

Production of Tequila

Agave Tequilana also known as Agave Azul or Blue Agave is the type of Agave plant used in the production of Tequila.

Cultivation

Tequila farmers generally harvest their Agave when the plant is between 6 and 12 years old. The size of the Agave varies and ripeness is measured by sugar content, rather than size.

Harvesting

When the Agave is ready, the Jimadors harvest each plant by hand and use a bladed tool called a Coa to remove the piña. The piña of the Agave is tested to determine the sugar content and has to meet a certain criteria in order to be utilized.

Cooking

Cooking the piña converts the Agave's carbohydrates in to fermentable fructose. The Tequila industry uses 3 types of ovens or hornos to cook the piña: steam, autoclaves and diffusers.

Traditional distillers steam-bake their Agave for 36-72 hours under gentle heat. Modern distillers use autoclaves or pressure cookers to roast them. How distillers cook the piña greatly influences the flavor of the tequila.

Grinding

Once the Agave is cooked, the juices must be extracted from the fibers. There are two techniques to do this: stone crushed by a tahona, or through a mechanical shredder. The juice that is separated from the fibers is called aguamiel (sugar water, honey water or Agave juice). The waste fiber is called bagazo and can remain in contact with the aguamiel during the fermentation process, lending additional flavor.

Fermentation

Agave juice (sometimes with the fibers) is placed in large vats where water is added. Additives can also be introduced at this time to increase yields (sugars) or cut time (salts). Yeasts consumes the sugar and produces alcohol as by product. Fermentation time varies from 2-12 days and the naturally fermented juice is called Tepache.

Distillation

During distillation, the Agave juice develops into three components. The first part of distillation, also known as the head or Cabeza is discarded, as it has the most volatile and strongest alcohol content. The middle part of distillation, also known as the heart, or Corazon, is saved for production as it has the most flavors and a reasonable alcohol content. Lastly, the Tail (Cola) is sometimes recycled into the next batch or thrown away as it contains the dirty remnants and residue. All Tequila must be distilled at least two times, and after the final distillation, water is added.

Aging

The age of a tequila is an important distinction and must be stated on the label of the Tequila bottle. There are 2 important effects of barrel aging: the extraction of flavor from the barrel, and oxidization, the effect of exposure to air. Tequila can be unaged or aged in White Oak Barrels. The most common barrels used by Tequila producers are used Bourbon barrels. Alternately, new barrels are more expensive, but provide more consistency and impart more flavors on the wood.