

tequila
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TEQUILA TAKEOVER

PREMIUM CANADIAN-OWNED TEQUILA + EARNING A PLACE ON EVERY BACK BAR

BY ANDREA YU

Like many of us, Eric Brass at one time treated tequila as a “close your eyes, plug your nose and hope for the best” experience. But that all changed after he went to Mexico on an exchange semester in 2005 and tried good tequila for the first time.

“I thought ‘this is incredible.’ It was like a cognac or a fine wine or scotch,” Brass recalls. The experience stuck with him as he returned to Canada and discovered a gap in the market between cheap, low-quality tequila and high-end varieties favoured by celebrities and bottle service seekers. Brass filled that gap in 2012 by launching Tequila Tromba—a premium craft tequila that offers finer nuances of taste and flavour without the exorbitant price tag.

While Brass is Tromba’s CEO and founder, he relies on some pretty skilled folks down south to create his product. By chance, while on exchange, Brass befriended Rodrigo Cedano who is the son of Marco Cedano—the original master distiller for one of tequila’s biggest names: Don Julio. Brass appealed to the elder Cedano, who was ready to shift gears. He agreed to hop on board with two conditions. The first: Cedano needed to be a partner in the business. And the second: “no gringos in the kitchen,” Brass recalls with a laugh. Brass didn’t hesitate to oblige and still relinquishes all control of production to the Cedanos, who rely on deep connections in and knowledge of the tequila-making process to make Tromba what it is.

One of the most important relationships that the elder Cedano has formed is with the region’s jimadors—harvesters skilled at identifying agave plants ready to pick. Only blue agave plants grown in the province of Jalisco are used for making tequila. These succulents will grow for seven to 10 years before they’ve matured and the nectar becomes sweet and flavourful enough to produce a quality tequila. The region in which agave is grown also



affects the flavour of the tequila—some being sweeter while others with a minerality and vegetal quality if grown in volcanic regions.

Following centuries-old traditions that are still heavily regulated by the Mexican government, jimadors precisely hand-cut leaves from the agave plant to release and uproot the plant’s bulb, called the piña. It weighs an average of 35 kilograms or about 77 pounds and the jimadors transport them to the factory by horse or donkey.

The piñas are then quartered and slow-cooked in a traditional brick oven at around 100 degrees Celsius for over 40 hours, depending on the recipe. This helps flavours mature and brings out the sweetness of the agave. Once cooking is complete, the agave is crushed to extract its sweet juices and a yeast is added to ferment the liquid. Once fermentation is complete (which takes up to four days), the liquid is then distilled twice (although some makers will distill up to four times) and bottled to create a “blanco” tequila. The tequila can also be aged in stainless steel or oak barrels to further develop flavour and complexity, creating a “reposado” (aged up to one year), “añejo” (aged two to three years) or “extra añejo” (aged over three years) tequila.

Canadian-owned tequilas

Looking to dive deeper into premium tequilas? Try one of these Canadian-owned varieties.

TROMBA

Launched: 2012

Founder: Eric Brass

Products available: Blanco, Reposado, Añejo

Blanco tasting notes: caramelized agave, pineapple, pressed agave fibre, bread, white pepper

SIEMPRE

Launched: 2017

Founders: Alex Lacroix and Monica Sanita

Tasting notes: spice, herb, pepper, brine/sea salt and citrus with candied, floral notes and hints of caramel and sweet fruit

AGUAMIEL

Launched: 2018

Founder: Craig Shaw

Tasting notes: black pepper, vanilla bean, grilled pineapple, lemongrass, green vegetables

Another important classification to note is “mixtos” tequila. These cheaper, lower quality tequilas are made of only 51 per cent agave, while the other 49 per cent is comprised of sugar, corn syrup or caramel, resulting in that harsh, unpalatable flavour that necessitates shooting down and chasing with a squeeze of lime.

But Jay MacRaild, general manager of Calgary’s Añejo Restaurant and now the Añejo Group’s director of operations, has seen an enormous transition in his customers’ attitudes towards tequila since Añejo opened in 2012. “The tequila industry has made, and is making, a huge transition, from something people threw up on at college parties, to a premium spirit that deserves its place on every decent back bar in the world,” says MacRaild.

For those still recovering from their “mixtos” days, MacRaild suggests sipping a 100 per cent agave tequila neat

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at room temperature. “There is a large range of flavour and nuance to tequila and it can’t be appreciated if you overload your senses by shooting it,” he says.

For those ready to go deeper into the tequila journey with equally deep pockets to match, Añejo stocks a handful of extremely high-end tequilas that cost over \$100 an ounce. These are all “extra añejo” tequilas that have been aged for at least three years. The most expensive on the list is Patrón en Lalique, ringing in at a whopping \$1,200 an ounce. The bottle, handmade by French crystal makers Lalique, certainly contributes to the tequila’s high cost, but so does the formulation; a blend of Patrón’s oldest and rarest tequilas (some aged in barrels for up to seven years) to offer nuances of vanilla, pecans and caramel.

Thankfully, premium tequila like Brass’s Tromba remains at an affordable price (\$9 an ounce at Añejo or about \$50 retail per bottle). But that could soon change if free trade between Mexico and Canada under NAFTA falls apart.

Torontonian Craig Shaw, who founded Aguamiel Tequila this year is hopeful that trade relations will remain open. “Premium tequila is at such a high price today that if there are any more tariffs or taxes added onto that product, the prices are going to go through the roof,” says Shaw. “We’re already having a hard-enough time trying to compete with the vodkas and gins out there that are made within the province.”

The tariffs could potentially put a damper on a healthy, vibrant craft tequila scene that’s been steadily growing in Canada. The Liquor Control Board of Ontario reported that tequila sales grew 12.7 per cent from 2016 to 2017, ahead of gin (11.9 per cent growth) and whisky (6.8 per cent), reflecting consumers’ “premiumization” of tequila, trading up from cheap mixtos to 100 per cent agave varieties.

Bars and restaurants have undoubtedly been pivotal in fueling this trend. Aguamiel’s Shaw has partnered with restaurants that are creating dishes to pair with and play on certain notes in his tequila. Mixologists are increasingly incorporating tequila into their cocktail menus in what Tromba’s Eric Brass calls a “tequila takeover.” Classic cocktails like a Negroni, for example, might be made with tequila in place of gin or a Caesar with tequila instead of vodka. Brass, who built his brand by appealing to bartenders and bar owners, is grateful for the support of mixologists who have sung the praises of finer tequilas to their customers, busting myths and misconceptions along the way.

“Bar owners and bartenders are at the forefront of educating their consumers.”

Salted Agave & Apple Sour

- .75 oz Tromba Reposado
- .5 oz lemon juice
- .5 oz salted agave nectar
- 1.25 oz fresh squeezed Granny Smith apple juice
- 1 egg white (to be added just before shaking so alcohol and citrus don’t cook it)
- + apple slices for garnish

Combine all ingredients and dry shake, hard. Add ice, shake and pour over fresh ice in a rocks glass. Garnish with apple slices.

Vida Rosa

- 2oz Siempre Plata
- 1 oz hibiscus agave
- 1 oz fresh lime juice
- + hibiscus salt for rim and garnish
- + lime wheel for garnish

For hibiscus agave, steep two hibiscus tea bags in 1 cup of boiling water. Soak for 4 minutes and remove. Add 1/2 cup of agave to water while still hot and stir to dissolve. For cocktail, half rim a rocks glass with hibiscus salt and fill with ice. Pour Siempre Plata, hibiscus agave and fresh lime juice into a shaker filled with fresh ice. Shake vigorously and fine strain into a glass. Garnish with a lime wheel half-coated in hibiscus salt.

Inverano En Jalisco

- 2 oz Aguamiel Tequila
- .75 oz fresh lime juice
- .75 oz jalapeno syrup
- .5 oz fresh pomegranate juice
- + soda water
- + lime wedge for garnish

Shake all ingredients and top with soda. Garnish with a lime wedge.



tasting tequila

Monica Sanita, co-founder of Siempre Tequila, guides us through the three components of tasting tequila.

VISUAL: Swirl some tequila around a clear glass and hold it up to a natural light. The body should hold itself together well, with uniform tears forming after a minute. Submerge the tip of your index finger in the tequila and feel the liquid against your thumb—an oily body means a great tequila.

AROMA: When nosing the tequila, keep the glass around an inch from your nose and gently inhale with your mouth open to let the aromas travel over your tongue. They should be soft and inviting without any burn.

TASTE: Take a small sip and coat your palate before swallowing. Take a second sip and concentrate on the flavour on your palate. A good tequila will create salivation without burning. Swallow the tequila and exhale to express the alcohol vapours over your tongue, leaving the lingering finish and the notes of the tequila behind on your palate.

FOR EXAMPLE: On the nose, Siempre is peppery with fresh agave and a hint of cotton candy. On the palate it tastes soft, sweet and savoury with an exceptionally smooth spiced pineapple finish. Distilled in Tequila by Master Distiller, Agustin Sanchez Rodriguez, Siempre is made using traditional processes in a 150-year-old distillery. Made using 100 per cent blue weber agave, Rodriguez uses a unique 50/50 fusion of highland and lowland agave for the fullest expression of tequila. It is then slow cooked in traditional brick ovens, double distilled and blended with volcanic spring water.

Source: Siempre



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