

## Let's talk about Tequila

Published May 14, 2010 – The Naperville Sun  
By BILL GARLOUGH For Sun-Times Media

In my column, predominantly devoted to wine, I have used the French wine term Terroir. This refers to a wine's sense of place and time, and includes the people, soil, geography, climate and the specific growing season the wine was produced. In better quality French wines, you can actually taste the soil in which the grapes were grown. All of this adds to the experience of drinking a beverage that was made elsewhere, and toasting its uniqueness.

There is no reason this concept cannot apply to other beverages from around the world. When you toast Bastille Day with a glass of French Champagne, raise a glass of Guinness beer on St. Patrick's Day, clink a stein of Beck's beer at Oktoberfest celebrations or have a shot of tequila on Cinco de Mayo, you are both saluting a country's past while toasting the present with your family and friends. Today we will explore Mexico's past and salute today's distinctive drinks.

### Tequila and mezcal

Mezcal is the oldest known distilled spirit in the Americas. The Spanish discovered this beverage during their conquest of Mexico in the early 1500s. Mezcal is named after the native maguey plant used to make this spirit. The heart of the plant provides the pulp that is mashed and then the juice is fermented. Mezcal hails from Oaxaca, a southern region in Mexico, and is known for its smoky flavor.

Mezcal's famous cousin is tequila. Tequila is made from the Weber blue agave plant. Both the maguey and agave plants come from the Agavaceae family of plants, actually related to lilies and not cactus, as is commonly thought.

When these plants reach maturity (about 10 years), they are harvested by cutting off the plant's long, spiny leaves and the plant's roots. The heart of the plant is called a piña (weighing 100-plus pounds), which is cooked for three days in pits lined with stones and then covered with the plant's leaves.

The cooked piñas are then ground into a mash and placed in large vats (with water) to ferment. Recipes may call for cinnamon, bananas or sugar to be added to the mash to impart unique flavors. Once the juice from the mash separates and ferments, it is distilled and becomes either mezcal or tequila, depending on which plant was used. Mezcal is generally not as smooth as tequila, as it is distilled only once, while tequila is distilled twice.

No column about tequila and mezcal would be complete without mentioning the "worm." The worm is the larval form of a moth that lives on the plant. It is a marketing gimmick for mezcal, and has no effect on the product.



*Bill Garlough samples tequila at the Leyva tequila factory. Courtesy of Bill Garlough*

There are two types of tequila, 100 percent blue agave and mixto. Mixto contains 60-plus percent agave juice and the balance is sugar water, while 100 percent blue Agave (100 percent puro de Agave) is pure fermented agave juice. Lower-priced tequilas are fine for margaritas, while the aged tequilas may be sipped straight up or over ice.

There are five types of 100 percent blue agave tequila:

Silver (blanco) — clear, unaged and bottled after distillation

Gold — Caramel coloring and flavors added to silver tequila

Reposado — Silver tequila barrel aged from 3 to 12 months

Añejo — Silver tequila oak barrel aged from 1 to 3 years

Extra Añejo — Silver tequila oak barrel aged for 3-plus years

As tequila ages in wood (typically oak) barrels, it gains complexity, darkens in color and becomes smoother to sip. On a recent trip to Mexico, I tasted three different Reposado tequilas with almond, orange and coffee flavors.

The world is discovering that a quality tequila may rival the experience of sipping a high-end scotch or cognac. Mexico's mezcal and tequila are richly intertwined with the country's history, and are an example of how Mexico has progressed from the days of the conquistadors to a vibrant, modern society.

So raise a glass and toast Mexico's past and traditions, while celebrating the present.

Bill's Tequila Picks (with suggested retails)
El Jimador \$20
Jose Cuervo Tradicional \$22
Hornitos \$23
Herradura Blanco (Silver) \$35
Reposado \$40
Añejo \$50
Don Julio Reposado \$45
Añejo \$48

Tequila of the Month
Milagro Silver Tequila: \$20. This multi-purpose Tequila is great for margaritas, straight up, or on the rocks. This is a smooth, complex Tequila, that disappears off the back palate fairly quickly and offers a hint of spice. This is a great sipper at a great value.

Bill Garlough is an owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the 2007 U.S. Chamber's Overall Small Business of the Year. Bill is a Level 1 master sommelier and pairs wine and food for My Chef's customers.