



Mexico's Original Luxury Tequila Turns 70

by KATHERINE PEACH

Deep in the central region of Mexico, spiked maguey plants flourish in the rich, red clay soil of the highlands. A member of the lily family, the succulent plant also known as agave produces the traditional and ancient spirit mescal. The origins of the spirit dates back at least two thousands years. First as the harsh pulque used ritually by the Aztecs, and eventually as the bitter mescal wine that was embraced by the Mexican working class, despite Spanish brandy producers' failed attempts to squash the rival industry.

It may be even better known for the production in a little village called Tequila, just 45 miles from Guadalajara. There, agave finally received the correct distillation to capture the plant's sweet taste and launched Tequila's fame to enthrall frat boys for generations to come.

Tequila can now only be produced in Jalisco, like a Cognac from France, or Chianti from Italy. With close to 200 species of agave, the maturity of the plant, distillation and aging processes all distinguish the varieties of tequila. Mexico's government established rules to further regulate the distillation process and establish the spirit as a luxury export.

To be considered tequila it must contain at least 51 percent agave, with the remaining made from any type of spirit. This type of cheap "mixto" product long dominated the market, leaving a challenging misconception and many an unsettled stomach. Despite the complicated personal history many liquor drinkers in the U.S. have with tequila, there is the inevitable enlightenment when paired with an atejo margarita or special reserve tequila served neat. This is not the tequila of your college years, but a refined and complex drink that is better saved for dessert than served in a shot glass.

This coming year the number one luxury tequila brand in Mexico, Tequila Don Julio will turn 70. A brand that stands second in the U.S. only to the marketing behemoth Patron. Priding themselves as the first true luxury tequila, Don Julio is celebrating the anniversary with the release of the "world's first" añejo claro tequila, aptly named Tequila Don Julio 70.

Imagined by Master Distiller Enrique de Colsa, Don Julio 70 combines the complex spiced finished of an aged 100 percent blue agave añejo, and the strong flavor found in a clear silver or blanco, thanks to an additional filtering process. This ambitious special reserve tequila commemorates the birth of a brand that states, "It is passion above all else that defines excellence."

Continuing the Don Tradition

In Atotonilco el Alto in the Jalisco highlands, the cooler climate allows agave plants to mature slowly in the lower temperatures, therefore containing higher sugar content. Here a young Julio González, having worked in his hometown fields since youth, learned the craft of creating mezcal wine. González recognized that this unmatched microclimate was ideal for growing blue agave with a more floral, fruit flavor and began to cultivate a superior spirit. He opened his first tequila distillery named La Primavera in 1942. He was just 17 years old.

Once considered a liquor of the people, he saw the potential for premium 100 percent agave tequila to be a well-crafted, distinct spirit. González controlled every aspect of the process, developing his own method of growing and distilling. He distinguished his brand, originally called "Tres Magueyes," by using mature plants, the more flavorful core of the agave, and even a shorter, square bottle that did not block the view of other guests at the dinner table. The word spread about his dedication, or perhaps obsession, creating a buzz with friends and business partners.

Finally his tequila was ready to carry his name, Tequila Don Julio, which lays claim to being the first tequila to boast the name of "Don," a traditional title of respect. Although Don Julio did not at first intend to sell his product, distributors were ordering more tequila than could be produced. Today the brand's heritage and drive for innovation seemingly leaves little room for competition in the premium tequila market.

Working alongside Don Julio González at La Primavera Distillery, Enrique de Colsa created a personal friendship that went beyond the agave fields. In 2003, González stepped down and named de Colsa as successor to the multi-na-

tional brand. Continuing the legacy as Master Distiller is no small feat, especially for a spirit that bears the founder's name, and a visual identity that is blazoned by the image of Don Julio's wide brimmed hat.

De Colsa attests it is of utmost importance to preserve the distinctive methods for planting and harvesting the agave. These methods include planting the agave farther apart to encourage larger growth and sweeter maturation, cutting the agave into quarters for uniform cooking, and overseeing the double-batch distillation process to ensure high quality standards. In the fields timing is everything. Similar to wines from various regions, de Colsa explained, tequilas aged in different mediums and for different periods of time play a key factor to the unique characteristics.

It is this fervor for the spirit that Tequila Don Julio seeks with Don Julio 70. The taste contains an initial bite that is synonymous with silver vari-



etals, a characteristic that can detour drinkers for years to come, but Don Julio 70 finishes impossibly smooth, staying true to the brand and reminding tequila connoisseurs that they are indeed in good hands.

While many tequila drinkers enjoy the smooth finish of aged *añejo*, there are flavors that become muted, according to de Cosa. As Master Distiller, he created a filtration process to bring back the raw agave flavor that is present in a blanco tequila and also made the tequila clear. A traditional Don Julio *añejo* is aged 18 months— regulations require it must be aged at least a year to be considered part of this category—in American oak barrels to capture honey and toasted oak influences. "I love the sweet honey smell of the cooked agave juices as they flow from our masonry ovens, and being able to taste that same pure agave flavor in the distilled tequila," de Cosa said. His dedication to understanding flavor profiles brought the *añejo* blanco to fruition, capturing the citrus notes of a blanco tequila with the filtration process he designed. The result is something unexpected, not quite the caramelized *añejo*, yet undeniably Don Julio.

Passion for a Spirit to Savor

The first barrels of tequila did not reach the U.S., or rather Texas, until 1873, according to the Beverage Tasting Institute. Today tequila produc-

tion is a booming industry that exported an estimated 200 million liters of tequila to more than 80 countries in 2010. The U.S. consumes a whopping 80 percent of all tequila exports. With a tradition rooted in mezcil wine, luxury tequila has revolutionized the industry for cocktail connoisseurs.

While blanco tequila is not aged at all, *reposado* and *añejo* are required to be aged at least two months and one year respectively, according to the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (CRT) in Mexico. Don Julio takes that method to the extreme with "ultra-premium" varietals. Don Julio 1942 is another commemorative tequila aged for two and a half years in American oak barrels. Hand selected blue agave plants are also used to create "Real," which is aged for three to five years before bottling. It was Don Julio's passion for a smoother tequila that inspired the CRT to create the extra-*añejo* category.

When asked to describe how passion defines a brand that has thrived for seven decades de Cosa explained, "Tequila Don Julio is defined by passion in many senses of the word: passion for tequila, passion for creating the highest quality product for our fans, passion for innovation and staying ahead of the curve," and as any exemplary brand, their lawyers will attest, "a passion to ensure that everyone enjoys Don Julio responsibly."

