

TASTING TOMORROW'S SUPER-TEQUILAS TODAY

BY ROBERT PLOTKIN

Jack Robertiello and I again co-hosted Spirits of Mexico Competition in the San Diego this past September. Now in its third year, the two-day blind tasting drew 111 entries of the best and the brightest 100% de agave tequilas, sotols and mezcals. From this prestigious field will come the next PARTIDA, EL TESORO AND PATRÓN.

Entries were judged on five key elements including appearance, aromatics, flavor, mouthfeel and finish, with a rating system totaling a maximum possible score of 100 points. We headed a judging panel of industry professionals that included among others Charlotte Voisey of William Grant & Sons, Junior Merino of The Liquid Chef and *Tequilier Ambassadeur* Mario Marquez.

For tequila enthusiasts and aficionados, the Spirits of Mexico Competition is something like the Oscars and Olympics rolled into one. Earning one of the competition's coveted gold medals has proven an invaluable benefit to the success of new brands of tequila.

At this year's competition, ten brands stole the spotlight and easily outdistanced the competition by racking up 26 gold medals, 8 silvers and 6 "Best of Category" captions [see inset "Tequila Franchises"]. Five of the brands—EL GRADO, HACIENDA DE CHIHUAHUA SOTOL, NOCAUT, SUAVEMENTE and PUEBLO VIEJO—earned medals for their

blanco, reposado and añejo—a clean sweep. Last year, newcomer SUAVEMENTE was the first brand to earn the distinction and repeated the feat this year.

Several distilleries distinguished themselves at the head-to-head competition, none more than Tequila San Matias de Jalisco. All four of their Pueblo Viejo Tequilas were awarded gold medals and the reposado also earned the “Best of Category” caption.

Adding to the haul CARMESSI REPOSADO and SAN MATIAS GRAN RESERVA ESPECIAL EXTRA AÑEJO scored silver.

Recent arrival EL GRADO TEQUILA looks to have a brilliant future after earning 3 gold medals. It and sibling CORRIDO TEQUILA hauled in a combined 4 golds, 3 silvers medals and a bronze for the El Grado Rosa. They hail from the Productos Regionales de Atotonilco S.A. distillery situated in the high altitudes of Los Altos.

Another brand that wowed the judges was HACIENDA DE CHIHUAHUA SOTOL. Their entire portfolio of 100% agave sotols grabbed gold medals, while the silver took the “Best of Category” caption. Sotol is a wonderfully exuberant spirit distilled from wild agave indigenous to the Chihuahua desert. It has an enticing floral bouquet, a vanilla, toasted oak palate and a smooth, relaxed finish.

STANDOUT PERFORMANCES

A number of tequilas earned top marks and deserve recognition. [see inset “Lottery Picks”]. Blancos from such tried and true brands as CHINACO, CORZO, DON EDUARDO, LA CERTEZA and SIETE LEGUAS scored gold, while CORAZON BLANCO took the “Best of

Category” honors. For that matter, all of the Chinaco, Corazon and Corzo tequilas showed quite well collecting a combined 10 medals.

Two popular favorites—ORO AZUL AÑEJO and 1921 TEQUILA CREAM LIQUEUR—were awarded gold and the “Best of Category” captions. It was the 2nd consecutive competition the cream liqueur earned the distinction. The same is true for GRAN CENTENARIO ROSANGEL, which again took home the gold. It’s a 100% agave tequila aged 10 months in French Limousin oak barrels and then further matured in ex-port pipes and infused with sweet Hibiscus flowers.

The much-anticipated T1 — TEQUILA UNO debuted at the Spirits of Mexico competition and proved well worth the wait. The brand is the brainchild of Master Tequilero German Gonzales Gorrochotegui, one of the founding fathers of Chinaco. Both the t1 Reposado and Extra Añejo earned golds, while the Blanco received a silver.

UNDER THE RADAR

Four tequilas merit mention as great brands that inexplicably attract little ballyhoo. An excellent example is recently released DOMAINE CHARBAY TEQUILA BLANCO. Having already conquered vodka and rum, Domaine Charbay and the indomitable Kararkasevic family ventured to Arandas and created an Olympic caliber 100% agave tequila. The blanco is lush, peppery and quite sensational.

Also new to our shores is SEÑOR FROG’S 100% AGAVE TEQUILA. More than 3 million Americans a year frequent a Señor Frog’s restaurant and cantina in Mexico and throughout the Caribbean. The brand was awarded two gold medals in last year’s

competition. It's now available in a Plata—dry and cocoa-laced—and a 4-month Reposado, which is light-bodied with ripe fruit aromas and a warm, vanilla and caramel finish.

SINGLE ESTATE TEQUILA OCHO features a range of 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 example, 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. *Viva la difference!*

Finally, there's award-winning EL TESORO DE DON FELIPE® 100% AGAVE PARADISO AÑEJO TEQUILA. The extra añejo is a blend of tequilas aged in white oak barrels, each selected for their distinctive characteristics. The prized tequila is further matured in French oak casks previously used by A. de Fussygnay Cognac.

While production of this extra añejo is limited, scarcity and demand doesn't begin to explain the tequila's intrinsic value. Paradiso is a rare spirit, one skillfully balanced between the elegance of cognac and the sultry character of tequila, both of which are deeply imbued in its wafting bouquet, velvety textured body, and bakery-fresh flavors. If it's true that ingenuity is the mother of invention, then double-barreled Paradiso is a stroke of genius.

In closing, we felt this year's blanco entries far outshined their wooded counterparts. We also found a huge disparity in quality between the extra añejos entries. Surprisingly

these expensive marques were fabulous and worthy of hosannas or vapid, dull and boring. Go figure!

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INSET 1:

TEQUILA FRANCHISES

Chinaco Blanco	GOLD
Chinaco Reposado	GOLD
Chinaco Añejo	SILVER
Chinaco Negro Extra Añejo	SILVER
Clase Azul Plata	SILVER
Clase Azul Reposado	GOLD
Clase Azul Ultra Extra Añejo	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Corazon Blanco	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Corazon Reposado	SILVER
Corazon Añejo	GOLD
El Grado Blanco	GOLD
El Grado Reposado	GOLD
El Grado Añejo	GOLD
Hacienda de Chihuahua Sotol Silver	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Hacienda de Chihuahua Sotol Reposado	GOLD
Hacienda de Chihuahua Sotol Añejo	GOLD
Milagro Silver	SILVER
Milagro Select Barrel Reserve Silver	SILVER
Milagro Añejo	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Milagro Select Barrel Reserve Añejo	SILVER

Nocaut Blanco	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Nocaut Reposado	GOLD
Nocaut Añejo	GOLD
Pueblo Viejo Blanco	GOLD
Pueblo Viejo Reposado	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Pueblo Viejo Añejo	GOLD
Pueblo Viejo Orgullo Añejo	GOLD
Suavemente Blanco	GOLD
Suavemente Reposado	GOLD
Suavemente Añejo	GOLD
Suavemente Extra Añejo	SILVER
t1-Tequila Uno Blanco	SILVER
t1-Tequila Uno Reposado	GOLD
t1-Tequila Uno Extra Añejo	GOLD

INSET 2:

LOTTERY PICKS

Chinaco Blanco	GOLD
Corazon Blanco	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Corzo Silver	GOLD
Don Eduardo Silver	GOLD
La Certeza Blanco	GOLD
La Pinata Plata	GOLD
Riazul Premium Silver	GOLD
Siete Leguas Blanco	GOLD
Tierras Blanco Organic	GOLD
Chinaco Reposado	GOLD
Forever Oax Reposado	GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
Muchote Reposado	GOLD
Penacho Azteca Reposado	GOLD
Milagro Añejo	GOLD/(TIE) BEST OF CATEGORY
Oro Azul Añejo	GOLD/(TIE) BEST OF CATEGORY
Tequila 55 Añejo	GOLD
Campo Azul Extra Añejo	GOLD
Corrido Extra Añejo	GOLD

t1 – Tequila Uno Extra Añejo

GOLD

1921 Tequila Cream Liqueur
Gran Centenario Rosangel

GOLD/BEST OF CATEGORY
GOLD