



The Mexican...

"One tequila, two tequila, three tequila, floor..." George Carlin

by Lynette Botha

Everybody's favourite get-you-in-the-mood party shooter has come a long way, *baby*. This month we delve a little deeper to find out how the juice of the succulent blue agave grew to be one of Mexico's biggest exports.

Pre-16th century

The agave's numerous uses were first discovered during the pre-Columbian era, by the inhabitants of the Tequila region* of Mexico. Wastage was not high on their lists. They used the fibre in the agave's leaves to weave materials, the spines were used as needles and, from the heart of the plant, they drained the juices and syrups. It's from the fermentation of these juices and syrups that a tequila-type liquor first originated. The ancestors believed that these 'mystic' juices allowed them to become one with their environment. The agave, to them, also represented the *Nahuatl* goddess, *Mayahuel*; the goddess of fertility with 400 breasts, that allowed her to feed her 400 sons.

(*The city was only officially pronounced *tequila* in 1656.)

Post-16th Century

Long before the Spanish conquistadors arrived, the Aztec people used to make a fermented beverage from the agave plant, popularly known as *pulque*. However, in the early 16th century, the invading Spanish brought with them the understanding of distillation and recognised the potential of the then low-alcohol drink. Consequently, the raw materials of the country were merged with the European production methods, and tequila was born. (Subsequent to the fermentation of the agave sugars, the Spaniards' knowledge of distillation was incorporated to produce the tequila.)

According to the National Chamber of the Tequila Industry (CNIT), during the three hundred years that the colonial age lasted in Mexico, tequila was a product of economic importance. At the beginning of this stage there were laws limiting the production of *wine mezcal* (these type of distillates), with the objective of creating markets in Mexico for Spanish wines and liquors. However, controlling the production of these native spirits was a very complicated task. For this reason, at the beginning of the 17th century, the Government of *Nueva Galicia* (today the state of Jalisco) decided to allow its production, although imposing heavy taxes.

After King Carlos III of Spain prohibited the production of spirits in the American colonies in 1785, tequila was produced in secret. However, Fernando IV later repealed this prohibition. By the 18th century, tequila was distributed to various countries through the port of San Blas and the routes of the Nao in China, and was an important export product for the region.

It is believed that the tequila boom in Mexico only came after the Mexican

Revolution in 1910. This can be attributed to the fact that it was associated with the revolutionary conquerors of that period; therefore natives accepted tequila as a symbol of national pride.

The prohibition in the United States in the 1930s, posed a difficulty for the introduction of European spirits into the country. However, tequila was easily smuggled and, therefore, became increasingly popular.

Over the years, demand for tequila has only grown and today it remains a true symbol of Mexican pride.

Tequila: Facts and Myths

Fact The blue agave (*agave azul tequilana weber*) is the only plant that can be used to produce tequila.

Myth There is a worm in some tequilas. (There is no worm in Mexican-bottled tequila. This would violate Mexican law. All ingredients added to tequila are carefully controlled. Mezcal, a similar spirit, distilled using a different process from a different plant, often contains a worm in the bottle.)

Fact Blue agave is a spiky succulent and a member of the lily family, not the cacti family as many believe.

Myth Raw tequila has a golden colour. (Not true. Double-distillation produces a colourless 150-proof tequila. Silver tequila is not aged and is simply the distilled tequila diluted with distilled water to a specified proof. Highly valued gold tequila comes in several varieties, the best resulting from ageing in large redwood casks for six months, giving it colour.)

Fact The agave takes around eight to 12 years to mature, and can only be harvested once. Tequila is made from the distilled sap from hearts (*piñas*) of the plant.

Myth The older the tequila, the better it is. (Nope! Tequila is more delicate than scotches, brandies and even wines. It doesn't improve with age.)

Fact On January 17, 2006 the United States and Mexico signed an agreement allowing the continued bulk import of tequila into the United States. Without this agreement, all tequila would have had to be bottled in Mexico. However, bulk importing applies to 'well tequila' (must have a minimum of 51% agave). 100% agave tequilas will still be bottled in Mexico.