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Front Burner FLORENCE FABRICANT

Picking an Extra Añejo Tequila Takes Extra Care

These long-aged agave spirits come with flashy packaging and success to match the hype.

By JASON WILSON

Cinco de Mayo is not the moment for extra añejo tequila. While plenty of the agave spirit from Jalisco, Mexico, will flow on Saturday, in cheap margaritas and shots, the bottles classified as extra añejo — which by Mexican law must be aged more than three years — will mostly stay on the top shelf of the bar, awaiting another day.

That's because extra añejo is tequila's big stretch into the heady world of high-end brown spirits, an unabashedly flashy space crowded with Cognac in shiny crystal decanters, expensive decades-old Scotch and impossible-to-find single-cask bourbon.

The popularity of long-aged agave spirits is a recent phenomenon, so it's perhaps no surprise to find these arriviste tequilas aping the packaging and storytelling of whiskey or brandy, focusing on rarity and age and high prices. You'll find extra añejo bottled flamboyantly, adorned with ribbons, strings, wax seals and medallions, and sold in boxes that are gold-trimmed, leather-encased or faux-velvet-lined. Many sell for more than \$100, and some for much more.

But some spirits aficionados view all this flash with skepticism and say the quality of the tequilas doesn't always measure up to the expense and hype.

"It's a circus; it's a weird category," said Nicolas Palazzi, the owner of PM Spirits in Brooklyn, which distributes several tequila brands, including Fuentesecca and Villa Lobos. "With extra añejo, we start to get into the dreamy category. As soon as you start selling dreams, that's when marketing comes in."

The rise of these high-end tequilas has been astonishing. Sales of super-premium bottlings increased sevenfold from 2002 through 2016, according to the Distilled Spirits Council, which represents American producers and marketers. (By comparison, sales of all tequila rose 121 percent during that period.)

Much of the growth in super-premium tequilas occurred after 2006, when the Tequila Regulatory Council, a Mexican trade organization, created the extra añejo classification; before that, the oldest tequilas were simply labeled añejo, meaning that they had to be aged a minimum of one year.

The big tequila brands, several of which have been acquired by larger conglomerates in the last year, have noticed. Patrón (acquired by Bacardi for \$5 billion) and



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Pricey but Worth It

Extra añejo tequila is not cheap. But when the agave and wood are in harmony, there's nothing quite like the taste. Here are some of the best. Besides these six, also look for the hard-to-find Tapatio Excelencia (\$170) and Siete Leguas D'Antano (\$279).

Siembra Azul Suro Extra Añejo \$90, 40 percent alcohol by volume. Delicate and approachable, floral with light spice and notes of apricot and citrus. Aged five years in new American oak. (Suro International Importers, Philadelphia)

El Tesoro Paradiso Extra Añejo \$99, 40 percent A.B.V. Complex balance of honey and crème brûlée, baking spices, green notes of jalapeño and green olive, with a long spicy finish. Aged five years in Cognac barrels. (Beam Suntory, Chicago)

Villa Lobos Extra Añejo \$125, 40 percent A.B.V. Buttered toast, maple and citrus, with

a backbone of intense agave spice. Aged four years in American oak. (Shand Import, Los Angeles)

Avión Reserva 44 Extra Añejo \$150, 40 percent A.B.V. Butterscotch, with notes of vanilla, baking spices and roasted carrot. Aged 43 months in American oak, then finished for one month in small barrels. (Pernot Ricard, New York)

Fuentesecca Reserva 2010 \$157, 42 percent A.B.V. Spicy, dark and earthy, with big agave on the nose. Aged seven years in both Loire Valley cabernet franc and California red wine barrels. (Haas Brothers, San Francisco)

Chinaco Negro Extra Añejo \$229, 43 percent A.B.V. Woody but fresh and savory, with aromas of olive and sweet relish, and a long peppery finish. Aged five to six years. (Hotaling & Company, San Francisco)

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A sampling of the better extra añejos — tequila's big stretch into the heady world of high-end brown spirits.

the consumer has to still perceive the agave. It should not taste like chewing a piece of oak.

Woody tequila is a pet peeve for many purists, who prefer the spicy, complex agave flavors of unaged blanco or lightly aged reposado ("rested" for less than 12 months) tequila, and view extra añejo bottles with a gimlet eye.

"You can't age tequila forever," Ms. Fagnan said. "It doesn't behave the same as whiskey. Eventually it just falls apart."

Some contend that tequila's most significant maturation happens under the ground, where the agave plant may grow up to a decade before being harvested and roasted. "The aging process is in the maturing of the raw material," said Bobby Heugel, the owner of several high-profile bars in Houston, including Anvil Bar & Refuge and the Pastry War, that have extensive tequila lists. "When you cover up that raw material, you're negating what makes tequila beautiful."

Mr. Palazzi, the Brooklyn distributor, said: "There's very little research about how the agave ages in the barrel. Most of the extra añejo you drink tastes like vanilla and coconut. Often it's hard to say what's the cask and what is the aging of the agave."

Still, when the agave and wood are in balance, there is nothing quite like great extra añejo, which offers a distinctly different sipping experience than brandy or whiskey do. "As long as the oak doesn't completely cover the agave flavor, you could age it 12 to 15 years," Mr. Camarena said.

David Suro-Piñera, owner of the tequila brand Siembra Azul, also used to be an extra añejo skeptic. Born and raised in Jalisco, he migrated to Philadelphia in 1985 and opened his landmark Mexican restaurant, Tequilas, which has more than 100 agave spirits on the menu.

For a long time, he resisted long-aging his tequilas, and even now insists on barrels made of brand-new French oak, or virgin oak from the Ozarks that he seasons with his own blanco tequila. "I don't think tequila calls for the help of bourbon or Cognac," he said. Siembra Azul's three extra añejos, all aged for five years, seem to back up his point.

"It's a new experiment for all of us," Mr. Suro-Piñera said. "But here's what I do know: The blanco going into the barrel has to be remarkable in order to have a good extra añejo."

Avión (acquired by Pernot Ricard) have both introduced extra añejo tequilas since 2014.

"We didn't really forecast for extra añejo to become so big," said Jenna Fagnan, the president of Avión. "Who would have thought? Two years ago, we said, 'Something's happening here.'"

Carlos Camarena, the influential distiller of tequila brands like El Tesoro, Tapatio, Villa Lobos and Excellia, estimates that his brands' extra añejo sales have grown more than 50 percent over the past three years. "It's growing faster than any of the other categories," said Mr. Camarena, who pioneered the aging of tequila in the late 1980s, when he created El Tesoro Paradiso, which was aged for five years in Cognac barrels.

Until the late 20th century, Mexico consumed more aged Spanish brandy and whiskey than tequila, which was regarded as a lowbrow spirit even in its homeland. Five-year-old tequila was unheard-of. "We were breaking the myth that tequila couldn't be aged," Mr. Camarena said.

Since then, he has experimented widely, aging tequila in Sauternes barrels, sherry butts, rum casks and barrels made from Japanese oak. "The sky is the limit," he said. "But regardless of the aging or the barrel,