

Fuenteseca: the oldest Tequila ever bottled

There has seldom been a time in the tequila industry wrought with more artifice and subterfuge than today. With more than thirteen hundred brands coming out of some one hundred fifty distilleries, and a pending agave crisis on the horizon, popularity is largely being driven by marketing campaigns and pretty packages. Meanwhile, there are a few people who have happily remained behind the scenes; head down, hard at work. Among them, forth-generation *agavero*, Enrique Fonseca—who has some of the most extensive agave plantations in México—and his partner-in-crime, Jacob Lustig. In recent years, their collaboration has helped reshape the way we look at tequila; and it would appear that they're just getting started.

While the Fonseca family had been growing agave for well over a century, they had never been in the business of distilling; as such, they were subject to the notoriously volatile ebb and flow of the agave market. During a glut in the 1980s—in spite of prosperous, multi-generational relationships—when producers refused to honor contracts, Enrique became increasingly uncomfortable with the precariousness of their position. So, rather than sell his agave at below-market pricing, he bought a state-of-the-art distillery (La Tequileña, NOM 1146) and put his mature agave to use. After four decades in the agave fields, he decided to throw his hat in the ring of the still.



As an unwitting student of both distillation and barrel aging, over time Enrique began experimenting with agave like no one previously had. Beginning with the raw materials, the Fonseca's vast holdings—which ranged from the high-altitude region of *Los Altos*, to the Tequila Valley, where their distillery is located—allowed him to capture the distinctive expressions of their respective *terroirs*. Next, onto distillation: Enrique employs both double-column copper stills and traditional alembics—elaborating the tension between the two unique methodologies. Lastly, barrel aging (and this is where things get really interesting). Taking things very seriously, as Enrique is genetically predisposed to do, after working extensively with bourbon barrels, he traveled to France and Scotland to study barrel regimens for Cognac and Scotch production. A few decades later, it's safe to say that Enrique has experimented more with extended barrel aging agave-distillates in a wide variety of woods than anyone. Interestingly enough, having searched the world over, Enrique favors red wine *barriques* from the Loire Valley above all others.

The first examples of Enrique's skilled craftsmanship to penetrate the US market in more recent years were bottled under the AsomBroso brand; among them was the first eleven-year aged tequila to be sold commercially. The second, and arguably more significant, effort was with Selección ArteNOM project, which was developed by Jacob Lustig, who sought to shine light on specific distillers, rather than the brands they make. By focusing on the NOM—the registered distillery where the tequilas are made—the limited release bottlings celebrate craftsmanship, through cultivation altitude, the soil of different tequila-producing regions and the hand of the maker. ArteNOM is the only project of its kind; no other tequila line works with multiple distillers.

The most recent project, Fuenteseca, is unlike anything that tequila has known—an intricate labyrinth of craftsmanship, which clearly articulates the distinctiveness of *terroir*, distillation and *élevage*. And, yes, the 18-Year is the oldest tequila ever bottled, commercially; moreover, Fuenteseca is the first brand to be graded both vintage and age-statement in the history of the CRT (Consejo Regulador del Tequila). But, at the heart of it all is an unparalleled understanding of extended-aging for agave distillates. Much as it was erroneously believed that whiskey was overpowered by wood after a decade in barrel—prior to Prohibition—the ensuing forced-aging revealed a new understanding; and today, of course, the most coveted bourbons are aged two decades and more. Nearly the same exact logic can be applied to Enrique's story. Year after year he produced tequila, by necessity; and, over time, he has developed stocks of the oldest tequilas on earth.

Having primarily kept these old stocks of tequila for himself, family and friends—all Enrique needed was someone to coax him into making them available in the US. Enter Jacob, Bay Area native who began selling mezcal door-to-door in Oaxaca city in the early 1990's. Knowing more about every aspect of the agave-spirits business—from field to bottle—than just about anyone, he knew that these expressions had to be shared. For agave fanatics—many of whom are purists, who only drink un-aged blancos—this was a game changer. Uncharted territory. With all the money that big brands have spent on hand-blown crystal bottles and the like, Fuenteseca is literally decades ahead of them; the proof is *inside* the bottle.

The only bad news: a mere one thousand bottles of each lot made it to the US; please understand that these are highly subject to confirmation and respond and your earliest opportunity.

Fuenteseca Extra Añejo 9 Year: Distilled in November 2003—80% from copper double-column still and 20% distilled from alembic copper pot still. After marrying, 85% of the run was laid in American white oak, and the remaining 15% barreled in used dark French Oak. The casks were then aged for nine years, at 3,800' elevation, in the town of Tequila, Jalisco in a cool-climate subterranean storeroom.

Fuenteseca Extra Añejo 12 Year: Distilled in June 2001—20% of this lot was distilled in copper double-column stills and 80% distilled in alembic copper pots. After distillation and blending, 90% was laid into in American white oak previously used to age California red wine, and the remaining 10% barreled in used dark French Oak. The casks were housed for twelve years, at 3,800' elevation, in the town of Tequila, Jalisco in a cool-climate subterranean storeroom.

Fuenteseca Extra Añejo 18 Year: This lot was distilled in September 1995, and consisted of 75% tequila distilled in copper column stills and 25% tequila distilled in copper alembic stills. The entire run was laid into 180L Canadian white oak casks previously used to age Canadian rye whiskey, at a warehouse located at 4,600' in the town of Atotonilco el Alto, Jalisco. The casks remained there for six years.

In 2001, the tequilas were extracted from their casks, blended together and re-barreled, with 47% returned to Canadian white oak casks and the remaining 53% going into 220L European dark oak barrels. The refilled casks were then moved from Atotonilco el Alto to a hillside facility El Chapingo, with its cooler, breezier climate, and left to age for an additional twelve years.

Wyatt Peabody | Wine Advisor
SOUTIRAGE | 866 309 8203