

We know there's more to tequila than the potent, harsh stuff of youthful lore. Indeed, we want to encourage a more refined view of tequila by offering the finest tequilas available. These are smooth, sipping quality tequilas, to be savored neat or on the rocks, or perhaps in a snifter after dinner. This is tequila for aficionados! Indeed, some say tequila is Mexico's answer to cognac; both are produced in officially demarcated regions, are made from a regulated species of fruit, are double distilled and, often, are aged in charred-oak barrels.

Tequila Terminology

Agave is the family of plants used to produce mezcal, and tequila. The agave is characterized by long, spiky, bluish-silver, sword-shaped leaves, similar to the giant aloes we have around the restaurant but much larger as much as four to six feet high. Each plant takes from eight to ten years to mature and is only used once, since only the heart, or *pina*, is used for tequila and the rest of the plant is destroyed getting to the *pina*. Each *pina* can weight 150 pounds or more. The *pina* is baked to convert the starch content to sugar, then shredded and crushed for fermentation. Tequila is distilled twice to remove all impurities.

100% Blue Agave refers to the specific plant that is used to make tequila. There are many kinds of agave but the Blue Agave (species name is *Agave tequila Weber*) has been determined to have superior flavor and is the only kind allowed by the Mexican government for making tequila. However, not all tequilas are made with 100% Blue Agave; instead, they have sugars added to supplement agave in the fermenting process. The government now requires all tequila to be at least 60 % Blue Agave. A higher percentage of Blue Agave enhances the flavor. Aging, particularly in wooden barrels, adds nuances to tequila's flavor and increases the smoothness of the drink in other words, takes out some of the "bite." The following terms refer to how long a tequila has been aged:

Blanca (white) or Plata (silver) are used interchangeably to refer to tequila that has not been barrel-aged at all. It appears as a clear liquid like vodka or gin.

Oro (Gold) tequila is more a marketing term suggesting improved flavor and smoothness, rather than being an official designation. Some tequilas use caramel coloring or brown sugar to achieve the gold color.

Reposado describes tequila that has been barrel-aged for at least six months. This longer aging further refines and smoothes the flavor.

Añejo is tequila that has been barrel-aged for at least one year, though many of the super-premium tequilas have been aged for three to five years, resulting in the smoothest of all tequilas and taking on nuances of the wood.

Flavor is influenced not only by the length of time a tequila is aged. The ultimate flavor is affected by what kind of wood is used for the barrels. Oak barrels often are purchased from bourbon distillers in the United States. If a barrel is new it will impart a different flavor than one used to age bourbon. The oak also is charred to varying degrees to influence the tequila's flavor. The Blue Agave itself has fruity flavor, with citrus undertones. Wood storage generally softens liquor, adding woody, vanilla or spicy flavors. Some may be a little smokey flavored or peppery, with a lingering fruitiness on the tongue.

Mezcal is a generic name for spirits that are distilled from any agave plant (not just the *Agave tequila Weber*). It is similar to tequila but only distilled once, with a stronger and harsher taste.