

# The tequila trade's big shots

Celebrities reshape a signature Mexican industry



A HORSE grazes in a blue agave field in San Martin de las Canas, outside the town of Tequila, Mexico. (Photographs by Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)





GUADALUPE RAMOS SANTOS uses a tool called coa to cut away blue agave leaves from the core, or piña, in El Arenal, in Jalisco state. ()

BY KATE LINTHICUM

TEQUILA, Mexico — People in the tequila industry call it the “Clooney effect.”

In 2017, actor George Clooney [announced](#) he was selling his 5-year-old Casamigos tequila brand to a British beverage company for the staggering sum of \$1 billion.

Almost overnight, it seemed that every A-list celebrity was [debuting](#) a tequila label — from Arnold Schwarzenegger to LeBron James, Nick Jonas and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

The flood of celebrity brands has helped fuel record growth in the industry. Mexico, the source of all tequila, last year produced 60 million gallons — 800% more than two decades ago.

The boom is visible here, a city where the narrow, cobblestone streets are jammed with tourists and seemingly every distillery is undergoing an expansion. In the surrounding hills, blue agave, tequila’s main ingredient, is selling for record prices.

“We can’t keep up with global demand,” said Augustin Velázquez Servin, an agave producer who also has a small label called Ruiseñor. “Anyone who has tequila right now is selling it at the price of gold.”

But not everybody is happy with the industry's rapid growth, which carries both an environmental price — as farmers bulldoze forests to plant more agave — and a cultural one — with foreigners playing an ever-growing role in one of Mexico's proudest cultural traditions.

"Personally I find it very sad when thousands of years of history are reduced to a marketing campaign from a very famous individual," said David Suro-Piñera, a conservationist who owns the small tequila label Siembra Azul. "Everything that really matters about these spirits is being reduced to celebrity."

Salvador "Chava" Rosales Trejo, who helps run the craft distillery Tequila Cascahuin and is the grandson of its founder, said many celebrities don't grasp what it takes to make tequila.

"They don't understand the earth, they don't understand the raw materials, they don't understand what agave is, they don't understand the resources we have here," he said.

Those tensions bubbled to the surface this year when supermodel Kendall Jenner unveiled her latest business venture: a spirits brand called 818 Tequila.

Critics [cried cultural appropriation](#), pointing out grammatical mistakes in the Spanish on the early labels and lambasting ads that showed Jenner astride a horse galloping through fields of agave. Jenner, who named the brand after the area code for San Fernando Valley, was accused by online commenters of tequila "gentrification."

But like so many stars who have embraced tequila, she had the last laugh.

After months of teasing the label to her 182 million Instagram followers, Jenner's first batch of tequila sold out almost immediately.

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The factory that makes Michael Jordan's brand sits along a busy highway on the outskirts of Tequila, where the city gives way to rolling fields of silver-toned agave.

Celia Maestri was a Mexican American spirits importer in Houston when she bought the distillery with her husband in 2008. Their business, Casa Maestri, was still in its infancy when Clooney sold. That same day, their phones started ringing. Caller after caller wanted to know if the distillery could help them make their own tequila label.

Today, the factory produces nearly 150 brands — more than any other distillery in Mexico.

"We are dream-makers," said Maestri, whose sprawling industrial facility now includes a luxurious lounge where clients can choose from a selection of hundreds of bottles, stoppers and labels.

The company has produced tequila for an array of international stars — including Elon Musk, rapper E-40, actress Shay Mitchell and Third Eye Blind frontman Stephan Jenkins.

But Casa Maestri's most famous brand is Jordan's Cincoro, which comes in a bottle shaped like an agave leaf and slopes at an angle of 23 degrees — a nod to Jordan's uniform number when he played for the Chicago Bulls.

With a price that ranges from \$75 for a blanco to \$1,568 for an extra añejo, it is one of the more expensive tequilas on the market.

But is it really what Cincoro Chief Executive Emilia Fazzalari promised in a recent Forbes interview — “a new tequila, a better tequila”?

Like all the tequilas made at Casa Maestri, it is distilled from juice extracted from agaves that are cooked partly in an oven and partly in an autoclave, a high-pressure steamer that producers like for its efficiency but that many tequila connoisseurs disdain because they believe it compromises flavor.

It has a relatively low ranking on the crowd-sourced rating app [Tequila Matchmaker](#), with one reviewer describing the flavor of Cincoro's \$130 añejo as “vanilla LifeSaver candy dipped in coco powder” and concluding “there is nothing here that is anywhere close to what a good, traditionally made tequila strives to be.”

And yet the brand has been wildly successful, tripling sales since it launched in 2020.

The key, of course, is Jordan, who appears in promotional material for the tequila alongside his co-investors — four NBA team owners — and sips it throughout his Netflix documentary “[The Last Dance](#).”

A pioneer of celebrity entrepreneurship, Jordan has made more than a billion dollars peddling everything from Nike sneakers to Hanes underwear to McDonald's hamburgers. He blazed the trail for stars such as [Rihanna](#), who became a billionaire and the richest female musician in the world, not from record sales but from her cosmetics brand.

Jenna Fagnan, who co-founded Teremana Tequila with [Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson](#), said top executives in the spirits industry are now used to meeting with celebrities, who also dabble in wine, vodka and whisky.

“When you sit down with them, you realize the majority of them want to start a spirit because they think it's a great way to make quick money,” she said.

Fagnan insists that Johnson is different — a genuine tequila nerd who is far more involved in his brand than other stars. Unlike most celebrity labels, Teremana has its own distillery, and the family that makes it is a co-owner of the brand.

But Fagnan demurred when asked whether the plan is to one day sell big to a liquor conglomerate.

“It's really DJ's call,” she said, referring to Johnson by his initials.

Fagnan was previously president of Tequila Avion, which sold a majority stake to the French beverage company Pernod Ricard in 2014 for about \$100 million. It acquired Tequila Avion outright for an undisclosed sum in 2018.



That brand was also partly owned by a celebrity — rapper Jeezy, who promoted it fervently, most memorably in a [song](#) with Sean “Diddy” Combs called “Bottles Up.”

“Bottles up, hold ’em high,” the rappers belted before name-checking Avion as well as DeLeon — a tequila brand that happens to be owned in part by Diddy.

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Pre-Hispanic Indigenous groups in Mexico had been fermenting agave into a viscous alcoholic drink known as [pulque](#) for centuries when Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century and first distilled tequila.

It has since evolved into a \$10.8 billion-a-year industry.

In winemaking, the French word *terroir* is used to describe how the unique aspects of a grape-producing region shape the flavor of the wine made there. More and more, the phrase is also used to talk about tequila.

A taster with a refined palate can tell the difference between agave harvested from the state’s colder highlands (sweeter) and those from the warmer valley surrounding the city of Tequila (more earthy and herbaceous).

They can sniff out whether the drink is 100% agave or a mixto, meaning it is derived in part from other sugars, and whether the flavor has been boosted with additives.

According to Mexican law, tequila is not tequila unless it is produced in Jalisco or in select municipalities in four other states. Yet there is no law prohibiting the ownership by foreigners of brands or distilleries, and over the last 50 years, tequila has gone from a spirit largely distilled by small Mexican producers to a global product dominated by multinational corporations.

Nearly all of the world’s top tequila companies — Jose Cuervo is a notable exception — are owned by foreign companies. Connoisseurs grumble that the taste of those brands, which include Sauza, Cazadores and Herradura, has declined with the advent of ever-more efficient industrialization, including the diffuser, which cooks agave even more rapidly than an autoclave.

Growing American demand has been a key part of the transformation. Last year, 72% of all tequila produced was exported to the United States.

At least 700 new brands have been registered over the last four years, and more are coming, said Grover Sanschagrin, an American who with his wife, Scarlet, co-founded [Tequila Matchmaker](#).

“We get phone calls and emails constantly from people saying, ‘We’re making our own brand,’ ” he said. “It’s almost like a checklist, like, ‘Oh, yeah, we got our distribution figured out. We got our celebrity.’ ”

The couple’s collection of several hundred tequilas includes many celebrity brands, most of which are not even sold in Mexico.

They don't love most but enjoy a few, including Mala Vida, which is owned by the Mexican rock band [Maná](#).

"A celebrity can come here, make a great tequila," Scarlet Sanschagrin said. "It just depends on what kind of partner they're choosing and what the process is."

She thinks the recent attacks on Jenner's brand were sexist.

"Gringos have been making tequila forever," she said, noting that former Van Halen frontman [Sammy Hagar](#) founded his Cabo Wabo tequila in 1996 before selling it for \$80 million in 2007. "There's a long line of men that came before Kendall Jenner that nobody ever said a word about."

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As morning fog drifted over a sprawling field of agave a few minutes outside Tequila, a dozen men in wide-brim hats bent over orderly rows of plants, whacking weeds that had sprouted during recent rains.

One of them was Armando Gonzalez Castillo, who grew up in these fields, working with his father every day after school.

At 17, he left Mexico, frustrated by the low pay. He went to Colorado and spent 15 years in construction before he was deported this year.

Returning to Tequila for the first time a few months ago, Gonzalez was shocked by the number of tourists packing the city center with their oversize tequila cocktails — and the town's seeming prosperity.

This was his first day back in the fields since 2006, and, although it was a far cry from the \$200 a day he had earned in Colorado, he was glad to learn that the pay had doubled from \$7.50 for a six-hour shift to around \$15.

The gains for agave plantation owners have been far larger, as over the last decade the price per kilo has climbed from less than a penny to as much as \$30.

"Every plant is a business," said Ruben Ravelero, who was helping oversee the workers that day.

But he worried that the boom would backfire. Plants have long been considered mature enough to cook at around 8 years old but are now being pulled as young as 4, before they have fully sweetened.

There are also growing environmental concerns. Tequila-making requires a lot of water and produces a great deal of waste, and agave fields are encroaching on what was once wild land. Ravelero pointed to the steep side of a nearby hill, where guava trees and nopal plants had once flourished and now only agave grew.

He was a child when his father taught him how to grow agave, planting it next to beans, squash and peanuts, a farming technique meant to mimic the diversity of nature. He sees

the short-term benefits of increased tequila production but worries that the growing monoculture, as well as the use of pesticides, could eventually ruin the industry.

“If we’re killing the soil, we’re killing ourselves,” he said.

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Guillermo Erickson Sauza stepped proudly into his humming distillery, trailed by his Labrador retriever, Molly.

“It’s like walking back in time,” he said.

His company, which sells in the U.S. under the name Fortaleza, is one of the most traditional tequila brands on the market. Instead of milling cooked agave with a mechanical shredder, he crushes it with a massive volcanic stone. He ferments the juice in wooden barrels.

In the 1870s, Erickson’s great-great-grandfather founded the brand Sauza, which remained in the family until 1976.

Erickson, who grew up in a suburb of Chicago, was 20 when his grandfather sold it to the Spanish company Pedro Domecq, and he always regretted it.

He moved to Tequila to start Fortaleza by revamping an old distillery on an 80-acre estate that the family managed to keep.

The company’s first batch, in 2002, was 100 cases. It now churns out 30,000 cases a year. The company recently moved to three shifts from two, so the distillery is now working 24 hours a day, six days a week.

Erickson said he isn’t sure whether celebrity tequila is a good thing. He thinks it might eventually help create a new wave of tequila aficionados, which would be good for his business. “It’s made tequila a lot more accessible to more people,” he said.

It was a warm afternoon, and Erickson was hiding out from the sun with a glass of tequila under a stately mango tree that had been there since his grandfather owned the land.

One thing he knows is that he has a different goal than most celebrities.

“Sure, I could sell and buy a big boat. But then what?” he said. “I love it here. I want to die here.”

When he goes to trade shows, he sometimes wears a homemade T-shirt. It says: “Not for sale.”