

**H**istory paints it as a miscreant muse to be sure, but drink pros are all pleased and proud of how far the tequila category has come. Boasting quality and flavor on par with fine wine and the best of bourbon and Scotch, tequila is today a platform for educating and impressing patrons.

No longer is a deep tequila selection considered only appropriate in Latin restaurant concepts. A strong tequila program can generate revenue in any venue — even as a complement to sushi or to Italian fare. Bolstered by heavy brand marketing and word-of-mouth buzz, tequila continues to raise its profile and, as with other spirit categories' high-end segments, piques patrons' fascination with its romance and the subtleties of its various expressions.

The other happy product of the advent of premium and super-premium tequila offerings is the profit of the pour. The key to unlocking those revenues is engaging the guest with the category. Borrowing a page from the wine mavens, operators are finding tequila flights powerful in driving both the excitement and revenue potential of the category.

### **Knowledge Grows**

If you are serving a Latin-based menu of food items, tequila is an obvious and necessary spirit behind the bar. However, grasping the nuances of presenting a flight is crucial, primarily because you are opening the door for both a chance to educate and to upsell. Second, while patrons are probably somewhat familiar with the cuisines of Central and South America, the average consumer over 30 is likely unfamiliar with premium and super-premium tequilas.

"I remember years ago, you would go to a restaurant and see maybe Jose Cuervo," says Dan McClain, general manager of Cantina Laredo in Huntsville, Ala. "Now you see three or four high-end brands at least."

# Sales inFlight

Serving Tequila Flights  
Successfully

By Jenny Adams



Tequila flights pair with sushi in tastings at Sushi-Teq, creating a compelling point of difference in the Boston bar and restaurant scene.

Cantina Laredo, a 26-location concept of Dallas-based Consolidated Restaurant Operations, offers gourmet Mexican cuisine, with edibles such as from-scratch sauces and guacamole mixed tableside. More than 30 tequilas reside on the back bar, presented in a multi-level bottle display in ascending order of quality.

"For us, it's more than just being able to offer tequila and say 'This is good,' McClain explains. "We want to educate patrons. When a guest arrives, the bartender or server points out our tequila display. That is a lead-in to get the guest to try several types in a flight. We use a three-slotted wooden paddle that holds caballito glasses — short shot glasses — and the guest picks one blanco, a reposado and an añejo. The price is \$20 for three samples, and the pour is one ounce."

McClain's staff is well versed on all of Cantina Laredo's brands, and it pays off. Most patrons find one brand they like in a flight and then order a secondary cocktail or Margarita made with that brand, he says. The restaurants also hold quarterly tequila dinners, where attendees are often loyal patrons previously educated via the tequila flights.

Strategic merchandising also pays off. Tequila bottles are displayed from least to most expensive on a multi-level showcase wall at Cantina Laredo. When the servers pull a bottle from the highest shelf, guests watching know it's something special, questions ensue and orders for that brand rise.

"Some of our most popular brands are Cabo Wabo, Patrón, Cazadores and Herradura, but we offer an añejo and a reposado made by Corralejo that I personally love," McClain admits. "That and the Don Julio are on the top of my list."

### Late-Night Flights

If your concept is not devoted to Latin atmosphere and cuisine, flights are still a strong tool for selling tequila. Obivia, located on Lafayette Street in New York City, is a terrific example. The concept is upscale lounge, divided into three separate rooms. With a capacity of 175, Obivia caters to Manhattan's trend-setters, offering private bartenders in the VIP area, bottle service throughout and chic

comfort foods such as mini hamburgers and filet crostinis. Co-owner Michael Matzo offers flights of almost every spirit, including two separate tequila flights.

"I have done flights since opening in 2005," Matzo says. "Originally, we set the shots into a block of ice, but the ice presentation melted way too fast and was very high maintenance. Now we use a paddle inspired by something I saw Grand Marnier doing with their original label, the 100 and 150."

The visual impact isn't lost on the crowds at Obivia. "Because we are in a nightclub setting, there is the domino effect," Matzo explains. "Once someone sees another table order something like a tequila flight, then suddenly everyone wants one."

Matzo's flights are highlighted on the menu, which also lists the 15 tequilas available for cocktails or shots. His standard flight features inocente Platinum (a silver tequila), Patron Reposado and Partida Añejo. The price is \$27 for 1 1/2-ounce pours. Matzo also offers a \$35 "Extra-Aged Tequila Three Years And Older" flight. Its three extra añejos [a denomination referring to tequilas aged three years or more] include a Gran Centenario Leyenda and a Cielo Añejo — both three years — and a Casa Noble Añejo, which is aged five years.

"The five-year-old Casa Noble is wonderful," he explains. "It was hard to get tequilas three years or older out of Mexico until last year. I believe that was the first year they released them for sale in America."



## Breaking It Down and Serving It Up

Flights of tequila can assume myriad formations. From offering guests three different reposados to presenting a selection of one reposado, one añejo and one blanco to even offering four tequilas aged more than four years, options abound.

Kuleto's Italian Restaurant in San Francisco is successful with flights of organic gin and vodka. When it comes to tequila, however, 4 Copas claims to be the only "USDA-certified organic" tequila on the American market. To introduce it in a tequila flight, bar manager Hunter Leigh says Kuleto's created its own "Quatros Añejos" flight priced at \$30.

"This flight offers a range of concepts and styles within one age category: Organic, Single Estate, Mainstream and Small Batch," he says, noting that the brands involved are 4 Copas Organic Añejo, Tequila Ocho Single Estate Añejo, Partida Añejo and Patrón Añejo. "It gives us a chance to talk about the evolution of tequila and the smaller, boutique and unusual offerings. It helps take tequila out of the Margarita."



**Sushi-Teq's cornerstone is the staff's ability to pair the seemingly odd coupling of sushi and tequila, giving guests an experience they've never had before and would be hard pressed to find anywhere else.**

"We pour the flights at the bar to save time, and we usually don't serve them cold," Matzo continues. "For the most part, I serve tequila at room temperature so the natural taste can come out, but I do have chilled shot glasses upon request."

Matzo is a proponent of new brands, and Obivia is a place educated consumers come to find out about special spirits.

"For example, inocente is new and a very up-and-coming, strong brand. We haven't gotten to Mezcal yet, but I would consider it," he adds. "I change the menu every three months, and I just bought a case of reposado and blanco from Lunazul that will be on our next tequila flight."

### Pairing Like Never Before

Breaking barriers surrounding tequila and enlightening patrons to the nuances of flavor in the category is Sushi-Teq, located at the InterContinental Boston Waterfront Hotel in Boston. The venue's cornerstone is the staff's ability to pair



## In-Flight Instructions

**S**o you've stocked some of the incredible premium and super-premium tequilas in demand today, but aside from the occasional orders for shots and in your top shelf Margaritas, you're not seeing as much movement as you'd like. You're considering flights to give your guests much-needed face time with staff and your tequilas, but you aren't quite sure how to go about it.

Eddie Perales, national tequila ambassador, West region, with Beam Global Spirits & Wine, offers the following strategic tips for successful tequila flights:

- Tequila flights are generally served in a flight of three, Perales says. "Half-ounce portions are the standard that supports our drinksmart program, which the Beam Global family lives and breathes daily."
- Training is key to the overall experience of tasting tequila. Bartenders and management should always be on the same page.
- Flights can be served by category, such as blanco, reposado and añejo — even extra añejo.
- Tequila flights can vary by premium and super-premium or even by highlands only, lowlands only or a mix of the two. If you really want to get into it, you can offer Sauza Hornitos oven-baked agave only or autoclave agave only, or even the innovative

shredded and steamed agave. It's fun to show all three types to help people understand the nuances of the production methods.

■ Flights are not shots. They are an experience to enjoy the different and varied worlds of tequila. Remember, the tequila took six to eight years to produce, so stress to your guests to take the time to appreciate tequila when sampling and tasting.

■ Presentation is a very important component to the success of the delivery. This is where you should be very creative in how you present your serving vessels. My favorite way to serve flights is on a flight board, which should hold three samples, a Sangrita [a traditional mix of fresh and roasted herbs and fresh tomato with fresh-squeezed orange juice], herbs and a small bowl of cucumber. Take the time to find or create the right serving vessel that fits your look and message.

■ Always tell the story of each tequila in the flight so it conveys the message and information you hope to impart.

■ Tequila can be served with different fruits, such as orange, grapefruit or pineapple with crushed red pepper flakes, or even grapes, which adds to the experience of the flight.

■ Flights should be presented as an adventure and a getaway from the salt-and-lime ritual to help guests discover that tequilas are meant to be sipped and savored.

You can't merely stock a deep lineup of premium tequilas. You've got to educate the patron to really make it sell, as the Cantina Laredo chain staff knows and executes well.

the seemingly odd coupling of sushi and tequila, giving guests an experience they've never had before and would be hard pressed to find anywhere else. It's not that far fetched when you consider that ceviche is a form of raw fish, but crossing the subtle flavors in a super-premium aged añejo and a nori-wrapped spicy salmon roll does take finesse.

"We opened intending to be a tequila bar with sushi appetizers," says bar manager Wayne Duprey, "but now we do an equal amount of sushi and tequila. We did a lot of study between pairings and tastings, and we've had a fabulous opportunity to take two cultures and blend them. It shocked people at first, but we have found a very pleasant harmony with flavors, styles and execution.

"We try to guide guests through the experience here rather than leaving it open, and we put flights together with tequilas that complement each other in the flight and pair well with the fish."

For example, Sushi-Teq offers a course in one of its special dinner events pairing Sauza Hornitos Añejo with Sweet Shrimp. "As the name suggests, Sweet Shrimp is praised for its clear, sweet aftertaste," the tasting menu explains. "The Hornitos Añejo is also known for its smooth sweet taste. It contains hints of vanilla, toasted wood and chocolate." The tastings match añejos with smoky, meatier flavors such as torched sushi items and tuna while pairing blanco tequilas with sweeter fare such as salmon or eel sauce.

For fish that doesn't go as well with straight tequila, some tasting courses match sushi with cocktails — for example, the marriage of citrus-based tequila cocktails with Sushi-Teq's signature 510 roll, which features shiromi (white fish) covered with juice of yuzu (Japanese citrus) and sea salt.

Outside of pairings, of course, Sushi-Teq does flights without the fish. Like Cantina Laredo and Obivia, Sushi-Teq's tequila flights are all listed on the menu and poured at the bar, and the staff is happy to switch out brands upon request. A paddle-styled presentation goes one step farther by coupling the tequilas with spices and acids.

Each flight comes to the table with a plate of orange slices beside cinnamon and limes beside Margarita salt. A small shot glass of Sangrita also accompanies the flights as it would traditionally in Mexico. Each pour is 3/4 of an ounce, and the price points range from \$14 to \$18.

"I did a little research and found out that we are selling most of them between 7 and 9 p.m., with about 350 flights sold since we opened in March 2007," Duprey says. "I think we have the most success with the customers who don't have a lot of experience with tequila. It's a good opportunity for them to explore.

"People often come in because they want sushi," he notes, "but they leave having had a unique experience regarding tequila." **NCB**