to try, including snifters of Don Julio 1942 añejo, Don Eduardo reposado and a Casa Noble blanco -- all half price for happy hour.

"You try a tequila, tell the bartender what you think and he will work with you from there," says James Sinclair, a partner at PaJa Group, which operates L'Scorpion.

At **Mucho**, flights of tequila are on the menu, most of them flights of usual-suspect brands: Don Eduardo, Herradura, Corzo. The ultima flight includes 3/4 -ounce pours of El Tesoro Paradiso, Herradura Selección Suprema and Don Julio Real for \$75.

"To get a staff to know hundreds of tequilas -- it's hard," **Mucho's Zislis** says. "We've been open seven weeks. The bartenders are probably familiar with about half of them right now. It takes time. . . . There are always three or four bartenders on; if one doesn't know a particular tequila, another one has had it."

And there's always tequila school. Bermejo's Blue Agave Club, a tequila tasting club at Tommy's in San Francisco, has more than 6,000 members. Others have followed suit: The Spanish Kitchen in West Hollywood started a "Tequila School" tasting club last year.

And at Tommy's, to become a "Tequila Master," members must sample 35 different tequilas (tracked by card punches at the bar; maximum three per visit).

To qualify for a "Tequila Ph.D." or become a "Tequila Ninja Master," members must try another 35 tequilas (the tequila can be in margaritas for a Ph.D., but you have to drink it neat for the Ninja Master title) and receive an 80% or higher on a 70-question exam that covers fermentation, distillation, tequila regions, brands and personalities.

"Now when somebody is looking for a tequila," Bermejo says, "my customers help each other out."

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