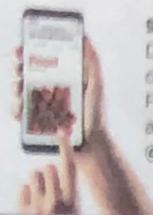




INSIDE Restaurants: At El Come Taco, the Villalva family serves food that's true to their story — hardworking dishes with bright, pure flavors. 5E



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SPIRITS | TEQUILA

The shots loved 'round the world

How clones, bats and biodiversity will help agave survive

By KEVIN GRAY
Special Contributor

It's no secret that Texans like tequila. In fact, it's a point of pride.

Between patio margaritas, rooftop palomas and late-night shots, we consumed a little more than 18 million liters of the agave-

based spirit in 2018. That accounts for a respectable one-ninth of the entire country's consumption, according to data from IWSR Drinks Market Analysis.

Of course, like all things delicious and from the earth, sustainable agricultural practices are key to ensuring that it's still

around for us to enjoy long term.

"The future of agave depends upon genetic diversity," says Grover Sanschagrin, the Jalisco, Mexico-based co-founder of tastetequila.com and the Tequila Matchmaker app.

"Right now, the entire industry is using blue agave

with the exact same genetic code, because they are harvesting the *hijuelos*, baby plants that are clones of the mother."

The clones are an efficient means to an end. If allowed to flower and sexually reproduce on their own — a process that often takes as long as 12 years — agave plants won't have enough



Lynda M. Gonzalez/Staff Photographer

"Spirits right now have the ability more than ever to be responsible, not just in production, but socially," says Jose Gonzalez, a bartender at the Jولة's Midnight Rambler. El Tesoro is at the forefront of sustainability practices.

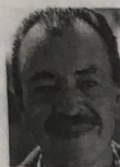
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Tequila producers lay groundwork for sustainability

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juice left to distill. To combat this dilemma, growers clone the agaves, ensuring they're able

to harvest the plants when perfectly ripe, usually between six and eight years of age. But while it's efficient, the practice is inherently risky.



CARLOS CAMARENA

"If one gets a disease, it could wipe out all of the plants," Sanschagrin says.

It's a risk that some tequila producers are hoping to mitigate. And the steps they choose to take now will affect tequila's availability and quality in the future.

One brand at the forefront of progressive sustainability practices is El Tesoro, which is made at La Alteña Distillery in the Jalisco highlands, about 6,000 feet above sea level. Led by master distiller Carlos Camarena, El Tesoro does things the old way — the hard way. Agaves are grown entirely on the family's estate, hand-harvested after seven to eight years, slow-cooked in brick ovens and then crushed with a 2-ton stone called a tahona.

But even a brand steeped in tradition knows that it must look toward the future to ensure its success. That's why Camarena is part of the Bat Friendly Tequila and Mezcal Project, which promotes biodiversity among agave plants. Today, El Tesoro allows between 2% and 5% of its plants to reach full maturity and bloom. For tequila producers, setting aside even a small percentage of the crop represents a substantial financial hit, as those plants can't be harvested, distilled and monetized.

It's good news for the bats, though. They are natural pollinators of agave plants, feeding on the nectar of mature plants and cross-pollinating from field to field. It's a symbiotic relationship. Formerly endangered species like the lesser long-nosed bat have more food to eat now, and their pollinating efforts promote biodiversity among the agaves.

It's too soon to know exactly how successful the project will be in the long run. Many scientists believed that, after so many years of cloning, it would be impossible for the blue agaves to reproduce sexually. But the results have already defied expectations. Camarena's team has been nurturing seedlings in a greenhouse, and roughly 5% have yielded sprouts, potentially representing a new genetic wave of agaves.

Camarena is playing the long game. "Maybe we'll see results in 80 or 100 years," he says, "but this isn't something we're doing for our own lifetime."

While El Tesoro is one of the innovators leading the sustainability charge, it's not alone. Ubiquitous giant Patrón commissioned a study at the National Center of Genetic Resources, Mexico's biodiversity bank in Jalisco, to analyze blue agave's genetics in hopes of establishing future recommendations for the industry that will promote long-term sustainability. And even smaller producers such as Ghost are playing a part.

"People in the industry tend to look at agave sustainability as an issue that should be addressed by the large tequila companies," says Chris Moran, founder and CEO of Ghost Tequila. "I don't agree at all. This is a matter of importance that every tequila producer needs to take seriously, to share in the



La Alteña Distillery

A **jimador** harvests agaves at La Alteña Distillery in the Jalisco highlands.

responsibility to ensure the longevity of this crop."

He notes that they control their own agave fields, which allows them to institute responsible agronomy practices, such as planting alternate crops after agave harvests to allow the soil to regenerate.

But it's not just the distillers who have a say in the matter. Bars, restaurants and retail shops can make an impact via the products they choose to carry.

According to Chris Dempsey, a bartender at Atwater Alley and the mezcal- and tequila-focused La Viuda Negra, it's important for bars to consider how spirits are made when deciding what to stock and pour. He notes that his bars won't carry any products made with a diffuser, a machine that significantly shortens the harvest-to-bottle timeline and strips out a lot of the agave's character. He prefers to support the people who put in the time and effort to produce the best possible products, noting a few favorite brands, including Siembra Valles, Tequila Ocho and El Tesoro.

"Camarena has been instrumental in sustainability and biodiversity," Dempsey says. "He is the leader to watch when talking about and practicing sustainability with agave and Mexican spirits."

"Spirits right now have the ability more than ever to be responsible, not just in production, but socially," says Jose Gonzalez, a bartender at Midnight Rambler inside the Jولة hotel. "It says a lot for a company when they put their money and their plants on the line."

He adds that Camarena is a guardian of agave plants, not just an owner, and that mindset impacts everything from the distillery's light environmental footprint to the quality of the product.

"People should care about what they put in their bodies as well as who it affects, like the producers and farmers," Gonzalez says. "As much as we go to the farmer's market to grab local produce, we should know who grows the agave."

Dempsey also urges consumers to fight the good fight.

"Think about it," he says. "You want to work out and eat all this amazing organic food, but then you go and drink some subpar spirits just because of marketing and a low price. That defeats the purpose of being healthy. If you really want to help the cause, don't drink diffuser tequila, and help support any sustainable agave program."

According to Sanschagrin, at today's market prices, each 1-liter bottle of traditionally made 100% agave tequila contains about \$10.70 worth of agave inside. So, while we consumers don't have a hands-on impact on the plants growing in Mexico, we can exert our influence with how we choose to spend our hard-earned tequila money.