

Chapter 14

Tequila and Mezcal

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making tequila (but only in Tequila)
- ▶ Taking your pick of popular tequila brands
- ▶ Distilling mezcal from the agave plant, too
- ▶ Developing a taste for worms

Agave-based spirits, such as tequila and mescal, have been enjoyed since the time of the Aztecs, when drinkers would down a milky white concoction known as *pulque*. Though you can still find pulque served in Mexican towns, its stronger sister spirit, tequila, is the most popular alcohol coming from the agave fields. Mezcal, of course, is famous for the worm in the bottle.

Tequila

Since the 17th century, and now by Mexican law, all tequila comes from a certain area known as Tequila within the state of Jalisco. In this dry, volcanic soil of the Sierra Madre foothills, you can find the home of tequila's largest producers.

Tequila is produced from the heart of one species of agave plant, the *Agave tequilana weber*, or the blue variety. This heart is known as the *piña*, and it usually weighs between 80 and 150 pounds. The *piña* is steamed and shredded until the *aguamiel* (juice) runs off. This juice is then mixed with cane sugar and yeast and fermented for two to three days. The fermented juice is double-distilled in traditional copper pot stills to 90 proof or higher (see Chapter 5 for details on proof). Tequila must contain a minimum of 51 percent distillate from the blue agave plant.

Types of tequila

Tequila comes in four categories:

- ✔ **Tequila Blanco (white, silver, or platinum tequila):** This tequila comes fresh from the still and may be brought to *commercial proof* (salable proof or for sale commercially) with the addition of demineralized water.
- ✔ **Tequila Joven Abocado (gold tequila):** This is silver tequila with added colorings and flavorings to mellow the flavor.
- ✔ **Tequila Reposado (“reposed” or “rested” tequila):** This tequila is aged for two months to a year in oak tanks or barrels. Flavorings and coloring agents may be added, as well as demineralized water, to bring the tequila to commercial proof.
- ✔ **Añejo (aged tequila):** This tequila is aged for at least one year in government-sealed oak barrels. Flavorings and coloring agents may be added, as well as demineralized water, to bring it to commercial proof. When tequilas of different ages are blended, the youngest age is designated.

Several tequila brands now offer flavored tequilas. Whether this trend catches on remains to be seen. Lemon, orange, and other citrus flavors are common, and you can also find such diverse flavors as chili pepper and chocolate if you’re feeling adventurous.

Reading a tequila label

The Mexican Government established NORMA (Norma Oficial Mexicana de Calidad) on March 31, 1978, to set standards of quality for tequila production. On every bottle, the letters *NOM* must appear, followed by four numbers designating

the distillery where the tequila was produced. Besides the brand name and NOM, the label must state the category of tequila, the proof, and whether the tequila is 100-percent agave.

Popular tequila brands

You're likely to find these brands at your local liquor store:

- ✔ **901 Tequila:** Justin Timberlake's line of ultra-premium tequila. Made from 100-percent blue weber agave and triple-distilled.
- ✔ **1800 Tequila:** 100-percent agave, double-distilled, and aged in French and American oak for six months.
- ✔ **Agavero:** Named after the blue agave plant, this tequila is a blend of selective 100-percent blue agave Añejo and Reposado.
- ✔ **Agave Loco:** A pepper-cured tequila.
- ✔ **Avión:** Comes in Silver, Añejo, Reposado, and espresso.
- ✔ **Cabo Wabo:** Sammy Hagar's tequila. It was introduced to the United States around 1996, without Van Halen.
- ✔ **Casamigos:** A tequila inspired by George Clooney and friends, Casamigos comes in Blanco and Reposado.
- ✔ **Cazadores Tequila:** 100-percent blue agave, this tequila rests for two months in new American white oak casks.
- ✔ **Chinaco:** An ultra-premium tequila.
- ✔ **Corazon de Agave:** An ultra-premium tequila.
- ✔ **Corzo Tequila:** Comes in Añejo, Reposado, and Silver. Corzo uses more than twice the agave of other super-premium tequilas.
- ✔ **Don Julia:** 100-percent blue agave tequila. Available in Blanco, Reposado, Añejo, 1942, and Real.
- ✔ **El Tesoro de Don Felipe:** Estate-grown and bottled with no water added. Varieties include Añejo, Reposado, and Platinum.
- ✔ **Gran Centenario:** Handcrafted from 100-percent blue agave, this ultra-premium tequila is available in these varieties: Plata (silver), Reposado, Añejo, and Extra-Añejo.
- ✔ **Herradura:** The name is Spanish for "horseshoe." It's available in Añejo, Reposado Gold, and Silver varieties.

- ✔ **Hotel California Tequila:** An ultra-premium artisanal tequila. Comes in Blanco, Reposado, and Añejo.
- ✔ **Jose Cuervo:** The world's oldest and largest tequila maker, and the oldest spirit company in North America. Available in these versions: Especial (Gold), Clasico, Tradicional, Black, and Reserva De La Familia.
- ✔ **Margaritaville Tequila:** Premium 80-proof tequila that comes in Gold and Silver.
- ✔ **Milagro Tequila:** Made using 100-percent estate-grown blue agave. Milagro makes a Silver, a Reposado, and an Añejo.
- ✔ **Paqui:** Handcrafted in small batches.
- ✔ **Partida:** An authentic estate-grown tequila, available in Añejo, Blanco, and Reposado.
- ✔ **Patrón:** Available in Añejo, Silver, Reposado, Burdeos, and Gran Platinum versions, all containing 100-percent blue agave.
- ✔ **Pepe Lopez:** Available in de Oro (gold) and Superior Silver (white) labels.
- ✔ **Revolucion Tequila Extra Añejo:** 100-percent blue agave, distilled twice and aged in 10-year-old oak barrels for a minimum of 3 years.
- ✔ **Sauza:** The first tequila exported to the United States. It's available in these versions: Tequila Blanco, Tequila Gold, Hacienda, Conmemorativo, Hornitos, and Tres Generaciones (available in Añejo, Reposado, and Plata).
- ✔ **Tarantula Tequila:** Comes in Azul, Strawberry, Reposado, and Plata.
- ✔ **Two Fingers:** Available in Gold, Limitado, and White. Named after a rogue entrepreneur, tequila producer, and occasional bandit from the Guadalajara area of Mexico who had only two fingers on his right hand (the index and thumb).

Messin' with Mezcal

The process of making mezcal hasn't changed much since the Spanish arrived in Mexico in the early 1800s and brought with them distillation technologies. The Aztecs near the mountaintop settlement of Monte Alban in Oaxaca had cultivated a certain species of agave plant for juice, which they fermented into what they called pulque. The Spaniards, wanting something much more potent, began to experiment with agave.



Mezcal, like tequila, is made from the agave plant, but the process is different. The key difference between tequila and mezcal is that the heart of the agave plant is roasted before distilling into mezcal, which is why mezcals have a smoky flavor. Whereas tequila is made exclusively in the northwestern state of Jalisco, mezcal is exclusive to Oaxaca.

Mezcal has a high potency and a strong, smoky flavor. Distillers insist that the drink has medicinal and tonic qualities. In Mexico, tribal women drink mezcal to withstand the pain of childbirth, and laborers drink it for added strength.

The famous worm

Worms live in the agave plant and are hand-harvested during the rainy summer season. They're stored in mezcal, drained and sorted, and placed in bottles near the end of the process. The worm is what makes mezcal unique; it's added as a reminder that it comes from the same plant from which the alcohol is made.

The worm is increasingly rare as mezcal is taken more seriously as a spirit. These days, worms are still common in low-end brands, but higher-end producers and craft distillers have gone wormless.

Apocryphal legends note that the worm gives strength to anyone brave enough to gulp it down. Some even believe it acts as an aphrodisiac. Like the drink itself, the worm is something of an acquired taste.

A few brands

The number of mezcal brands is much smaller than the number of tequila brands. Here are a few:

- ✔ **Gusano Rojo Mezcal**
- ✔ **Illegal Mezcal**
- ✔ **Miguel de la Vega Mezcal**
- ✔ **Monte Alban**

Storing and Serving Suggestions

Tequila appears in many popular cocktails, including the Margarita. The traditional way to drink straight tequila requires a little coordination and a steady hand. Place salt on the web of your hand between your thumb and forefinger. Hold a wedge of lime or lemon with the same two fingers and have a 1-oz. shot glass filled with tequila in the other hand. In one quick, continuous motion, lick the salt, drink the tequila, and bite the lime or lemon wedge.

Many higher-end brands are meant to be sipped neat or enjoyed on the rocks like Scotch. You drink mezcal straight, without the salt or citrus. Some folks drink it with a dram of water, but not in Mexico.

An opened bottle of tequila or mezcal has a shelf life of many years if kept in a cool, dry place.