

# The Best in Bar Management

# Nightclub&Bar

## Contemporary Tequila

Article By: [Jack Robertiello](#) - March 8, 2010

David Suro-Piñera has been in the hospitality business long enough to remember the days when getting customers to think “quality” when they ordered tequila was no easy task.

Suro-Piñera, who owns Tequilas Restaurant in Philadelphia, has been trying to make that connection for nearly 25 years, and for him, the change in awareness over the last few years has been surprising ... and encouraging.



“Today, many, many times, the customers who come into our place already know more than our servers about the various distilleries and regions as well as how tequilas are made and aged. It’s so exciting to see this and realize how far we’ve come.” Suro-Piñera has also witnessed this growth from the seller side, as he, like other agave-loving entrepreneurs, brings in his own brand, Siembra Azul.

We spoke amidst another sign of the remarkable Mexican spirits evolution: On a cold January morning in Manhattan, dozens of bartenders clustered around a dozen or more sampling stations at the bar and restaurant Los Feliz. The brand reps at the tables, stocked with mostly new or small production tequilas and several mezcals, served alone and in cocktails, were doing a brisk business with the crowd eager to get a handle on the various spirits.

Until very recently, New York hasn’t been known as much of a tequila haven, but Suro-Piñera says the

organization that oversees the tequila industry now sees Gotham as the biggest market for premium and above tequilas. The attendance at the seminar, put on by bartender John Pomeroy of Brooklyn's The Hideout, was just another sign of how well tequila is doing.

Dori Bryant has hosted the Spirits of Mexico Festival in San Diego since 2004. "Through those years, I have noted a steady, constant upward trend, not only in the number and quality of agave spirits on the market, but in consumer awareness and savvy. The consumers are not asking, 'What's a reposado?' — they're asking 'What distillery is it made in? How long is this reposado aged? What barrels are used for aging? Is this tequila made from agaves grown in the highlands or elsewhere?'"

### **Seeds of Passion**

Like no other spirit, tequila has benefited from an uncoordinated but devoted educational effort by bartenders like Tony Abou-Ganim and restaurateurs like Suro-Piñera and Julio Bermejo of San Francisco's Tommy's. At hundreds of small and large restaurants and bars across the country, tasting dinners, frequent sampling clubs, agave classes and, most beneficial, tequila flight programs have set the contemporary standard, having hit home with consumers while bringing tequila front and center as a quality spirit.

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*Tequila tastings and educational events, such as those hosted by David Suro-Piñera at Tequilas in Philadelphia (above) are proving more and more popular.*

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Brands have done their best to educate customers, sending distillers on tour to the U.S. time and again for samplings and events. Recently, tequila suppliers have started appointing bartender brand ambassadors, like Brian Van Flandern for Don Julio, to speak the gospel of tequila as both a sipper and a cocktail ingredient beyond the Margarita.

Tequila as a sipping spirit is a leap for some imbibers, but with the advent of 100 percent blue agave spirits that go through multiple distillations, the idea is taking hold. Triple-distilled 901 Silver Tequila, for one, is best enjoyed over ice, according to CEO and founder Justin Timberlake and president Kevin Ruder. Newcomer PaQui Silvera was developed with the upscale, educated tequila enthusiast in mind; sipping is a recommended repast by brand owner Tequila Holdings.

The focus on quality appears to be working wonders for bars and restaurants with a savvy approach to the

spirit. Take what Ivan Iricanin, bar manager for Masa 14 in Washington, D.C., is up to. He not only carries every 100 percent agave tequila he can find in the area (currently 126), he also brings in a handful of brands on his own, a collection from small family distilleries in 375 ml bottles, like Don Celso, El Caudillo, Arette Unique and Penacho Azteca, and is selling them in flights.

“Guests are ordering these tequilas more than I expected. We haven’t really been trying to sell them, and at half an ounce per glass you’re not really getting a lot, but guests have been more than willing to try,” says Iricanin. He offers the standard option of a vertical flight through a brand, a region or an age statement, or customers can pick their own three to sample. Recently, he added an extra anejo flight for \$35, a deal considering a few of these tequilas wholesale for as much as \$300. He sold five flights the first week.

But no mixto tequila at all? Not even for house Margaritas? Not for Iricanin. His special Margarita uses only blanco tequila, agave syrup and fresh lime — no sweet and sour mix and not even orange liqueur. “It’s very simple and very crisp, and people really like it.” More and more, this style of Margarita is gaining ground. His Paloma is made with Patron, grapefruit juice and half a lime.

Customers, as Suro-Piñera suggests, are increasingly able to tell the difference. Even in slushy frozen Margaritas, a cash cow for many restaurants, a little upgrade can do wonders and make a program stand out among many competitors. Iricanin has established a tequila lounge at Masa, where he serves cocktails such as the Red Star with Herradura tequila, Chambord, agave nectar, raspberry puree and fresh lime juice.

### **Ramping Up**

Competition to be a stand-out tequila bar is fierce, especially in such cities as D.C. Last year, Jose Andres’ Oyamel Cocina Mexicana became the first restaurant in Washington and one of only 15 or so in the country to receive the Agave De Oro, the highest certification from the Tequila Regulatory Council of Mexico. (Establishments are judged on staff training, proper storage and display of tequilas by category and type, menus, service and staff knowledge.)

Tequila producers like what is happening on-premise and are responding to the opportunity this tequila revolution offers. Some are finishing their spirits in wine barrels, though most employ used bourbon barrels. At least one tequila new to the U.S. is distilled four times. Limited-release, vintage, estate-produced and even single-barrel tequilas emerged onto the market last year, and finally, even the mezcal producers are figuring out that times have changed. At the recent New York tasting, in addition to Del Maguey, Sombra and Illegal mezcals, bartenders sampled the unsmoked [Fidencio](#). Like other recent imports, these spirits showed that mezcal is a legitimate sipping spirit, and potentially a killer cocktail ingredient. Cutting-edge bartenders like Phil Ward of Mayahuel in New York are building their businesses with new and creative cocktails based on tequilas and mezcals.

Even operations not traditionally known for having a smart tequila program are on board with the contemporary way to feature tequila. Last fall, Southern Hospitality BBQ in New York hosted a tasting featuring 37 or so tequilas, including Gran Patron Burdeos, which retails for around \$500 per bottle. Beverage director Chris Russell was on hand to discuss participating brands 1800, Maestro Dobel, 901, Gran Centenario, Cazadores, Corzo, Herradura and Casa Dragones, among others.

With about 25 tequilas on the list, Southern Hospitality stocks more than most bars, and Russell carries only one mixto. Even the machine Margaritas are made with 100 percent agave tequila — in this case, Cazadores — while the house Margarita is made with Herradura. Customers are even getting picky about all the ingredients in their Margaritas. It’s just another sign, Russell says, of the sophisticated American tequila drinker. “In the last 15 years there’s been an exposure to super-premium spirits in general, and tequila is one of those that has become much better known as a sophisticated spirit.”

Russell’s found that his customers connect easily to the stories of tequila’s history, craftsmanship and artistry, creating excitement in a way brands dream of, but require a cadre of knowledgeable and passionate bartenders to achieve. With tequila’s growing popularity among the nation’s barkeeps and mixologists, the level of guest education going on is at an all-time high, a trend that should keep Mexico’s spirit trending upward. **NCB**