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Celebrate Cinco De Mayo In Tequila



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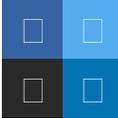
□ Many Americans will celebrate Cinco de Mayo this year by downing a few tequila shots or sipping margaritas,

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Jimadores harvesting agave

Mezcal may be getting all the hype lately, but tequila is still Mexico's most popular spirit. Many Americans will celebrate Cinco de Mayo this year by downing a few tequila shots or sipping margaritas, □ but if you're a serious connoisseur consider heading to the



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source of it all. Tequila, the town, was founded in 1530 by Franciscan monks in the state of Jalisco and in 1795 the Cuervo family received a royal permit from the King Carlos IV of Spain to produce “vino mezcal de tequila.” Today the UNESCO World Heritage Site is still home to the majority of tequila production and very welcoming to visitors.

If you remember wicked hangovers from pounding tequila shots in college, chances are you were drinking tequila mixto, which is only required to be 51% blue agave. The best tequila is made purely from blue agave, so look for 100% blue agave on labels for a smoother drink.

American visitors only make up a small slice of visitors to Tequila (80% of guests are from within Mexico) but that only makes this destination all the more intriguing. This isn't San Miguel de Allende, where you'll encounter as many Americans and Canadians as locals, but it's easy to get around even if your Spanish *no es muy bueno*.



Hotel Solar de las Ánimas

Fly to Guadalajara and it's a 90-minute drive or two-hour ride on Jose Cuervo's [Express train](#) to the "Pueblo Mágico" where tequila was born. Check into Relais & Chateaux property [Hotel Solar de las Ánimas](#). Also owned by Jose Cuervo, the hotel has significantly elevated the level of accommodation since it opened in 2015 with 93 rooms and a convenient location right on the main square.

The resort is a bit of a maze, but the Spanish colonial architecture and colorful paintings by contemporary Jalisco painter Chucho Reyes Ferreira make it a fun place to get lost. Enjoy a lavish breakfast buffet including made-to-order chilaquiles and sip smoky lemon rosemary margaritas at the skybar. A tasting menu dinner at [La Antigua Casona](#) is a must. Chef Sergio (his impressive resume includes Guy Savoy in Las Vegas and The Georgian Room at Sea Island) will indulge your palate with adobera cheese croquettes, beef blanketed with rich mole negro and duck breast in a spicy mole rojo made

with beets.



Horseback riding in agave fields

The largest producers of tequila today are Jose Cuervo, Herradura and Sauza. Jose Cuervo just [went public in February](#), making the Beckmann family billions. Herradura is a subsidiary of Brown-Forman and Sauza is owned by Beam Suntory. Cuervo owns 25,000 hectares of its own blue agave plantations, growing nearly 45 million agave plants. They also buy agave hearts (or pineapples, as they are commonly called) from many small farmers.

While visiting the Cuervo plantation, I had a chance to see a *jimador* in action, wielding a deadly sharp *coa* machete and expertly slicing his way through the spiky seafoam green agave leaves. A good warrior can harvest 300 to 350 tequila “pineapples” per six hour shift, which equates to 11 or 12 tons. The general wage is \$150 pesos per ton of tequila or a little less than \$100 for a day's work. Fifteen pounds of agave heart equates to a litre of tequila, a better yield than I expected.

Unlike grapes for wine, an agave plant must be replanted after it is harvested and it takes seven to eight years to mature. For top shelf premium tequilas, plants will be even older, up to 12 years. Blue agave is grown in alternating rows five feet apart, so that once a plant is harvested, the fallow adjacent row is planted.



Agave hearts ready to be cooked

After harvest, the production of tequila is relatively quick. The agave is steamed and cooked to a caramel brown, at which point you can chew on it like sugarcane to extract a sweet, fruity juice. The agave is then milled to extract the juice or *musto*, which is fermented for a couple of days with yeast, then double distilled. Originally there was only silver tequila, but in the 1960s distillers began experimenting with aging tequila blanco in oak barrels, begetting golden reposado and amber-hued añejo tequila.

My favorite of the tequilas I tried over my three-day visit was Jose Cuervo's Reserva de la Familia extra añejo, which tasted like vanilla crème brûlée with hints of cinnamon and apple. You'll

want to sip this out of an elegant crystal tequila glass, a [creation by Riedel](#) at the request of tequila producers in 2002, sized for 2 ounce pours. Several other tequila producers offer tours and tastings in town, including a unique cave tasting experience at Fortaleza.

While it would have been easy to eat every meal at La Antigua Casona – it really is that good – take some time to wander the village and try some street food. Ask a local to point you in the direction of *callejon del hambre* – or the “street of hunger.” Find Tacos El Pelon and order the *tacos de tripa* – tacos with chopped tripe which you then dress as you please with a dozen different garnishes. They were the best tacos this *gringa* has ever eaten, although I admittedly washed them down with beer, not tequila.

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