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Proof Positive: Beyond the Valley of the Margarita

Sun, Dec 17 @ 02:52 AM

What the martini is to vodka and gin, the margarita is to Tequila. It is Tequila's featured star and cash cow. Take a seat in any Mexican or Southwestern restaurant in the U.S. nowadays, and you're handed a list that offers a dozen or more margarita variations: margaritas made with handpicked pineapple; margaritas made with organic eastern Mediterranean pomegranate; margaritas made with handpicked Hawaiian mango; margaritas made with organic, hydroponic, handpicked, estate-grown, Maui star fruit. Lovely, but you get the overpowering feeling that the margarita has been subject to more versions and variations than there are recordings of "White Christmas."

Within the span of a generation, the margarita has morphed into a cocktail category all its own, one that has unintentionally painted its core ingredient, the Mexican agave-based distillate, Tequila, as merely an ingredient. Now I'm not anti-margarita (except when lazy or ill-informed bartenders employ a mix in place of freshly squeezed lime juice.) The margarita is one of my two favorite cocktails. (The other is a whiskey sour.) But I am also an ardent fan of Tequila itself. And I contend that Tequila's earthy charms are suitable for far more applications than the scores of margarita variations on cocktail menus today.

The most obvious way to explore the manifold gifts of Tequila is through the non-margarita cocktails, of which there are plenty. Take the Bloody Maria, for instance, a toothsome knock-off of the vodka-based Bloody Mary. The Bloody Maria's recipe calls for 2 ounces of 100-percent agave reposado Tequila (reposado, or resting, Tequila spends some time maturing in oak, and you want the assertive herbal taste of the agave with some wood-induced mellowness here), six ounces of tomato juice, one-half ounce of fresh lime juice, two shakes each of celery salt and black pepper, and three or four dashes of Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce. This eye-opening cocktail has far deeper flavor and intensity than the standard Bloody Mary because it showcases the Tequila's naturally zesty flavor.

Robert Plotkin of Tucson, Arizona-based BARMedia, a spirits educator, judge, and consultant, believes that there are endless mixed drink possibilities using Tequila. "The way I like to present

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Tequila these days is in variations of the Caipirinha,” says Plotkin, referring to the beloved Brazilian cocktail, which uses sugarcane-based cachaça. “As a mixologist, they afford me an opportunity to introduce numerous combinations of fresh fruit, each with the intention of accentuating the inherent charms of the particular Tequila I’m working with.”

Just coming onto the nation’s cocktail radar screens is the 1.5-ounce quick shot called Peter’s Sermon. This minimalist drink includes a half-ounce each of blue Curaçao, fresh lime juice and 100- percent agave blanco (white, meaning young and unaged) Tequila, gently poured in that order in a shot glass. To that combination is added a dash of Tabasco. Tidy and compact, the Peter’s Sermon is to be consumed in one gulp. Tastewise, the interplay of the sweet blue Curaçao, the sour citrus, the bitter/spicy Tabasco, and the vegetal agave spirit, makes for highly pleasing “small dose” quaffing.

Christy Pope, bartender at New York’s Milk & Honey and Little Branch bars, thinks that with so many top-notch Tequilas in the marketplace, each with its own personality, the sky’s the limit on non-margarita concoctions. Says Pope, “Tequila and grapefruit are beautiful companions. A favorite new drink of mine is the Tequila Sugarplum, which is Tequila, pomegranate juice and grapefruit juice.”

As one of Manhattan’s most talented mixologists, Pope goes even further, pointing out, “I think that Tequila and Campari have quite a romance going. Two cocktails that illustrate this are the Siesta (Tequila, Campari, grapefruit juice, lime juice, simple syrup and Angostura Bitters) and the Rosita (Tequila, Campari, sweet and dry vermouth and orange bitters.)”

Lime juice, grapefruit juice, orange juice. In both old and new Tequila cocktails, it seems that there is citrus in a majority of recipes. Why does Tequila go so well with citrus? Sofia Partida of Partida Tequila explains, The agave plant is a succulent. A succulent is a fleshy plant that naturally stores water and is indigenous to arid climates. The moisture, or juice, is stored in the plant’s heart, called the piña. By harvest time, the juice of the piña is an intriguing mix of sugary and earth tastes which are augmented during the cooking process.

“Citrus fruits and juices,” she continues, “through their natural marriage of sweetness and acidity, tend to best highlight the unique flavors cultivated in the agave and underscore the hint of citrus in agave while offsetting the more complex earthy tones which are a hallmark of premium Tequilas.”

Tad Carducci, principal bartender at The Pluckemin Inn, in Bedminster, N.J., agrees with Partida, adding, “Good Tequila has mouthwatering acidity, which gives it a bracing, cleansing, astringent quality that perfectly complements all manner of citrus fruits.” He compares it to the way the acidity of some red wines, Italian Barbera, in particular, pairs well with tomato sauce. And, he says, “I have found that Tequila pairs up well with other high-acid fruits, such as green apple, passion fruit and sour cherries,



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The nation’s foremost mixologists insist that only freshly squeezed citrus juices make the grade for all Tequila-based cocktails. Mixes and packaged juices dull the spirit’s flavors, while freshly squeezed juices enhance its herbal taste.

Likewise, don’t forget that Tequila offers greater flavor scope than either gin or vodka because there are four distinct types of 100-percent agave Tequila: blanco (unaged), reposado (matured in oak for two to 12 months), anejo (aged in oak for one to three years), and extra aged (matured over three years in oak). Nimble and herbaceous blancos are typically best matched up with citrus juices in lighter styles of cocktails (Tequila Sunrise, Tequila Smash), while meatier, oak-aged reposados work better with more substantial mixed drinks (Bloody Maria) that include strong-flavored fruit liqueurs and spices. Save the complex anejos and extra aged Tequilas for drinking neat, meaning served on their own.

Michael Trujillo, mixologist for Albuquerque, New Mexico-based Top Shelf Mixology, has a useful formula for matching the types of Tequila with companionable ingredients. “When using blanco, I like to use fruits, juices and herbs that complement the character of the young spirit, such as citrus, lime peel, cucumber, dill and white pepper. Rested and aged Tequilas have more complex flavors and deeper aromas, and therefore it’s best to employ things with greater flavor impact, like spice, pepper, clove, cinnamon, agave nectar and pineapple, in cocktails where they are the foundation.”

But, Tequila’s versatility ranges beyond mixed drinks.

One of the most rewarding ways of enjoying premium and super-premium Tequila is as a one-ounce shot. The key here is to request top-quality Tequila produced from 100-percent blue agave. For confirmation of any Tequila’s authenticity, make certain that the bottle has the words “100% Agave” and “Hecho en Mexico” (made in Mexico) clearly printed on the label. To connoisseurs, a straight shot is the best method of learning how wonderfully herbal and zesty upper-echelon Tequila can be.

For added enjoyment of straight Tequila, prepare sangrita as a chaser. Sangrita, whose Mexican origin dates back to the 1920s, is the customary partner to straight Tequila that highlights agave’s crisp acidity.

Enrique de Colsa, master distiller at Tequila Don Julio, likes sangrita as a Tequila accompaniment. “It’s meant to be enjoyed slowly, alternating between sips of Tequila to best savor the flavors, he says.” This spicy, yet refreshing drink enhances the crisp agave flavors of blanco and the layers of spice and citrus notes of reposado.”

One of Tequila’s most hidden talents is as a tangy and spirited ingredient in cooking. Yuri Kato, publisher of the **www.cocktailtimes.com** Web site is a believer in employing

Tequila in the kitchen, declaring, “Tequila is great in cooking, especially for cold dishes like salad and guacamole, because you actually taste the flavor of the Tequila. It’s also fantastic for cooked meals like grilled chicken and steaks. When cooking with Tequila in hot dishes, you can marinate; you can pour Tequila as you grill or sauté with spices. Personally, I love using reposado Tequila on skirt steaks.”

Mexican cuisine is a horn-of-plenty of ingredients. Chicken, beef and pork spiced with pungent sauces dominate Mexico’s inland cooking, while seafood typically headlines coastal fare. Enrique Olvera, chef and owner of Pujol Restaurant in Mexico City, uses Tequila as a regular ingredient. Says Olvera, “Tequila is most often used in ceviche dishes. At my restaurant, one of the dishes that I use Tequila in is shrimp spiced with chile picayune and served with a foam made with Tequila Don Julio Reposado.

“Tequila can also be used to flambé foods,” Olvera continues. “I’ll use Tequila to glaze the pan before starting the meal. By letting it heat up and simmer, the hints of the Tequila are extracted—sweet citrus and peppery notes—and add a wonderful flavor to the dish. When using Tequila as a sauce or flambé, it should be paired with strong-flavored fare. A mellow or light-tasting item can get lost if cooked with Tequila.”

As a marinade mixed with a little lemon juice, sea salt and olive oil, Tequila lends a piquant taste to grilled chicken, white fish, shrimp, scallops and pork.

David Suro-Piñera, president and founder of Siembra Azul Tequila, has an unusual recommendation on how Tequila is best employed in the kitchen, observing that, “because of its natural characteristics, Tequila generates fruity and herbaceous flavors. Cooking with Tequila contributes to [a dish’s] zest. However, I believe that instead of cooking with this spirit, the best results are obtained by misting Tequila over a good salad or seafood dish as a final touch.” [For more information on cooking with Tequila and other spirits, see the **Pairings article** from this issue.]

As one of the world’s most adaptable distillates, Tequila has proven to be so much more than the base for the most popular cocktail of all. Cocktails, straight shots, marinades, pan glazes, foams and garnishes: Is there anything that Tequila can’t do?

Source:

Wine Enthusiast
By F. Paul Pacult

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