

Nightclub & Bar

► Impromptu Tequila Tasting with Ocho Tequila

If Tales is about the cocktail, then it makes sense that at an Absinthe tasting from some of the top wormwood brands, I get an opportunity to take part in a totally under the table and impromptu tequila tasting. As the absinthe fountains slowly drip and drink-tasters start to get their first tingle from the green fairy, I find myself in a corner of the room, behind some tasting stations with some fairly esteemed company based from all over the globe including Drew Levinson, with Wirtz Beverage Group, and former mixologist for the world famous Bellagio Resort in Las Vegas, as well Treys Ladrado, corporate beverage director for Singapore's MENU Group who operates several concepts including the nation's top tequila bar, Café Iguana, which boasts an impressive 200+ tequila labels.

Altamar Brand's west coast brand development boss, Bill Haskin, slyly looks around the room before pulling several bottles from his carrier bag, he's there promoting his Kubler Absinthe but I've put him on the spot and always the gentlemen, he is obliging. I'll admit it; I'm a junky for the agave juice and tend to stick to what I know including Casa Nobles Tequila and a brand formerly marketed by Altamar, Corralejo Tequila. A few years back I was lucky enough to travel to Mexico with Altamar's founder and Brown Foreman descendant, Lyons Brown III who immersed me in the nuances of the product and I have been a fan ever since. Altamar eventually sold their marketing rights to their partner in the venture and the product's importer, Infinium Spirits and set their sights on a boutique brand, Tequila Ocho, which is the world's only single estate, vintage tequila. Each bottle is numbered with the year of the vintage and the estate from which the agave for that batch was grown. The whole concept is more related to the wine industry than tequila, and I am intrigued.

Haskin, who was a successful operator overseeing cocktail-focused venues such as The Starlight Room in San Francisco and The Side Bar in Las Vegas is clearly succeeding on the supplier side of the business with an impressive blend of knowledge and passion and he isn't shy to jump into the selling points of the brand: the product is made by third generation tequilero Felipe Camarena, every part of the product process is done in the traditional fashion, the agave is hand-picked, males separated from the females, cooked in a stone oven for 48-hours under low heat, crushed with a tahona, open air fermentation, double distilled first in stainless steel then a small copper pot still. My head is spinning, and my mouth starts to salivate as I eye the bottles with an eagle's intensity, I can't wait to taste it.

He grabs the 2008 Ocho Plata (silver) and continues the education session while pouring reasonable tasting samples into whatever glassware we can find without impacting the Absinthe tasting going on around us. "It takes eight days from when the Plata is picked until it is bottle, that's where the name Ocho came from," Haskin continues as he hands us our samples, "The 08 comes from our El Carrizal estate, which is located more than 6,000 feet above sea level. Go ahead," he adds with a smile, "Taste it." The spiciness and mint notes jump out of the glass and envelope me in a delicious aroma. "This vintage is why I fell in love with this product," Ladrado says before telling us how it captivated her at the Australian Bar Awards, "What I had thought was a brief moment turned out to be a good 20 minutes. Three awards were announced in that time and I didn't have a clue. The 2008 Ocho plata had captured me." When I ask what about this vintage is getting her so fired up, she quickly responds, "The finish on this vintage, its such a true representation of agave." Levinson also joins in, "The earthy notes, the minerality, the pure agave flavor... this is what I love about tequila."

Perhaps I should have savored the sample a bit more, after all, its delectable, but I am anxious to see what's next and have a comparison point. "Since each vintage comes from a different estate with varying altitudes, each vintage will have a unique flavor and aroma," Haskin adds while pouring the 09 Plata. "This is from our Las Pomez estate which still is very elevated, but doesn't experience the drastic temperature changes of the 08 estate." The 09 hits the glass and then my palate, its not as full-bodied as the 08 but has other characteristics its predecessor does not, vanilla notes and hints of custard. "Whoa," says Ladrado, who hasn't yet tasted this particular vintage "This is delicious!" When Haskin attempts to refresh her class with the reposado, she laughs and pulls away, "I'll finish this one first." Its hard to say which I like better, but that's not really the point here, let people decide which vintage best fits their taste profile and let the terrain speak for itself. Levinson agrees when ask him about whether or not I should be focusing on choosing a vintage or instead enjoying the experience. "Absolutely, these Platas might be the purest essence of agave in the world. Let people pick which they prefer, but regardless of vintage, they'll enjoy the journey of finding out!"

When Haskin moves over to the 09 Reposado, I am immediately hit with another surprise, not as much coloring as I might have imagined, until Haskin drops another bomb, "Our reposado is aged for eight weeks and eight days," clearly continuing the numeric theme of the product. "Only eight days more than the minimum allowed by law," Levinson chimes in, also intrigued, "and it gets that much color in that little time?" Haskin launches into a description of the barrels that are being used for aging, fourth or fifth-used bourbon barrels that have not been re-charred, but by then I am lost in agave heaven. "Classic highland style," Levinson responds with a look of contentment after a measured sip. "Incredible balance between the fruit notes and the acidity," Ladrado echoes after him.

By the time Haskin reaches for the 07 Anejo, I feel as though I am seeing some fairies of my own, except they aren't green and they certainly aren't waving an anise-flavored wand. "Here's the big guy," Haskin says with a knowing smile, "Aged for one year and one day." Again, only one day over the legal limit allowed, and again the coloring relays a disguised punch within a lighter shade than one would expect. "Big time citrus notes," Ladrado says excitedly, "it lost the mint a bit but the caramel and butterscotch is developing." Levinson responds, "This is what it's about." And even Haskin stops pitching for a moment, a hush of quietness falls over all of us even as the frenzied chaos picks up elsewhere in the room.

We swirl and sip the anejo, taking in the moment and the quality of the hand-crafted, traditionally produced product. The night is still very young and there are many more cocktails to be had, but if at least for a few minutes we are transported high into the Mexican mountains. Surrounded by the traditional and artisanal methods of Mexico's greatest import and soaking up the flavors of its terrain, soil and product; the century old concept of the siesta makes so much sense. Surrounded by friends and enjoying the delicious Tequila Ocho mid-Tales siesta, for just a moment, everything seems right in New Orleans.