

FT Magazine Food & Drink

How Americans ruined tequila – and the true believers saving it

Marketed as a wild party drink for too long, the Mexican agave spirit is finally being taken seriously

Lilah Raptopoulos 11 HOURS AGO

Over the past 18 months, tequila has slowly taken on an outsized presence in my life. Friends who once ordered whiskey with soda at bars started switching to tequila. One became a tequila aficionado and poured me samples, one of which tasted like blue cheese. Blue cheese! I kind of liked it. I visited my sister in the suburbs of New York, and my brother-in-law asked me if I'd tried The Rock's tequila. "It's a lot," he said, passing me a small glass. I tasted it and coughed at the kickback. "I can't tell if it's good," he continued, and I agreed that it was probably quite bad. "But it's The Rock!" he said. "So I love it."

I started drinking more mescal, another spirit made from the agave plant in the tequila family, and going to mescal bars. Tequila was no longer something to shoot and slam on a sticky bartop. It was something to be savoured, like a square of dark chocolate. I was participating in the party without realising there was a party, loving something I knew almost nothing about.

I wasn't alone. Tequila is now the fastest-growing spirit in the US. This year, Americans will spend \$13.3bn on agave spirits, more than they do on US-made whiskey. In 2023, they are set to overtake vodka as America's best-selling spirit, according to research group IWSR. Any educated bartender will tell you tequila is as complex as whiskey and wine. But to many Americans, it is either a wild party drink or a celebrity gimmick. Nick Jonas has one. So do Michael Jordan, The Chainsmokers, Rita Ora and Kendall Jenner. Tequila is George Clooney in a grey suit, fingertips on a glass of *reposado*, promoting a brand he sold in 2017 for \$1bn. It's not farmers in agave fields, artisan distillations, various terroirs.

Tequila, the big brother in this family of agave spirits that are almost exclusively made in Mexico, is among the most complicated, labour-intensive spirits to produce. Agave is a tough and spiky plant that the untrained should avoid. It can grow more than 20 feet wide. One plant takes five to 14 years to mature so, unlike grapes or grain, it can't be reharvested seasonally. Instead, farmers tend each plant for years, cut it, then start

again from scratch.



An agave plantation in Jalisco, Mexico. This year, Americans will spend \$13.3bn on agave spirits © Getty Images

If you lift the lid off decades of marketing and misunderstanding, tequila is actually one of the most interesting spirits you'll find behind the bar. It's time it finally got its due.

Trace a line back to when tequila caught on in America, and you'll find yourself stumbling into a bar around 1953, when the margarita rose to fame. The bartender who first put tequila, cointreau and lime in a glass, trimmed it with salt and gave it a name is disputed. But the man who used it to hook America on to the spirit is not. His name was Vern Underwood Sr, and I'm on the phone with his son.

"You've given me a tough assignment," Vern Underwood Jr says when I ask how Americans originally bought in. Underwood Jr is now 83. "Everyone I know related to Cuervo going way back is dead."



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Tequila found a customer base in the US in the late 1800s, when Tequila Sauza became the first brand to export it. During Prohibition, smugglers carried it over the border on donkeys. It gained more drinkers in America during the second world war, when European spirits were in short supply. In the late 1940s, Underwood Sr, a spirit distributor based in Los Angeles, was importing a little-known brand called Jose Cuervo from Jalisco, the state on Mexico's Pacific coast where most tequila is made. No one wanted it. Until one day, he got a call from the owner of a small bar in Los Angeles called Tail o' the Cock. "They told him, 'Our bartender's making a drink that's really selling, they call it the margarita'," Underwood says. So his father went to try the new cocktail. Tasting its potential, he started publicising the recipe with Jose Cuervo as the key component. Because there was almost no competition, "It took off like a rocket."

Underwood Jr joined the family business in the early 1960s, and by feeding into what Americans already associated with Mexico — a spirited, lawless party destination — the father and son distributors found a home for Jose Cuervo on every bar's bottom shelf. Tequila started appearing in the pop culture canon, from the Eagles' "Tequila Sunrise" to Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville". Myths emerged, mostly unfounded. They've likely been shouted into your ear at a party: tequila is a hallucinogen! Tequila makes your clothes fall off! By the 1980s, frat bros were taking body shots of the worst version of the stuff (mixtos, or agave cut with sugar) after a drunken lick of salt and before a suckfull of lime.

Underwood confirmed that tequila's early reputation in America came down to a few marketing pros in south California. He says they went in hard promoting Jose Cuervo as young, sexy and wild. They placed a liquor ad in Playboy magazine, with the tag line "Margarita, more than a girl's name". He chuckles at that memory. "Classic. Great ad. My mother didn't like that ad." During promotional parties, the Underwoods noticed people taking tequila shots — using salt and citrus to muscle it down — so they started spinning that, too. Tequila ads called this strategy the "classic down-Mexico way" and consumers believed them.



California Prohibition agents with 250 bottles of tequila smuggled into the US from Mexico, c1930. Gas tanks were frequently used to hide illegal alcohol © FPG/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

I ask Underwood why shots got so popular. “People wanted to have fun!” he says. “It was exciting.” He reminds me that tequila emerged in the *Mad Men* era, when spirits were heavy, like scotch and brandy, and ordered in smoky bars. Women and college students rarely sat down to order a drink. This gave them a way in. “This was radical! More open. Young kids were drinking it,” he says. “The other thing they did, which was hysterical, is they said tequila doesn’t give you a headache.”

“People still believe that!” I say.

“It was marketing.” He pauses, then laughs. “Drink too much, it’ll give you the worst hangover you’ve ever had.”

It's 2008. I'm in a college dorm room being passed a new liquor to try, in a stout bottle with a round cork. It's expensive — maybe \$50 — and surprisingly smooth. There's a Top 40 anthem blasting out of someone's laptop by a new artist named T.I. "Stacks on deck," he raps. "Patrón on ice/And we can pop bottles all night/And, baby, you could have whatever you like." I didn't know it, but I was in the second coming of tequila.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Patrón reinvented tequila as the spirit of choice for musicians, celebrities and college students. It raised the price of tequila in America. And it was also led by two savvy south California businessmen, Martin Crowley and John Paul DeJoria, who founded the company in 1989. The pair made a tequila that every expert I asked admitted is, indeed, quite good. And with the help of Hollywood and some choice publicity stunts, they hit the jackpot. Today it sells 3.2 million cases, has appeared in more than 250 songs and is one of the bestselling spirits in the world. It opened up the market, too. Chantal Martineau, author of the 2015 book *How the Gringos Stole Tequila*, compares Patrón with Starbucks. It was America's gateway drug into quality agave.



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Enter George Clooney. In 2013, Clooney and a friend, who both had homes in Mexico,

decided to launch a tequila brand. Presumably, they'd seen the success of Patron.

They named it Casamigos and, four years later, sold it for a small fortune to Diageo, a multinational drinks company based in London. Its success launched a thousand celebrity copycats, many of whom slap labels on to bottles of agave made in the same few distilleries in Jalisco. In the decade that followed, lots of them made money too.

Then, a third wave of tequila began to emerge. Ivy Mix, one of America's most respected bartenders with a singular focus on Latin American spirits, was one of its leaders. She and her bar, Leyenda, a casual, low-ceilinged joint in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, collect awards like Olympians. Her 2020 cocktail book, *Spirits of Latin America*, offers a cultural education in agave. Mix is influential and she's a purist.

The mass-produced names still rule the market, but Leyenda is one of a growing cadre of bars that specialise in sustainable, well-made agave spirits. "I just think it's sad," the 37-year-old tells me. We're sitting at the back of her bar. "It's such an insane process to make tequila. And celebrities think, OK, I'll slap my name on that and make a few hundred thousand dollars. Why do it to tequila? Of all things. Do it to something else."

It turns out mediocre tequila production is putting a major strain on Jalisco. And that's what Mix is fighting. In Mexico, agave prices have been close to record levels for the past three years. Experts worry that big conglomerates are harvesting the plant too early, cutting prices and underpaying farmers to make a profit. Smaller producers, which can't afford to buy up agave and subsidise their prices with profits from other spirits, are struggling to compete. And as demand has grown, one strain of agave has taken over the vast fields of Jalisco, creating a monoculture that could be taken down by a single pest.





Casamigos tequila was founded by George Clooney and Rande Gerber in 2013. It was sold to Diageo in 2017 © Alamy

Experts use these words to describe the category: fragile, unsustainable, in peril. They say if we're not careful, tequila's success will become its undoing. Mix believes we should care less about brands and more about Tequila with a capital 't': the drink itself. "Before too long, the only people who'll be able to afford to buy agaves will be making tequila with a tiny 't'," she says. "Then we're wiping out everything."

I look behind the bar and recognise almost none of the bottles. She agrees to pour me the good stuff, and lines up a few *blancos*. At Leyenda, agave spirits are served as they are in Mexico: in a small glass, neat, with no lime or salt. In Mexico, tequila is a noble drink to be savoured. You take it in small, regular sips. You drink it on Sundays with family, on special occasions, to celebrate or mourn.

Most of Mix's spirits come from producers she's met in Mexico and families she knows personally. She grew up in small-town Vermont and at 19, wanting to get out, took her first trip to Latin America. She's spent her life travelling back and forth since. Each tequila she pours uses traditional, resource-intensive processes. One is an earthy valley tequila called Fortaleza. Bartenders respect it for being 100 per cent tahona made. This means after the agave is cooked, a big stone wheel crushes it like a mortar-and-pestle, as opposed to a machine ripping it apart.



© Carmen Palma

Next up is Siembra Valles. The bottle features a rustic drawing of an agave farmer at

work. Siembra Valles is made by David Suro-Pinera, a conservationist whose mission is to get American consumers to buy responsibly made tequila, mostly by educating bartenders like Mix. The juice has an exciting bite: lemon peel, black pepper. Their best tequila, Ancestral, uses another ancient method: farmers pound roasted agave by hand, with wooden mallets, for hours.

I try Tequila Ocho, from another small producer Mix likes. It's nutty, creamy and kind of sweet. Why is that so good? I ask.

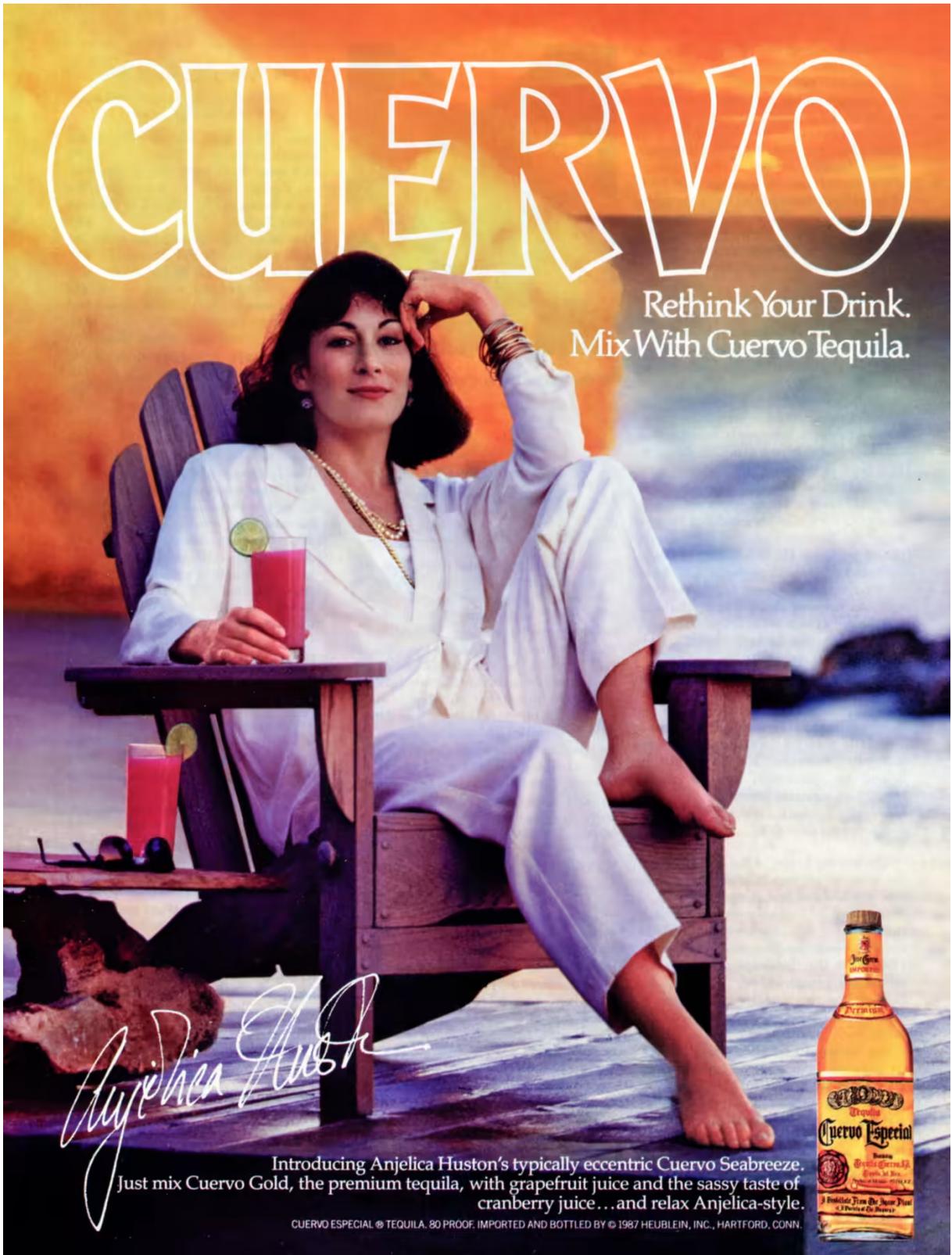
"Because it's agaves that are really, really ripe," Mix says.

I lament that no one ever taught us what to taste for. What should we taste for?

"Flavour!" she says. "Tradition, culture, history! Some of these have been made in the same manner for hundreds of years. And if it was made in Italy, it would be worth 16 times as much. But it's not. It's made in Mexico."

When I get home I call Suro-Piñera, from Siembra Valles. "On the surface, agave spirits are an incredibly successful business story," he warns. "But big brands are not transparent about methods of production. Celebrities are hiding it behind curtains of glamour, and it's dangerous. It's actually bad business." It would help if unethical practices became unpopular, he adds. Or, failing that, if we knew enough to choose better tequila.

Tequila's third wave doesn't just include the purists. It also includes marketers positioning tequila as truly top shelf. What would it look like if we took a spirit we used to degrade, respected its culture and made it luxury? This leads me to the headquarters of Casa Dragones in a trendy warehouse on Manhattan's west side. I'm sitting at a table with its CEO, Bertha González Nieves. She's from Mexico City and is the world's first female certified *maestra tequilera*, or master distiller. I've been shadowing her busy schedule, and today I'm with her team, including creative director Mishele Wells, who is also her wife. My table mates are aesthetically impeccable: layered gold jewellery, turtlenecks, oversized blazers, tortoise-shell glasses, linen suits.



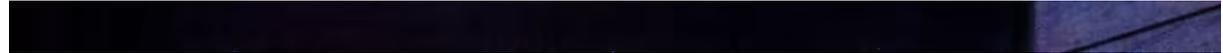
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González Nieves founded Casa Dragones in 2009 with Robert Pittman, the creator of MTV. It launched with one very high-end tequila called Joven, a rare style that's a *blanco* and extra aged blend. When I first tried it, I liked it immediately. It's floral, citrusy, smooth and bright. The price is an eye-watering \$265, and it comes in a signed, hand-engraved crystal bottle with a tagline that does half the work: "Tequila you can sip."

Wells tells me they sell "far, far less" than Casamigos and Patrón, and that because they're luxury, they're not vying for fast growth. In 12 years, they've come out with just four expressions. They don't lead with their sustainable farming practices, but they describe them in detail when I ask.

The team discusses a tasting room they're building for next month's Art Basel Miami Beach, based on the Mexican tradition of *sobremesa*, or relaxing around a table after a big meal. They plan a menu for an exclusive Day of the Dead dinner they're hosting in their luxury hacienda in San Miguel. They then take me through a slideshow of every room of said hacienda and the names of every Mexican artisan that made every piece of furniture in that house.

I ask González Nieves how she's able to fight old caricatures, but still let tequila be fun.

She thinks. "Just because people think mariachis are a caricature doesn't mean for my birthday I'm not going to have mariachis," she says. "I love mariachis! Same with Day of the Dead. We believe in it. It's a real ritual. So it's the pleasure of celebrating tradition and also elevating it. That's how you lose the caricature. People understand the depth of the tradition, not just the facade."

Bartenders' opinions matter, and Mix seems to approve of Casa Dragones. "It's a brand," she tells me with some cynicism, "but they're not celebrity endorsed. She cares about Mexico, which I respect. And the tequila, it's actually good."



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The night before, I joined González Nieves at an event where she was promoting their

new *reposaao*, aged in Japanese Mizunara casks. I ask if she's criticised for exploring Japanese barrels. Some could see it as gimmicky or inauthentic. She pointed to the producers who make tequila using historic methods and said there's space for both. "It's great, because they're protecting those processes," she said. "But we're on the other end of the spectrum. For some, we're too rebellious," she added, "but we believe that to really expand the tequila repertoire, we need adventure." Then, she handed me a glass.

In the weeks after doing this research, I ordered and sipped a lot of tequila neat. I brought a few bottles home and poured myself small tips as I wrote, tasting them slowly to compare. And like my aficionado friend, I started giving small pourings to anyone who dropped by. One shrugged at the taste of Casa Dragones' Joven and I pulled his glass, enraged that I'd wasted such a precious commodity on his clueless taste buds.

When another friend ordered Casamigos at a bar, I told her it had glycerine in it, and sure, she might like it, but it's my responsibility to inform her that it's technically bad. I decided it's cool to like Casa Dragones, because it honours Mexico, tastes good and makes me feel like I could own a linen pantsuit. And the Siembra Valles, for the flavour and for Suro-Piñera's work, I cherish.

I still don't know what makes a palate sophisticated, or what makes a tequila good, but it must be everything combined: personal taste, objective quality, an informed mind, an appealing brand. Mix thinks we should like tequila for all its parts, the way we do with wine: its flavour, its history, its styles, the people who make it, the way they drink it. She, Suro-Piñera and González Nieves all told me that if the industry worked more like wine, if it came together to build stronger protections, things could really improve. The spirit would taste better, Mexican producers would do better, consumers would know better. Tequila would get more expensive. But maybe it should have been all along.

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