

Tequila Time Travels

Mexico's national drink grows up and enjoys a place in our cocktail culture

By Jenny Adams

Tequila. Twenty years ago, it was the drink of choice for the guy or girl you could never take home to mama. It was the wicked sidekick to a domestic draft that you deftly hoisted as you sang along with The Champs single of the same name. It belonged in a shot glass, which belonged in a bar, which you would never admit to your mother that you frequented. My, my, how things have changed.

In the last few years, premium and super-premium tequilas have exploded onto the bar scene and ventured into cocktails of all kinds. No longer masked by Margarita mix or slammed down with a salty grimace and lime wedge, tequila has moved into an upper-class neighborhood and become a part of polite society. And one of its most admirable attributes is tequila's effect on the memory. While a bottle will make you forget, a few delicate sips will make you remember—for me, it's those summer moments I long for all year.



The Anatini and Cancun Collins

Restaurant Anatole

One of the great things about a well-made tequila cocktail is that it goes great with a light afternoon meal. Sitting in the warm rays of sunshine, protected by the large windows and soft breeze of air-conditioning, the view from Anatole out onto St. Charles Avenue makes you glad you are in New Orleans. I recommend trying either of the signature tequila-based drinks on the cocktail menu, the Anatini or the Cancun Collins.

If you are a novice on the subject of Mexico's errant aphrodisiac or you had a few bad experiences with the cheap stuff back in college, I suggest asking for the Anatini. Its 1800 Reposado has a very smooth taste, which is further softened by Midori Melon Liqueur. A little fresh lime juice is added at the end, which brings a nice finish to the candied, green-apple taste.

The Cancun Collins uses the same tequila, unless you specify otherwise, but it is definitely a libation meant for someone who loves tequila. A full-body flavor, it has a splash of lime juice and club soda and is a great twist on a classic, with a slightly sour finish that goes great with this particular spirit.

Both of these sell for \$8, and combined with the curly endive salad or the fresh lump crabmeat appetizer, the beautiful seascape-inspired artwork by Martin Welch and the excellent service, you'll be talking about these tequila drinks and your experience at Anatole for years to come.



Sangrita

Vega Tapas Café

With all the great food in the city proper, sometimes it takes a good drink to send you on a side trip. Vega Tapas Café on Metairie Road has just such a cocktail. If you haven't yet experienced chef-owner Glen Hogh's mastery of the "small plate" and the delectable atmosphere, the Sangrita cocktail is your third good reason to visit.

The decor of the front bar makes you feel as though you stumbled upon some "hole-in-the-wall" gem in Spain, with deep ruby and green accents and funky lighting emitted from blown-glass candleholders. The main dining room is the type of place where you either take a date, or take your best friend to dish about a date. And what better cocktail accompaniment for that than tequila?

The Sangrita has a beautiful strawberry color with a lime garnish and salt rim. It reminds me of standing in my front yard in summer, eating salted watermelon and watching the lightning bugs blink on and off at dusk. Instead of a full sour mix pour, they only use a third with two-thirds red sangria and Patron Silver tequila, unless you specify another. Since the plates are small, I recommend six for two people, with a serious recommendation of the rare tuna with guacamole. It sends this drink and your taste buds over the edge, as seafood and tequila are better together than apart—just like summer weather and a rekindled sense of childhood abandon.

Matt Carroll Sets Us Straight

Tequila is as confusing, if not more so, than scotch. Taste, appearance and price may vary depending on where it was produced, the amount of time it was aged and the processes employed. Matt Carroll is the vice president of marketing for Patron Spirits out of Dallas, and he was kind enough to explain a few things to us.

"There are two types of tequila produced: 100% agave and mixto. A mixto is made from 51% agave and 49% neutral cane spirits, as in sugar cane.

"If you're talking about mixto, there is really no difference between gold and silver tequila. It is the same tequila, but the coloring—called caramel—is added. It's a big vat, and they put a few drops in, and it spreads. So it doesn't affect the flavor at all.

"In your 100% agave, the coloring comes from aging in oak barrels, which does affect the flavor. The most popular is silver, and it is the purest form—full agave flavor, without any added flavor from the oak barrels.

"Then you have Reposado. The base is the same as the silver, but by Mexican law it must be aged for at least two months in oak barrels. Some companies age theirs longer. Añejo, the final one, must be aged in oak for at least one year.

"You can really start to get into the way the agaves grow, like wine. You want a higher sugar content for a smoother tequila. The actual agave plant looks like a giant aloe vera plant. It is not a cactus. It's a member of the lily family, but you won't believe it if you back into one."

Recipe of the Month

Cocktail Japon

by Dale DeGroff, mixologist and author of The Craft of the Cocktail

- 1-1/2 ounces Patrón Tequila Reposado
- 1-1/2 ounces grapefruit
- 1/4 ounce simple syrup
- 1 ounce Momokawa Sake
- 1/2 ounce Cassis
- Slice European cucumber

Assemble all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake well. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with a thin slice of European cucumber. Enjoy!



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