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Don't Shoot!

A tequila-sipping tour of Jalisco unearths far more than sombreros and slammers | By Troy Johnson |

I've been handed a *coa*—part commercial pizza cutter, part medieval weapon. I thrust it downward, and the steel blade effortlessly shears off the burly leaves of a Weber Blue Agave. I am 17 miles west of Guadalajara, Mexico, at the foot of a volcano, amid endless fields of these dangerous succulents. (Agaves merely impersonate cacti.) I keep slashing until finally—toes remarkably unsevered—I expose the agave heart, or *piña*, which has the look of a giant, unripe pineapple and the blasé taste of jicama. It will eventually yield eight to 10 bottles of top-shelf tequila.

Tequila is no longer just for people wearing funny shirts and funnier hats, to be consumed right before invoking the gods of regret. Here in the state of Jalisco, a massive industry is polishing the spirit's luxury makeover, which started in 1983 with Chinaco, the first premium tequila sold in the U.S. "Premiumization" is a profitable buzzword. Just ask Sammy Hagar, who sold his majority stake of Cabo Wabo last year for \$80 million. Tequila's agave landscape has been named a UNESCO World Heritage site, joining the Statue of Liberty, Stonehenge and Necropolis as a U.N.-blessed cultural treasure. The goal now? To make the region an elixir mecca à la the Rhône Valley. Judging by the barrel-shaped tour bus pattering around Tequila's town square, the two will have peculiar differences.

A tequila train with mariachis runs from Guadalajara to **Casa Herradura** (*Hacienda San José del Refugio, Amatitán, 011.52.333.942.3900*), 2007's Distiller of the Year. Polite men with automatic rifles guard the Eden-esque estate. Inside, workers pile hundreds of *piñas* into giant clay ovens, and the deep, sugary scent of hot agave juice coats the air. Ancient, subterranean distilleries are stunning—perfect for royal weddings and lawless bacchanals.

The nearby **Mundo Cuervo** (*75 Calle José Cuervo, Tequila, 011.52.374.742.2170*) curates a tipsy Disneyland

appeal. Ismael Gama—Jose Cuervo's internationally famous *jimador* (agave farmer)—offers visitors hand cream from a hollowed-out bull's horn. "It's his own brand," a translator says. "You can buy it in the gift shop."

Back in Guadalajara (which locals refer to as the Silicon Valley of Mexico) at the restaurant **La Tequila** (*Av. Mexico 2830, Zona Minerva, 011.52.333.640.3110*), 220 tequilas assist in the appreciation of fried *gusanos de mague* (larvae) and *escamoles* (ant eggs—delicious in soft tortillas). And at a place called **Sacromonte** (*Pedro Moreno 1398, Zona Minerva, 011.52.333.825.5447*), rose-petal quesadillas pair nicely with *reposados* (barrel-aged premium tequilas) served in fine stemware. It's proper and a bit odd, like the Unabomber in a fitted Ferragamo. Meanwhile, the best tamarind Margarita can be found at **Casa Fuerte** (*Calle Independencia 224, 011.52.333.639.6481*), where tabachin-tree flowers flutter down like red snow on the piano bar's patio.

In-the-know tequila seekers stay at **Villa Ganz** (*rates from \$200, 877.278.8018, www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com/villaganz*)—the former family manse of pro-golf hero Lorena Ochoa—where modeling magnate and owner Sally Rangel hosts Mexican film directors and TV crews. And at the new "It" boutique hotel **Clarum 101** (*Rates from \$220, 877.278.8018, www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com/clarum101*), a starkly white house of modern, the underwear-ad-worthy owners pamper guests with Molton Brown products, iPod docks and a rooftop Margarita terrace.

This is Tequila country—take off that funny hat and sip awhile. **A**



GOLD STANDARDS Clockwise from left: Herradura's clay ovens; Villa Ganz; the Tequila Express; Plaza de Armas in Guadalajara.