



The Mexican Way

When it comes to tequila, no frills are required.

BY NANETTE MAXIM

I once arrived at a dinner party in Mexico City's art-filled San Angel neighborhood just as the cocktail hour was beginning. A few of the guests—elegant women of a certain age—were being served tequila blanco in slender glasses balanced on individual wooden trays bearing quartered limes and a bit of salt. Ignoring the accompaniments, they sipped their tequila slowly, savoring it neat. I immediately wanted to have what they were having. And for this American, whose tequila past had been limited to rounds of citrusy margaritas, the flavor of a crisp, smooth, floral tequila sipped from a *caballito*, as this special glass is called, was a revelation.

Mexico takes its national drink very seriously; true tequila must be made only of 100 percent blue agave (a variety of the spiky succulent plant with the big pineapple-like heart, also called *piña*) and produced in a distillery located in a municipality recognized as being one of Mexico's denominations of origin for genuine tequila. Any tequila that does not say that it's 100 percent agave on the label is known as *mixto* (but still labeled tequila) and is made with up to



49 percent other sugars, such as cane. *Mixto* is not the beverage to drink neat.

Tequila dates back to the Aztecs, who first fermented agave juice to make ceremonial wine. Today, the blue agave, which takes 8 to 10 years to mature, is mostly harvested by hand and slowly steamed-cooked or roasted in special furnaces. The plants are then shredded and pressed to release their sweet juice into fermentation tanks. (It takes about 15 lb. of agave to make 1 liter of tequila.) Yeast is added, which acts on the sugars in the juice, turning it to alcohol. Tequila's flavor can vary greatly, depending on how it's distilled and how long it ages (see right).

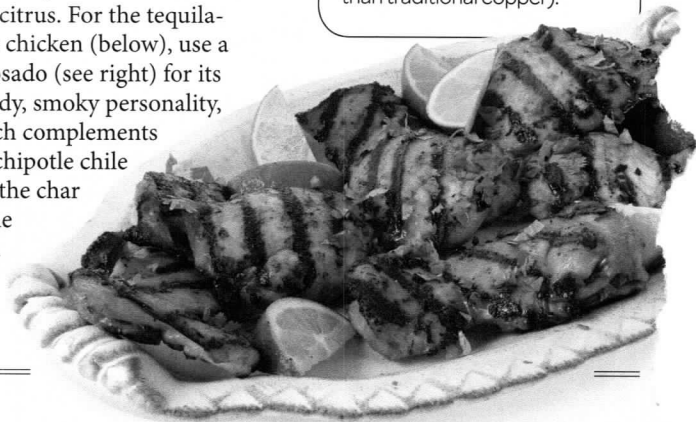
The spirit is also good to cook with. When using it, think of the flavors you want to highlight or enhance in the food, and then choose a tequila that will do just that. If you want to add tequila to a salsa or vinaigrette, reach for a blanco (see above); its pure, bright vegetal flavors will complement fresh herbs and citrus. For the tequila-lime chicken (below), use a reposado (see right) for its woody, smoky personality, which complements the chipotle chile and the char of the grill.

Age matters

Tequila is categorized according to its age, and the older the spirit, the more depth (and mellowness) of flavor. *Blanco* (also called white or silver) is the youngest (bottled unaged or aged up to 60 days), clearest, and cleanest tasting. *Reposado* ("rested") is golden in color, toasty in flavor, and aged in wood (typically oak) barrels for at least 60 days. *Añejo* ("aged") must spend at least one year in wood. *Extra-añejo* is aged for at least three years.

Tequila vs. mezcal

Agave is the base for both tequila and mezcal, but mezcal uses many other varieties of agave beyond the blue variety required in tequila. Traditionally produced in open-air distilleries called *palenques*, mezcal has a smokier flavor than tequila. These days, mezcal is growing in popularity, especially artisanal mezcals from Oaxaca villages and some made in clay pots (thought to lend a greater fruitiness to the spirit than traditional copper).



tequila-lime chicken thighs

For a full, robust tequila flavor, be sure to let the chicken marinate for at least 8 hours. **Serves 4**

- 1/3 cup tequila, preferably reposado
- 1/3 cup fresh lime juice (from 2 large limes)
- 1/4 cup agave syrup
- 3 large cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tsp. chipotle chile powder
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp. dried oregano, preferable Mexican
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

- 8 boneless, skinless chicken thighs (about 2 1/2 lb.), trimmed of excess fat
- Peanut or vegetable oil, as needed
- 1 lime
- 1/4 cup coarsely chopped cilantro; more to taste

In a medium bowl, whisk the tequila, lime juice, agave, garlic, chile powder, cumin, oregano, 2 1/2 tsp. salt, and black pepper to taste. Add the chicken, turning to coat. Cover and refrigerate for at least 8 hours or up to 2 days.

Prepare a medium (350°F to 375°F) gas or charcoal grill fire.

Remove the chicken from the marinade and shake off the excess liquid. Brush the chicken and the grill grate with the oil. Grill, flipping once, until charred in places and cooked through, about 8 minutes total.

Remove the chicken from the grill, cover with foil, and let rest for 5 minutes. Squeeze half a lime over the chicken, garnish with the cilantro, and serve with the remaining lime, cut into wedges.

—Diana Andrews