



**AT THE BAR** By Robert Plotkin

# New Tequilas in the Lime Light CLASS OF '09

**A** There continues to be an influx of new and exciting brands of 100% agave tequilas on the American market. After all, nothing breeds success like success. Is there a point, however, where there are too many brands of premium tequilas on our shelves?

"Perhaps, but don't start looking for that saturation point to come soon," contends Rich Krumm, food and beverage director for the Brennan Restaurant Group of New Orleans. "At one of our restaurants we carry 45 labels of tequila and they're all extremely active. Tequila drinkers are different than, let's say, vodka drinkers who find a brand they like and typically stick with it. On the contrary, Tequila aficionados are very open to trying new brands."

Brendan Moylan, owner of Noonan's Bar & Grill in Larkspur, CA, agrees that tequila enthusiasts thrive on the sense of discovery. "Stocking new brands is a significant sales driver. We carry over 300 labels of tequila and invest in new brands when they enter the market. I'm a devoted fan of 100% agave tequilas and I appreciate having an opportunity to sample a new range. It's an enriching experience."

In an evolutionary sense, tequila is a maturing category. As aficionados grow more discerning, distillers are responding by releasing the best and brightest their craft can produce, innovative offerings such as ultra-premium blancos, vintage dated and single estate bottlings, flavor infusions and increasingly rarer and older añejos.

High on the list of sure-fire prospects is organic 4 Copas Tequila, a super-premium line of handcrafted tequilas made in the lowlands of Jalisco. The 4 Copas Reposado spends 9 months in American white oak, while the añejo is aged 3 years.

According to Mac Gregory, director of food and beverage at the Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, his guests enjoy the tequila and respond well to it being an organic spirit. "We consider 4 Copas to be a one of the marquee "boutique" selections based on the quality of the juice and its no-nonsense packaging. It's an ideal brand to recommend to connoisseurs looking for a sensational tequila they've not experienced."

Equally engaging is recent arrival Single Estate Tequila Ocho. The range features vintage-dated, estate-delineated, 100% agave tequilas distilled in the highlands of the Los Altos region. Each bottling showcases the agave from an individual estate. For instance, the agaves used to make the 2008 Tequila Ocho Añejo were cultivated in the heat and humidity

of El Vergel Estate, which is at a different altitude and miles away from the red soil of the Carrizal Estate, where the agaves for the 2008 Plata were grown. Few brands, if any, better demonstrate the profound affect of terrior on a finished spirit.

Another lottery pick is La Certeza 100% Agave Tequila, a range of small batch spirits from Tierra de Agaves. The state of the art distillery was founded in 2002 by Francisco Beckmann, former co-owner of Jose Cuervo. Ultra-premium La Certeza tequilas are distilled entirely from estate-grown agaves and aged in both American white oak and French Limousin barrels.

Tierra de Agaves has also introduced Lunazul, a line of small-batch 100% agave tequilas competitively priced well below what their enhanced quality would normally dictate. After less than a year on the market, Lunazul was named a "Rising Star" Growth Brands award winner by the Beverage Information Group, awarded to brands "less than five full years of age that have exhibited notable growth."

"The recognition is well deserved," contends Bridget Albert, director of mixology for Southern Wine and Spirits of Illinois and author of Market-Fresh Mixology (2008 Surrey Books, Chicago). "The Lunazul Reposado is delicious, skillfully balanced between vanilla, fruit and spice, while their Blanco has a peppery palate with a sweet agave finish. It makes a delightful spicy Bloody Maria."

More than 3 million Americans a year frequent a Señor Frog's restaurant and cantina in Mexico and throughout the Caribbean, which ensures a warm stateside reception for recently released Señor Frog's 100% Agave Tequila. The award-winning brand is available currently in a Plata—dry and cocoa-laced—and a 4-month Reposado, which is light-bodied with a warm, vanilla and caramel finish.

Rounding out the Class of 2009 is Sauza Hornitos Añejo 100% Agave Tequila. Aged in American white oak barrels and loaded with semi-sweet flavors of vanilla and cocoa, this suave, lavishly flavored añejo is certain to perpetuate the popularity of the Hornitos franchise.

Sauza Hornitos Añejo is already a success as far as The Phoenician's Mac Gregory is concerned. "It's been hugely successful as the featured tequila at our Margarita Happy Hours. Like the Reposado before it, Hornitos Añejo is a great tequila at a great price. Our guests win, we win and Sauza wins."

## Sizzling New Blancos

Spirits authority Sean Ludford of BevX.com believes the surest way to assess the attributes of a tequila brand is to sample its blanco, or plata version. "Barrel aging has a profound affect on tequila. Blanco tequilas are left unadulterated and typically bottled fresh from the still. When well made they're vibrant, bursting with flavor, and best represent the compelling qualities of tequila."

So in case you've missed the initial fanfare over their release, here's our take on new silvers destined for the fast track.

Artisanal Jose Cuervo Platino 100% Agave Tequila is a charming blanco with such tremendous depth of character it's guaranteed to make Jose Cuervo a household name. The handcrafted tequila is made according to a process called "Esencia de Agave," in which only that part of the agave richest in fermentable sugars is used in distillation. Platino immediately grabs your attention with an alluring bouquet and a layered, long-lasting palate.

"Cuervo Platino is a genuine pleasure to work with," states Adam Seger, general manager, sommelier and bar chef of Nacional 27 restaurant in Chicago. "Not only is it fabulous featured in cocktails, it demonstrates to consumers just how elegant a silver tequila can be and the enhanced flavor of Jose Cuervo's high-altitude agaves."

New from the bestselling brand of 100% agave tequilas is Gran Patrón Platinum. In order to produce a lighter bodied, more brilliant spirit, the tequila is sent through a traditional copper pot still a third time. Another innovative twist is that a portion of each distillation is aged briefly in American oak barrels prior to being blended back into the batch.

Bridget Albert describes Gran Patrón Platinum as a tequila to be celebrated. "Agave forward with hints of citrus, it's one of the few blancos deserving of a snifter."

Top-shelf Partida Blanco is produced from mature, estate grown blue agaves cultivated in the rich, red volcanic soil of Amatitán, Mexico. The piñas are slowly baked, slowly fermented and double-distilled in traditional pot stills. Bottled fresh from the still, Partida Blanco is a sleek, aromatic tequila with a warm satisfying finish.

The most innovative silver making its American debut is ultra-premium Maestro Dobel Diamond. This franchise player is comprised of barrel-matured tequilas filtered to remove all traces of color and impurities. The result is a crystal clear, highly aromatic tequila with all of the nuances and complexity

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of an añejo. The ultra-premium carries a suggested retail price of \$74.99.

### Infused and Enthused

Regulation changes now permit distillers to infuse tequilas with added flavors. The potential upside for producers is huge. Capturing a portion of the flavored vodka and flavored rum market represents a huge opportunity for the tequila industry.

Leading the charge is thoroughbred Gran Centenario Rosangel, a 100% agave tequila aged for a minimum of 10 months in French Limousin oak barrels. It's then further matured in export pipes and infused with sweet Hibiscus flowers, a staple in Mexican culture and cuisine. Tinged sunset pink from the portwood, Rosangel is top-notch in every respect.

"Gran Centenario Rosangel is fantastic," says Julie Reiner, cocktail expert and proprietor of New York's famed Clover Club and Flatiron Lounge. "Finally someone created an infused tequila that is versatile, interesting and a joy to work with. Rosangel works beautifully with my new age tropical style of mixology, it will surely make the menu at both Clover Club and Flatiron Lounge."

Super-premium Tanteo Chocolate 100% Agave Tequila is one of three jalapeño-infused tequilas in the Tanteo range. The handmade pepper infusion injects the tequila with a precise dose of peppery heat, a measure of sizzle that's impeccably balanced and amazingly delightful. It's even dazzling alone in a glass.

"I've tasted the Tanteo Chocolate in scores of different cocktails and each was more delicious than the previous," says Jonathan Pogash, director of cocktail development for New York's Hospitality Holdings, which operates The Campbell Apartment and The World Bar, among other venues in Manhattan. "I think the flavor of the chocolate infusion marries perfectly with the taste of the 100% agave tequila. It's an appealing spirit on many levels."

Another savory break from the staid and conventional is Agave Loco Pepper Cured Tequila, a 100% agave reposado infused with the essential oils of six varieties of Mexican peppers. The exuberant spirit has naturally obtained opacity and the savory aroma of the fresh peppers, which is the first indicator of the nearly combustible heat to follow. Its peppery blast rises to a crescendo just short of producing tears.

Tabasco Spicy Tequila was created for those unafraid of crying in public. The brand is a snazzy fusion of premium tequila and iconic Tabasco brand Pepper Sauce. In a shot or couched in a Margarita, the incandescent, universally adored flavor of Tabasco is unmistakable.

Bridget Albert is a fan. "I've served this tequila to my guests who enjoy a little kick in their cocktails. The Tabasco gives a nice fire to a traditional Margarita. It is also pairs well with fresh orange juice."

For those looking to put more zip in their step, energized p.i.n.k. 100% Agave Tequila contains a

natural infusion of flavorless caffeine and guarana. Made at the famed La Cofradia Distillery, this superior blanco tequila has a marvelous mouth feel, wafting floral and spice bouquet and an extended, flavorful finish. Stimulating and delicious is an unbeatable combination.

To say the future looks bright for the tequila category would be to sell it short.

**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*. He can be reached at [www.BarMedia.com](http://www.BarMedia.com) or by e-mail at [robert@barmedia.com](mailto:robert@barmedia.com).**

### SIDE BAR 1:

#### Sexy Extra 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 barrel-aged for 3-years or more. For generations these ultra-luxurious spirits were reserved for the private use of maestro tequileros and their families, but now any commoner with a few hundred dollars in their pocket can afford what many consider the epitome of the craft. Here's a look at the recent arrivals. —RP

- 4 Copas — Made in the lowlands of Jalisco, 4 Copas Extra Añejo is distilled using certified organic agaves and matured for 54 months in American white oak. The añejo retails under \$200, which makes it an affordable slice of heaven.
- Cabo Uno Añejo Reserva — Created by ex-Van Halen rocker Sammy Hagar, Cabo Uno is aged 38 months in both French and American oak barrels. Limited in production to only 1,800 cases a year.
- El Diamante del Cielo — The handcrafted, limited production tequila is made from estate-grown agaves and triple-distilled in state of the art pot stills. El Diamante Del Cielo Añejo is a blend of tequilas aged up to 4 years in oak.
- Gran Centenario Leyenda — Gran Centenario has extended its world-class range with the release of Leyenda, a blend of añejos aged 4 years in French Limousin oak barrels. Older reserve añejos are then added to enhance its depth and complexity.
- Gran Patrón Burdeos — Debuting at around \$500, Burdeos is made from a blend of añejos aged in American and French oak. The tequila is then transferred to ex-Bordeaux barrels and racked for a year or more. Over that time the tequila develops a rich amber hue and wine-induced flavors.
- Milagro Select Barrel Reserve — The award-winning añejo is triple-distilled in the highlands of Tepatitlán and aged no less than three-years in new French oak barrels.
- Partida Elegante — Handmade on the family's estate outside of Amatitan, Elegante is distilled entirely from estate-grown agaves and matured in American oak barrels for 36 to 40 months. The result is a lush and exquisite spirit.