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Perceptions of tequila have been polarised, but **Luc** finds a new level of quality helping to consolidate it

# Breaking bar

**P**icture the scene: A style bar on a Friday night almost anywhere in the world. Sophisticated crowds are sipping tequila cocktails at £10/\$15 a pop. The author of the menu uses five or six words just to describe the tequila and the bartender has met the master distiller. Next door in the neighbourhood boozier, rows of students are pouring salt on their hands and cheap tequila shots down their necks. All that separates them is a brick wall.

For Mexico's tequila ambassador to Europe, Tomas Estes, this brick wall has become a metaphorical one he finds it hard to break through.

He says: "Tequila's image change has been going on for about 10 years and it's gaining momentum, but there's still a way to go. It's very well respected among bartenders but what I lament is that we haven't gotten beyond them [bartenders] as much I'd hoped. We've got the choir but we want to get the message over the wall."

International vice-president for Olmeca and Pernod Ricard's tequila business Olivier Fages agrees. He adds: "While tequila is among the favourite spirits in the bartending community, there is still vast opportunity for growth among consumers who are just beginning to explore the spirit in cocktails and mixed drinks."

Industry consultants Cognosis goes as far as saying that tequila's image change is 'niche'.

Cognosis director Justin Bater says: "Currently it's a very niche trend. Patrón has shaken up the

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category among consumers and trade 'in the know', and changed some of the rules by adding different packaging and a stronger quality dimension to tequila.

"In the US, Patrón is rapidly achieving 'icon' brand status and it's securing good shelf presence in the premium London on-trade. But overall, outside the US, tequila is still massively underdeveloped. It's not understood by the vast majority of consumers."

So how can tequila producers and ambassadors serve the no-man's-land between the style bar and the student bar?

Perhaps one way would be not to deny the tequila drinking population a shot.

#### Call the shots

Estes puts it like this: "Personally, I want to change the image of tequila without denying the shot. What I preach is that it can be a fun part of tequila – authentic Mexican shot glasses, a sense of adventure and ritual."

In the UK, Monte Alban Mezcal distributor Hi-Spirits' chairman Jeremy Hill says tequila and mezcal brands have long been seen as party spirits and brands shouldn't deny consumers that pleasure.

"The reality is that most consumers see it as a party spirit and we'd be limiting its potential if we put the focus on Monte Alban as a connoisseurs' drink," says Hill. "We mustn't lose sight of the fact that people are out to enjoy themselves."

That's not to say Hill doesn't see premium

potential in the category and he adds: "There is undoubtedly a growing number of consumers out there who appreciate the quality and heritage of authentic mezcal and tequila and we're happy to work on bespoke support for the brand for bars which serve it as a sipping drink."

Estes does also try to get bartenders to think about serving tequila in different glasses. "Usually a tasting glass," he says. "It flatters the drink, adds value and tells the consumer a different message."

Diageo's Don Julio global brand ambassador, Brian Van Flandern, has been working to change the serve of tequila with the Luxury Drop campaign (*Drinks International*, September 2010) and, according to Diageo's president of tequilas, Maggie Lapcewich, the company is planning to take the Luxury Drop concept to the off-premise through "customised retail events".

As well as not forgetting the party aspect of tequila, if producers want to take on other spirits and change tequila's reputation, then quality is key. For many consumers, their lasting memory of tequila is likely to be a cheap shot at the end of a drinking session. The phrase "I'm never going to drink this stuff again" often follows.

#### Quality efforts

But when you look at the figures, the message of quality does seem to be getting through. In 2010, sales of 100% agave tequila were 30.5 million litres up on sales of other tequila (Camara Nacional de la



Industria Tequilera).

Patrón COO John McDonnell says people across the world are starting to understand the difference between low and high-quality tequila.

He adds: "People have begun to realise how big the differences are between a low quality 'mixto' tequila and a high quality 100% agave tequila such as Patrón."

"That awareness has definitely taken hold in the US, but as an industry it's a message we need to continue to educate consumers on, and certainly in some other parts of the world where the tequila category is less understood, it's very important that we educate on those differences."

In response to demand for 100% agave tequila, Pernod Ricard launched Olmeca Altos. The drink was a collaboration between Olmeca

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master distiller Jesus Hernandez and two famous bartenders - Henry Besant and Andrés Masso.

The company has also introduced Olmeca Tezon, which it claims is one of the few 100% agave/100% tahona (the traditional stone wheel that gently mashes agave to extract the sugar) tequilas on the export market.

**Latest moves**

Besant is full of praise for some industry innovations, especially when it comes to upping the quality ante.

Among his favourite innovations is barrel ageing and finishing – in particular, Euro Wine Gate’s (EWG) Excellia tequila. The company, which also owns the G’Vine gin brand, launched the tequila in November 2010, a culmination of a partnership between Jean-Sébastien Robicquet, brand creator and G’Vine distiller, and Carlos Camarena, tequila master distiller whose brands include Tapatio and El Tesoro tequilas – as well as the Estes-founded Ocho (Often). Camarena is also credited with creating the extra-anejo category.

The Excellia brand is made from 100% agave Tequilana Blue Weber and aged in ex-cognac and ex-sauternes barrels. The portfolio includes Excellia Blanco – aged a few weeks (legislation allows an ageing of a maximum of two months for blancos); Excellia Resposado – aged nine months (it must be aged for a minimum of two); and Excellia Anejo, aged 18 months (anejos have to be aged for a minimum of 12 months).

But Besant warned that some companies are rushing production of 100% agave tequila to keep up with market demand. A fan of the tahona method, he says: “Some brands are switching to aggressive production



**Tomas Estes hopes to change the face of tequila without losing its fun associations**

(Above) Hand-labelling Patrón bottles

(Below) Jose Cuervo’s 250th ultra-premium expression is a fine example of a ‘connoisseur’ expression

methods to extract sugar from agave.”

Also at the ultra-premium end, Diageo has launched Jose Cuervo 250 Aniversario to mark 250 years since Antonio de Cuervo received a land grant with which to cultivate agave for tequila distillation. The product is a 100% blue agave extra añejo tequila, aged in toasted new American oak barrels for a minimum of three years and finished for 10 months in sherry casks.

Estes, who founded the Café Pacifico and La Perla Mexican bar/restaurants in London, Paris, Amsterdam and Sydney, stocks the anniversary tequila at his bars and it sells for £250 a serving. He says: “These tequilas are important in terms of changing the image of tequila from ‘never going to drink this stuff again’ to the likes of single malts and cognacs.”

So important does he consider this evolution in quality that he has launched a new expression of his Ocho brand – Ocho Curado. Estes has taken cooked agave and added it to blanco tequila, allowing it to infuse and create a sweeter, amplified tequila flavour. “This has never been done before,” he says.

**Connoisseur**

The mention of single malts and cognacs brings us neatly to tequila’s third avenue for development.

Diageo’s Lapcewich describes the drink as a “connoisseur’s



dream” – the type of assertion that often leads super-premium expressions of tequila to be compared to malt whisky and cognac.

She describes tequila as being “made using various processes, aged for varying lengths of time, resulting in significantly distinctive tastes that can be appreciated by the finest palates”.

If this comparison really holds water it’s worth asking if the big brands are heading off to China to cash in on connoisseur culture. Lapcewich says China, with “its propensity for fine, ultra-premium spirits, is seen as a great growth opportunity for our high-end tequilas”, while Pernod Ricard’s Fages describes China as a tequila market “to watch”.

He adds: “The idea that tequila is ‘increasingly enjoyed as cognac’ is being referred to regularly and there is an element of truth in it. In China, Olmeca is still in its ‘baby shoes’, but we see continuous and strong growth.”

Relatively new kid on the tequila block is Tequila Distinguido, whose brand manager Alonzo Pierce says: “China would surely play a huge role in the near future as tequila competes

with the snifters of the world.

The aficionados with the extra money to spend are trading up to reposados and anejos. These are especially great for the winter months, just as nice as a bourbon or scotch.”

**In the mix**

Perhaps another way to meet the needs of the no-man’s-land would be to further highlight the versatility of the spirit.

Estes says: “There’s something in there for everyone and that’s a real asset for the trade. Perhaps that will help enrich the image of tequila for the no-man’s-land between cheap shots and super-premium tequilas.”

Patrón’s McDonnell is singing from the same hymn sheet. He adds: “We continue to reinforce to people how versatile and mixable this spirit is. Pretty much any cocktail that can be made with vodka or other white spirits can be created with Patrón tequila instead. The natural agave flavour really comes through in cocktails. As more people come to understand this spirit, the ultra-premium tequila category will only continue to grow.”

Brick by brick, the wall is coming down. ■

