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# Tequila Shots



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THE TOWN OF TEQUILA, MEXICO, lies about an hour's drive from Guadalajara. Along with a population of fifty-one thousand, it boasts roughly twenty tequila factories, which is hardly surprising when you consider that nearly all tequila today originates from Tequila, its neighboring town, Amatitán, and the Los Altos region of Jalisco two hours to the north. In 2005 and 2006, I conducted fieldwork in this region. What made tequila so special, I wondered, and how did it come to be regarded as Mexico's national drink?<sup>1</sup> After all, across the border in the United States, drinkers and nondrinkers alike associate tequila with rowdiness and fiesta-fueled excess. In its native Mexico, however, tequila

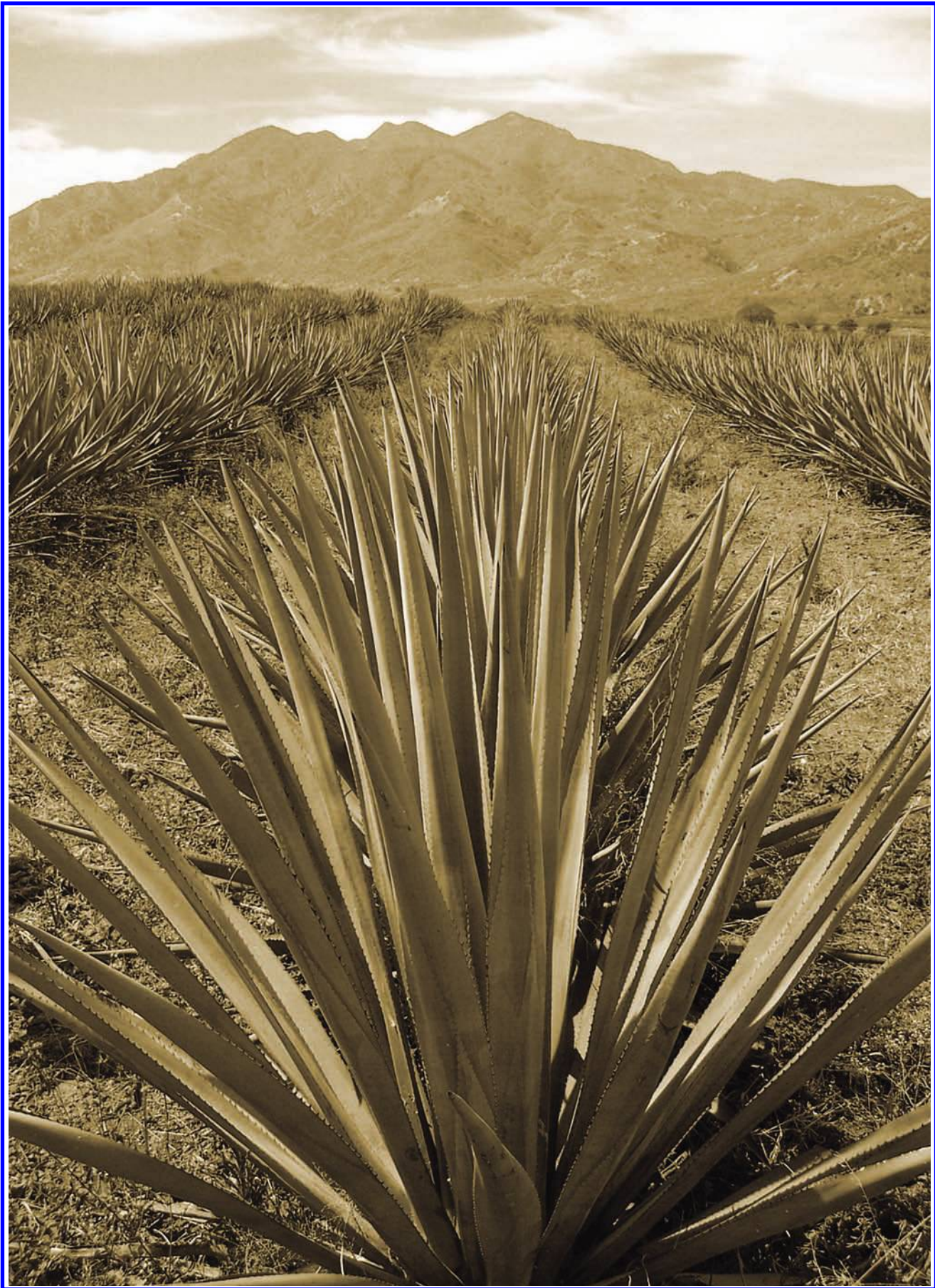
Above: *Welcome to Tequila.* Right: *Agave landscape.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GWYN FISHER © 2006

symbolizes collective national identity and pride. Nowhere is this truer than in Tequila itself, where the drink embodies both traditional and modern means of production, bespeaks the Mexican countryside, and celebrates life even as it commemorates its passing. A potent symbol indeed.

Ever since the sixteenth century, when Spanish settlers introduced the process of distillation, Tequila has been known for the manufacture of *mezcal*, an early incarnation of tequila (tequila is to mezcal as cognac is to brandy,

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the proprietary form). However, long before its official founding in 1530, Tequila was inhabited by various indigenous groups—the Chichimecas, Otomíes, Toltecas, and Nahuatlacas—who produced *pulque*, a beverage fermented from the agave (maguey) plant and similar to beer in its low alcohol content and high number of nutrients. Like *pulque*, tequila is fermented from agave, but then it is distilled. Therefore, tequila is among the earliest *mestizo* products to have emerged from the encounter between colonizers and native inhabitants. This venerable history no doubt influenced UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) decision in 2006 to add the Tequila region to its list of World Heritage sites.

With its rolling hills, ancient *guachimontones* (rounded pyramids), stunning fields of blue agave (*Agave Tequila Weber*), and state-of-the-art factories, the Tequila region represents a uniquely Mexican blend of indigenous traditions and European technology. As the UNESCO proposal affirms, “the cultural profundity of the agave landscape and the pro-

duction of tequila hearkens back to the very foundation of our nationality—for it fuses the closeness to nature and the land of the indigenous populations with the transforming and fundamental spirit of the Spanish settlers. From this union the spirit of a new culture was born giving rise to the traditions and values that now characterize the Mexican people.”<sup>2</sup> Despite such flowery language, this statement captures the way Jalisco's landscape and industry combine to link Mexico's indigenous past with its *mestizo* present.

In a similar way, tequila symbolizes the balance of the traditional and contemporary in its production techniques. After harvesting, the *piña* (the agave's heart or root) is either slowly roasted in a traditional stone or brick oven (*horno*) or cooked more quickly in a steam autoclave. The *piñas* are then crushed, either by a large stone wheel known as a *tahona* or by a modern mechanical chipper. The resulting must (*mosto*) is strained and left to ferment. Fermentation takes place either naturally (thanks to a yeast that occurs on the agave plant) or through the help of commercial



brewer's yeast. As with the roasting, modern methods accelerate the fermentation process. The resulting liquid is then distilled twice, either in traditional copper pot stills or in stainless-steel column stills. Traditional tequila makers are skilled enough to stop the distillation at 40 percent alcohol; but more often than not, after the tequila has aged in wooden barrels to develop its flavor, water is added to the distilled spirit to bring it down to 80 proof (40 percent alcohol) before bottling. Only three types of tequila (reposado, añejo, and extra añejo) are actually aged in wooden barrels—tequila blanco (or silver, as it is known in the United States) is bottled immediately following distillation.

Although most tequila is now mass-produced using modern machinery, some small-scale producers continue to rely on artisanal methods, including the use of *tahones*, *hornos*, and rustic fermentation tanks. Ironically, even though they use these time-honored procedures, some artisanal producers, such as those illustrated here, do not conform to the standards enforced by the Tequila Regulatory Council.

Therefore, their products cannot legally be called “tequila.” Instead, the beverage they manufacture is typically called *aguardiente de agave* (agave firewater) or *vino de mezcal* (mezcal wine).

No rituals better reflect the central role of tequila in Mexican culture than those associated with *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. Predating the conversion of Mesoamerican populations to Christianity by roughly two thousand years, Day of the Dead rituals (which now coincide with the Catholic feasts of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on November 1 and 2) commemorate the continuation of life after death. People erect *altares* (altars) to the departed and decorate gravesites with *ofrendas* (offerings) of the deceased's favorite food and drink. At the historic Panteón de Belén cemetery in Guadalajara, altars are adorned with incense, flowers, candles, and *papel*

**Below:** Cooked agave piñas in oven. **Left:** Agave pencas (*spiny leaves*) and the Tequila volcano.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GWYN FISHER © 2006





*picado* (paper cutouts) ornamented with skulls. Tequila is also frequently part of the offering. As family members tell stories of the dear departed, they place tequila on the grave—and often drink it—as a symbol of the good times in that person’s life.

The elaborate decorations on the altar for famed Mexican actress Maria Félix include *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) and candied *calaveras* (skulls), as well as a range of other foods (*carmitas*, corn, and jicama) and drinks (cups of hot chocolate, a bottle of tequila). The graves of less celebrated individuals can hold candles, a bowl of *chicharrón* (pork rind), flower petals in the form of a cross, and a bottle of tequila—that ubiquitous image of Mexico so vital to all rituals of passage.

In every country, national identity both emerges from and creates material culture. In Mexico, tequila represents a unique national product that binds the country’s diverse inhabitants and expresses the dynamism of Mexican culture, a culture that, as many *Jaliscienses* (Jaliscans) told me, should not be swallowed in a single gulp but should be appreciated in flavorful sips. ☪

**Above:** Traditional mezcal production. **Right:** Day of the Dead altar in memory of Maria Félix.

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#### NOTES

1. As early as 1974, tequila became the first Mexican product to receive a Denomination of Controlled Origin (DOC) from the World International Property Organization, meaning that any product bearing the name tequila must be produced in accordance with a specified process in one of five Mexican states (Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas). The DOC safeguards against misuse of the product’s name and protects consumer interests by ensuring quality production.
2. Sofia González-Luna, “Introduction,” in Ignacio Gómez-Arriola, *The Agave Landscape and the Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila* (Guadalajara: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2004), 13.

