

Tequila-centric bars, eateries on the rise



Tequila and mezcal cocktails at Blanco Tacos + Tequila, which opened Tuesday in Fashion Valley. (Michael Adan)

San Diego may have a well-earned reputation as a craft beer mecca, but it's quickly becoming a tequila town.

Several new restaurants and bars have opened from the Gaslamp Quarter to Oceanside with bar programs centered around upscale tequila and mezcal brands served in shots, flights and cocktails.

So when did the Mexican-made spirits transition from frat party favorites to upscale sippables for the hipster set? Ask Miguel Luna, founder of CaliFino Tequila, which just opened its first U.S. retail store in Carlsbad.

“Good-quality tequilas have been around for a while, just not embraced,” Luna said. “We are starting to see a growing appreciation and enjoyment of finer tequilas. We are becoming more and more educated on tequila and it is no longer just a spirit to shoot to get drunk. The public is starting to realize there are fine tequilas one can sip on and enjoy.”

Here’s a look at some of the region’s newest tequila- and mezcal-centric restaurants and bars, as well as a new one coming this fall:



Tequila tasting flight at Blanco Tacos + Tequila in Mission Valley (Blanco Tacos + Tequila)

Blanco Tacos + Tequila, Fashion Valley

Blanco opened Sept. 26 in the former California Pizza Kitchen space in Fashion Valley shopping center. It serves a menu of 11 signature tacos with an ambitious

tequila and mezcal beverage program overseen by Mat Snapp. The location has 40 to 45 tequilas and eight to 10 mezcals. Snapp's signature cocktail is the Operation Diono made with Campari, orange brandy, vermouth and Banhez mezcal, which comes from a collective of mezcal farms in Oaxaca's Ejutla Village. Tasting flights are served in a wooden box with six glasses that include three grades of tequila, one sangrita, a soda water, and a citrus-flavored salt. *Fashion Valley Mall, 7007 Friars Road, Suite 901, Mission Valley. (619) 810-2931. blancotacostequila.com*



A tequila cocktail at Death by Tequila restaurant in Encinitas one of several just-opened restaurant that specialize in tequila and mezcal bar drinks. (Cole Ferguson)

Death by Tequila, [Encinitas](#)

Opened in mid-July by Carlsbad residents Chad and Jessica Mestler, this Baja-inspired upscale Mexican restaurant and bar has more than 80 tequilas and 30 mezcals on its bar menu, as well as wines from Mexico's Valle de Guadalupe and Mexican beers on draft and in cans and bottles. It offers a variety of fruit juice- and herb-infused margaritas on the rocks and 10 tequila cocktails. Signatures

include the Tres Cacti, made with Hacienda Silver tequila, lemon, prickly pear, agave and Jarritos soft drink; the Los Muertos, made with Milagro Silver tequila, lime, mango and chile ash, served on the rocks; and Frothing in Puerto, made with Gracias a Dios mezcal, lemon, vanilla, pineapple and egg white served in a coupe glass. *569 S. Coast Highway 101, Encinitas. (760) 230-6108. deathbytequila.com*



El Chingon in the Gaslamp Quarter serves margarita flights as well as cocktails that are customizable with four different distilled Mexican spirits. El Chingon is one of several newer restaurants and bars that specialize in tequila and mezcal bar programs. (Courtesy photo)

El Chingon, Gaslamp Quarter

Opened last year by GBOG Hospitality Group, this self-proclaimed “bad ass” Mexican restaurant/bar offers a unique Mexican spirits program. The restaurant has six cocktails that are customizable with choice of four Mexican distilled spirits: tequila, mezcal, raicilla and sotol. The restaurant also serves margarita flights. *560 Fifth Ave., downtown. (619) 501-1919. elchingon.com*



El Jardín in Liberty Station serves 27 tequilas and 26 mezcals, along with Mexican bottled and canned wines and beers. (James Tran)

El Jardín, Liberty Station

Open since July, this regional Mexican restaurant and tequila bar is overseen by “Top Chef” star Claudette Zepeda-Wilkins, who hand-selected everything in the restaurant from the furniture and dishes to the menu ingredients and the selections in the bar. The bar serves 27 tequilas and 26 mezcals. There are also Mexican whiskeys distilled by Sierra Norte from yellow and black corn, Mexican bottled beer, wines from the Valle de Guadalupe and agua fresca. *2885 Perry Road, Liberty Station, San Diego. (619) 795-2322. eljardinrestaurantbar.com*



El Roy's Tequila Bar + Kitchen in Coronado serves more than 90 agave spirits and nine flavored margaritas. (Blue Bridge Hospitality)

El Roy's Tequila Bar + Kitchen

In mid-August, El Roy's replaced the former Candela's on the Bay restaurant at the Coronado Ferry Landing with this innovative Mexican restaurant and bar. It's owned by Blue Bridge Hospitality, which runs numerous Coronado restaurants, including Stake Chophouse and LeRoy's Kitchen & Lounge. Its extensive bar menu features more than 90 agave spirits, nine margaritas and sangrias. It also offers three drink flights of tequilas and mezcals as well as an agave flight featuring sotol, raicilla and bacanora that range in price from \$15 to \$38. *1201 First St., Coronado. (619) 537-0195.* bluebridgehospitality.com/el-roys-tequila-bar-kitchen/



Jalisco Cantina in Oceanside serves more than 75 varieties of tequila and mezcal. It's one of several newer restaurants and bars that specialize in tequila and mezcal bar programs. (Courtesy photo)

Jalisco Cantina, Oceanside

Last year, Barrel Republic owner Dave Pike opened this 50-seat tequila bar and restaurant in downtown Oceanside. It serves more than 75 varieties of tequila and mezcal. Shots start at \$5 but go up to \$75 for the Herradura Seleccion Suprema Tequila Extra Añejo, which is cask-aged for four years. The bar also sells the spirits in flights, where patrons can sample three different brands of tequilas or mezcals or do a vertical tasting of the different aged grades, from the youngest (blanco) to the middle-aged (reposado) to the oldest (añejo). 213 N. Coast Highway, Oceanside. (760) 429-1679. thejaliscocantina.com



Juan Tequila is a new New York-style seafood and cocktail bar that serves "tiki"-style cocktails that are made with Mexican and Latin American distilled spirits. It's one of several newer restaurants and bars that specialize in tequila and mezcal bar programs. (jim sullivan / Courtesy photo)

Juan Tequila, [Downtown](#)

This upscale Baja-style cocktail and seafood bar opened in June in the former New Yorker pizzeria space. The upscale interior features chandeliers, leather furniture and marble table tops. The menu is a mix of small and large plates plus a selection of raw oysters and seafood. The bar program, created by Cervantes Magaña, offers 10 "tiki"-style cocktails, many made with tequilas, mezcal and other Latin American liquors. A few examples are the Mexicano Highball, made with Mexican sherry, tequila and Campari (\$10) and the La Perla Del Mar, a tiki drink made with Barbados and Jamaican rums, macadamia milk blend and Caribbean spices and citrus (\$15). *535 Fourth Ave., downtown.* (619) 458-9455. juantequila.net



A selection of cocktails at Lola 55, which serves 52 agave spirits. (Sergey Kolivayko)

Lola 55, East Village

Frank Vizcarra's just-opened East Village tacos and cocktails spot offers made-from-scratch Mexican food and a full bar. Bar manager Gareth Moore serves 52 agave spirits from Mexico, with more to come. He has also created 10 custom cocktails made with tequila, mezcal and other spirits that are citrus-forward to balance the spiciness of the food. One of the most popular is the Cielo Mi Amor, made with tequila, Aperol, passion fruit, pineapple cactus agua fresca and lime. *1290 F St., East Village. (619) 542-9155. lola55catering.com*



The team behind Tahona mezcal tasting room, open this fall in Old Town San Diego, from left, Amar Harrag, Blair Marano, Carlo Bracci Devoti and Steven Sadri. Tahona is one of several new local restaurants and bars that specialize in tequila and mezcal drinks. (Nicholas Kowalski)

Tahona, Old Town San Diego

Slated to open in October, Tahona will be a mezcal tasting room, bar and Oaxacan-style restaurant that will serve 120 varieties of mezcal. The 52-seat restaurant/bar will re-create the look, taste and feel of the mezcal tasting rooms founder Amar Harrag visited during his travels in Oaxaca. Among the mezcal brands it will serve are Casa Tribal and Mezcal Animas. There will also be a variety of mezcal cocktails. *2414 San Diego Ave., Old Town.* tahonasd.com



A VIP tequila storage locker at Volcano Rabbit in the Gaslamp Quarter. (Alejandro Tamayo / The San Diego Union Tribune)

Volcano Rabbit, Gaslamp Quarter

This restaurant/nightspot opened in mid-February in the former Don Chido Mexican restaurant. It's a high-energy, 95-seat tequila bar, serving 175 agave spirits, which it bills as downtown's largest selection of tequila and international agave spirits. Locals can rent in-house tequila lockers, which entitles them to buy bottles for half-price. There's also a 40-label bottle service program, with a mix-and-match mini-bottles option. With so many spirits to choose from, partner Mike Georgopoulos recommends his three favorites for shots: Casa Dagonés Joven, a blanco barrel-aged in American oak for five years (\$40 a shot); Azunia Reposado, aged 11 months in whiskey barrels (\$12 a shot); and Expresiones del Corazón Thomas H. Handy Añejo, aged 19 months in Handy Sazerac rye whiskey barrels (\$16 a shot). *527 Fifth Ave., Gaslamp Quarter. (619) 232-8226. volcanorabbitsd.com*



A variety of tequila brands available at Volcano Rabbit. (Alejandro Tamayo / The San Diego Union Tribune)

A novice's guide to tequilas, mezcals and other agave spirits

Bottled agave spirits arrived in Mexico when the Spanish explorers wanted to create a locally distilled substitute for their fruit-based brandies. The first major tequila distillery was established in Jalisco in the 1600s.

Tequila is made from blue agave plants grown only in the Mexican states of Jalisco, Tamaulipas, Nayarit, Michoacán and Guanajuato. Mezcal, often characterized as having a smoother, smokier flavor, can be made from any of up to 30 kinds of agave grown in a larger area of Mexico.

Tequila is graded in quality and price by how long it's aged, starting with the less-aged blanco, followed by reposado, añejo and high-end extra añejo. Mezcal comes in joven, reposado and añejo varieties, as well.

Also increasingly popular are a trio of similar Mexican spirits known as sotol, raicilla and bacanora. Sotol is distilled from the desert spoon plant, raicilla is a highly potent agave liquor and bacanora is a less-smoky form of mezcal.