

SHELF LIFE

PAPAGAYO IS ONE OF THE RESTAURANTS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE TEQUILA REVOLUTION.



A photograph of a dining table with brown napkins and a glass display cabinet filled with various bottles of tequila. The table is in the foreground, and the cabinet is in the background. The bottles are of various shapes and colors, including clear, blue, and yellow. The lighting is warm and focused on the bottles.

HOT SHOTS

Is tequila reaching its
saturation point?

BY LINDSEY CANANT / PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN WATKINS

CROWDED HOUSE

TEQUILA PACKS THEM IN
AT BARS LIKE LOLITA.



EVERY EVENING AT THE Back Bay hotspot Tico, a dapper, professional scrum pushes up against the patinaed bar. They're here for the food and the ambience—spicy, varied, with unexpected twists like gothic Spanish lamps and mango in the quail a la plancha. But they're also here for the tequila, our city's newest favorite tippie. In the past few months, Boston has seen the launch of tequila-slinging venues like Tico, Lolita and Fort Point's Papagayo. Mija Cantina and Temazcal loom on the horizon. There's obviously money to be made in the fruits of the agave—on its first Friday in business, Tico's bar poured some 400 made-to-order margaritas.

With tequila varieties at many of these restaurants numbering more than 100 (Sushi-Teq has 102, Papagayo and Mija Cantina 150 each, Lolita boasts 195, Temazcal a borderline-abstract 300 bottles), bar managers have faith in the drink's appeal. "Everyone has a tequila these days, even Justin Timberlake," says Papagayo co-owner Brad Dalbeck, who'll soon head to Mexico to select and brand a barrel of tequila for the house. Bartenders say customers choose their poison based on bottle design ("It's like picking a perfume"), menu tasting notes, familiar brands ("like Patrón"), bartender recommendations or, in the case of Temazcal, from photos, ratings

and details about the distilling process on the iPad menu.

We weren't always a tequila town. In 2009, Boston held just 1.1 percent of the national tequila market. Danielle Eddy of the Distilled Spirits Council predicts that, as one of the nation's top cocktail cities, we're now following San Francisco, Chicago and New York's lead in adopting the trend. Between 2002 and 2007, U.S. imports of tequila grew by 48 percent. Sushi-Teq's head chef Tsuyoshi Taki-ishi sees tequila's rise in popularity as part of the ebb and flow of drink trends, starting with vodka bars in the '80s and the more recent resurgence in Scotch's popularity. Nationwide, tequila sales rose four percent between 2009 and 2010.

Eddy expects growth to hold in coming years. With 2011's biggest tequila-drinking months ahead (May, July and December) and several bar openings scheduled, we're likely to sip our way up from the number 18 rank in state tequila consumption we achieved in 2009.

"When we opened, most people thought of tequila as a bad memory instead of a quality spirit," says Mohamad Elzein, partner/director of operations at Masa. In the 11 years since it opened in the South End, Masa has quietly worked to revamp tequila's image from frat-party fuel to luxury libation. Statistics prove that the strategy's working. Nationally, high-end and super-premium brands are up 17 percent since last year. Elzein

claims customers are more likely to pick tequilas on account of flavor profile rather than price point, but he says Bostonians are willing to spend. “Between 2003 and now, there’s been much more consumption of top-shelf tequila. It’s grown every year. Those bottles are moving three, four times faster now,” he explains. Says Temazcal’s Todd Hall, a winner of two James Beard awards: “Tequila will be the next status symbol.”

As the U.S. tequila market evolves, more profits are reinvested in marketing campaigns and experimental distillations. To add character, some distillers are aging tequilas in former port, wine or whiskey barrels (and sometimes the same tequila in multiple barrels, such as Gran Patrón Burdejos Añejo, aged in new French and American oak, then vintage Bordeaux barrels). Others are adjusting batch sizes, creating reserve blends, altering flavor profiles through infusions or developing organic tequilas. The quest for new products and new marketing concepts is, of course, self-perpetuating.

In a tone that’s only half-joking, Tico’s chef/owner Michael Schlow muses that our arctic winter might’ve precipitated the trend. “In Boston, we secretly (or not so secretly) covet warmer weather,” he says. “So we sip a tequila, listen to a Latin soundtrack and pretend it’s not four below outside.” Ultimately, though, Schlow and many of his compatriots agree that the surge in Latin restaurants is due, in part, to the wretched economy. Ingredients and startup costs are relatively approachable for business owners, especially since customers now expect large portions for a moderate price. “Just look at Qdoba and Anna’s,” Schlow says. “Now Boston is familiar with Mexican food. It’s everywhere.”



CRIB SHEET

TEQUILA TYPES

BLANCO/PLATA (“WHITE/SILVER”): unaged tequila; has the strongest agave flavor

ORO/JOVEN (“GOLD/YOUNG”): blanco tequila with caramel coloring added to simulate reposado

REPOSADO (“RESTED”): aged in wooden barrels for at least two months, lightly golden

AÑEJO (“AGED”): aged for at least one year, golden-colored

EXTRA AÑEJO (“EXTRA AGED”): aged at least 3 years, smoothest tasting



GLOSSARY

AGAVE: large spiky plant growing in Mexico’s semiarid high plains and valleys

AGAVE NECTAR: organic vegan sweetener, similar to honey; see also: hippie juice

BLUE AGAVE: type of agave with distinctive taste growing only in Jalisco and its neighboring states

JALISCO: a Mexican state containing the town of Tequila; denomination-controlled like Champagne

MESCAL/MEZCAL: smoky-flavored liquor made from pulque roasted over rocks heated with charcoal

MIXTO: a spirit with at least 51 percent agave plus colors, flavors, syrup and glycerin; see also: bad idea

PIÑA: the heart of the agave plant containing all the agave juice and weighing 80-150 lbs

PULQUE: fermented agave nectar that’s distilled into tequila or mezcal

TERROIR: unique characteristics of land imparted into a product

WORM: urban legend, loosely based on fact; see also: *Law & Order: Ripped From the Headlines*

Dire economic times, too, demand an uplift. Chris Jamison, co-owner of Lolita, explains, “We were trying to create a dangerous, sexy, decadent, rock ’n’ roll party with an upbeat, upscale atmosphere. And tequila is a party liquor in a way that Scotch, gin and even vodka aren’t.”

Of course, restaurants like Sunset Cantina, Olé and La Verdad have dished up Mexican food and tequila drinks for years, but even the established places have to meet the demands of the trend. Masa’s tequila list has grown from 45–50 tequilas to just above 100. Its list is carefully curated, and bartenders

steer customers on the assumption of little prior knowledge of the drink. “A gin drinker will probably like a tequila that’s peppery and herbal, whereas an ultra-añejo tequila can be mistaken for a good Scotch,” says Elzein.

Like a wine list, Masa’s tequila roster aims to offer a sense of

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place, specifically “where the blue agave was grown—the highlands or the lowlands—and approach it

WHERE TO DRINK TEQUILA

LOLITA COCINA & TEQUILA BAR

271 Dartmouth St., Boston
(617-369-5609)
lolitaboston.com

MASA

439 Tremont St., Boston
(617-338-8884)
masarestaurant.com

MIJA CANTINA

Faneuil Hall, Boston
mijaboston.com

PAPAGAYO

283 Summer St., Boston
(617-423-1000)
papagayoboston.com

SUSHI-TEQ

InterContinental Hotel
510 Atlantic Ave., Boston
(617-217-5150)
intercontinentalboston.com

TEMAZCAL TEQUILA CANTINA

250 Northern Ave., Boston
(617-439-3502)
temazcaltantina.com

TICO

222 Berkeley St., Boston
(617-351-0400)
ticorestaurant.com

with the concept of terroir.”

Temazcal’s Hall, too, links flavor with geography.

“You can taste the earth in a great tequila, literally. It’s supposed to be savored. We’re

not serving some unaged tequila with a handful of salt and five limes.

They’re aged, buttery and nuanced.” The idea is to usher

in an age of tequila enlightenment, like in the 1980s, when

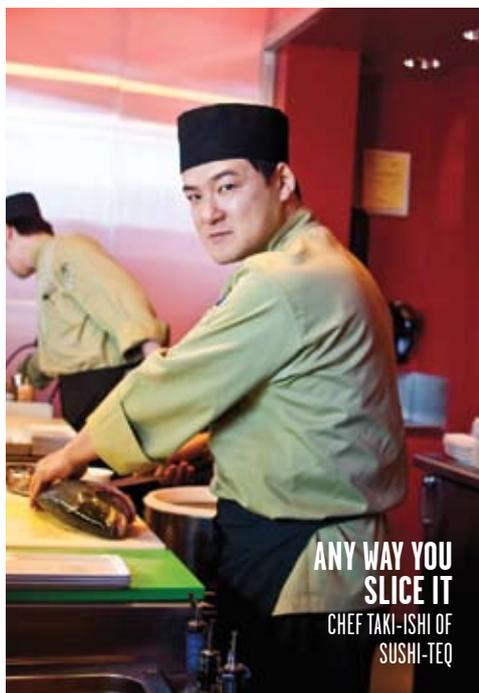
Americans put away the white zinfandel and uncorked the cabernet.

As with a good wine list, Schlow insists, “Man and woman cannot live by one or two tequilas alone.” As cus-

tomers become more educated, he explains, they move from cocktails to neat drinks. (“These

are not tequila shots. They’re for sipping.”) Elzein agrees, explaining that his customers then use their knowledge of specific tequilas to select nuanced cocktails. Stepping past the margarita, consider the Paloma (Schlow’s favorite), the Bloody Maria or icy granitas.

Katie Noble



ANY WAY YOU
SLICE IT
CHEF TAKI-ISHI OF
SUSHI-TEQ

potency of tequila, he claims, ends up just smothering flavors.

As with any subject involving taste and money, there's going to be disagreement. "It's a spirit that fits many different narratives," Lolita's Jamison says. His restaurant is a self-declared "office professional by day, punk nymphette by night." Foxwoods' Scorpion Bar is a gothic, Mexican rock club. Mija Cantina will be loungey. Tico is relaxed sophistication. Temazcal

promises tradition with a high-tech touch. What they have in common is a defining liquor.

And then, when some yet-undreamed tequila bar in Boston unveils the last, undiscovered bottle of añejo to come out of Mexico, what next? Bergamot just put lemon beignets atop tequila ice cream. It's only a matter of time before hipsters make tequila postmodernist. Are we just one margarita cupcake with triple-sec icing away from inciting a detached-ironic-indie-yuppie rebellion? (Kickass Cupcakes, we need to talk.) In other words, is this bacon all over again? Will some satanic liquor store soon be selling tequila-that's-actually-a-shirt (à la Johnny Cupcakes), vodka-flavored tequila (über-meta) and bottles with blank labels (pencil in your own brand)?

Still, like bacon and cupcakes, there's a reason for the popularity. Tequila is fun. Tequila is complex. Tequila is delicious. Fashion or food trend, for the moment the city remains intrigued.

Your move, margarita-flavored bacon. ***

IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE HIPSTERS MAKE TEQUILA POST-MODERNIST.

Tequila, too, has started to seep into the menu. Papagayo makes a pan-seared shrimp penne with a tequila-lime reduction. Sushi-Teq's Taki-ishi formulated a sweet yuzu-and-tequila-based soy sauce that dresses some of the dishes at the InterContinental Hotel's Tokyo-meets-Jalisco restaurant. Self-declared "purist" Hall, however, frowns on that tack. "Tequila isn't something you pair with food," he insists. "Pairing is supposed to enhance and accent." The

TEQUILA RECIPES FOR THE MARGARITA GRADUATE

PALOMA {TICO}

INGREDIENTS:

½ oz Fresh lime juice
3 oz Ruby red grapefruit juice
Soda water
2 oz Milagro Silver or DeLeón Reposado

METHOD:

1. Rim a highball glass with salt (optional).
2. Combine juice and tequila.
3. Pour over ice and top with soda water.

SPICY CUCUMBER {LOLITA}

INGREDIENTS:

2-3 Serrano chiles
4 ½-inch slices English cucumber, quartered
1 ¼ oz Don Julio Blanco
½ oz Patrón Citronge
Fresh lime juice
Cane simple syrup (1:1 water and cane sugar)

METHOD:

1. In a pint glass, muddle chiles and a handful of English cucumber quarters.
2. Over ice in a cocktail shaker, add Don Julio Blanco and Patrón Citronge and equal parts lime juice and simple syrup to top off.
3. Shake vigorously.

4. Pour directly into pint glass (do not strain).
5. Garnish with 2-3 cucumber quarters.

BESOS {TEMAZCAL}

INGREDIENTS:

1 ½ oz Patrón Silver
1 oz St-Germain Elderflower Liqueur
1 oz Fresh lemon juice
Dash agave nectar
6 Fresh raspberries

METHOD:

1. Combine ingredients in a shaker.
2. Serve over ice.
3. Garnish with a lemon slice.



AGAVE IT MY ALL
THE QUIET BEFORE THE COCKTAIL HOUR
AT MASA.