

We Take Our Mouth Down South: Our Research Mission to the Wilds of Mexico

So we just got back from Mexico. And we ain't talkin' no damn fool charter trip to Playa Prefabo in Cancun, a quick cross-border sneak into Tijuana, or some sun-splashed, pampered poolside ceviche n' cerveza-catered chaise in Puerto Vallarta here. We're talking Real Mexico. We spent a week in Guadalajara.

But....but.....why? Good question. Guadalajara is four hours from the ocean. On a high mountain-ringed plateau, it sits at over 5,000 feet of altitude. It's a teeming, sprawling place that is home to 4.6 million people, 20% more than Los Angeles.

We went to Guadalajara precisely because it lacked the tourist trappings of the Yucatan; the relative cosmopolitan sophistication of Mexico City; or even the faded luster of the Pacific coastal resorts. When we travel, we want to see how the real folks live – and even better, what they eat and drink.

Speaking of food, this is the point in any travelogue where the writer is tempted to choose between two tempting tines in a metaphorical fork in the road.

The bold romantic regales the reader with tales of how the Tapatias (as Guadalajarans refer to themselves) live a far better life than we do, eschewing our crass consumerism for simpler, deeper pleasures in life. He ignores the frequent aroma of sewage, the poverty and a city that is just plain fugly in many places.

The cowardly writer goes for the hip, ironic angle, trashing the locale as “not up to snuff” and “lacking anything of real merit”. This is bullshit. A traveler who can't find anything to recommend about a place is either obtuse or blind.

The reality, as always, is somewhere in the middle. And so it is with Guadalajara.

Vinos y Licores

We visited a number of Mexican wine and spirits shops, both for critical provisioning and for, um.....research purposes.

Our main observation: Wow! There's a LOT of tequila! At Hair O' The Dog, we carry about 50 brands of tequila, and given that most have three versions – Blanco, Reposado, and Anejo – we've got a lot of bottles of tequila. The stores that we visited featured hundreds of bottles of tequila, filling the majority of the shelf space in the store. It's like two aisles of tequila and one aisle of everything else.

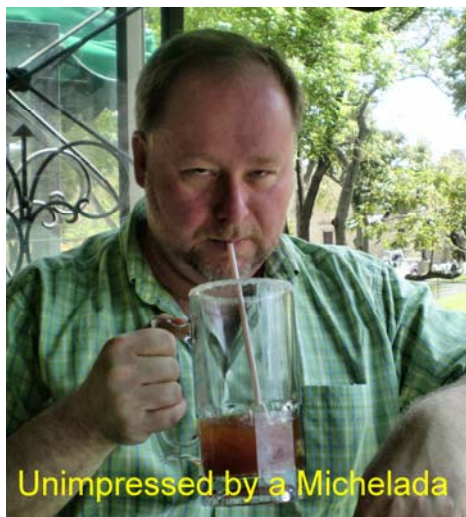
Other spirits, mostly recognizable global brands, were sort of crammed in there. We did find a bottle of Absolut Disco covered with little disco-ball mirror shards. Queenie wanted to buy it, but she likes anything that's shiny, and I was concerned about exceeding our import quota and getting busted by those scary U.S. Customs types.



The wine selection was limited to maybe 30 bottles of mostly Spanish stuff, much of it recognizable. A few California selections crept in, but we were here for the local stuff, so we snagged a bottle of Santo Tomas Tempranillo-Cabernet, from the Ensenada area. Our verdict: It's pretty fruity, owing to the fact that it's grown 100 miles south of San Diego, but it's perfectly drinkable. And it's not like Mexican food really lends itself to wine anyway.

Speaking of Mexican food, our verdict is that you're better off with the Americanized version of it, which features better-quality ingredients and a fresher approach. We had some very nice "Nuevo Mexican" meals, but these were in restaurants that catered largely to Americans. The good news is that even at these relatively expensive places, you can get a great lunch for about \$6 and an excellent dinner for about \$11.

With meals, beer features as the prominent beverage. Mexican beers, like most warm weather brews, lean towards the lighter, American Lager style. Yes, Corona is everywhere. We enjoyed flirtations with local beers Indio and Estrella. We were reminded just how good Negra Modelo is, dark but not too heavy. But the beer that stole the show for us was Bohemia. Maltier than the light lagers, Bohemia has some real body and a gorgeously smooth, mellow flavor.



Unimpressed by a Michelada

The Michelada

If what you really want is a watery Bloody Mary, order up a Michelada, which is essentially a cerveza-diluted version of the real thing. It was an interesting concept, but it simply didn't stick the landing. The Michelada has some of the refreshment value of beer, but has none of the zippy jolt of the Bloody Mary.

Tequila

Okay, so I was going to try to snow you about how, despite its reputation as a producer of crappy mixto tequila, I always knew that José Cuervo was a highly respectable producer of fine spirits. The fact is that my snobby butt was planning to visit the upscale Herradura distillery via The Tequila Train, but that by the time we got to the ticket office, the train was tragically sold out.

So we just got into our 3-horsepower car (rented for \$11/day) and drove ourselves out to the town that gave tequila its name. Tequila is Mexico's Wild West. It's surrounded by high desert mountains. Huge canyons, evocative of Utah, cut through the countryside. Gorgeous shimmering fields of spiky blue agave herald the approach to the town.

The town itself appears to have been ripped out of a classic Western movie. If you were to roll the cars out of town, it



Dave Dodge Scorpions Among the Agave

could pass as *circa* 1880. The roads are dusty and paved with a bone-jarring jumble of stones. People in Tequila ride horses around town and wear cowboy hats without irony. There is a constant rumble of trucks piled to the brim with agavé piñas.

So, since we got skunked on the Tequila Train tickets [in typical Mexican fashion, you can't buy the tickets in advance] we decided to visit José Cuervo's distillery, which sits right off the town square. Suffice it to say that we weren't particularly excited about visiting Cuervo. It's sort of like a collector of classic automobiles getting a tour of the Yugo factory.



Pinas at Jose Cuervo

But man, we were idiots! For starters, Cuervo's Rojena distillery in Tequila is the oldest distillery in the Western hemisphere, dating to 1758. Second, Cuervo opened a large commercial distillery in Guadalajara some years ago, and that distillery produces all of the *Especial* (mixto) tequila. The old Rojena distillery produces only 100% blue agave tequilas, trading as *Reserva 1800*, *Cuervo Tradicional* and *La Familia Reserva*.

Authenticity verified, we enjoyed a terrific tour that encompassed the entire distillery. We tasted slices of the raw agave piñas, which were kinda like a semi-sweet chunk of starchiness that was the consistency of fresh ginger. After the piñas are roasted, we tasted them again: even sweeter, and now softer, too. It wasn't going to rival Belgian chocolate, but it probably tasted better than brewer's mash or wine dregs.

We finished our tour with the requisite tasting of blanco, reposado and añejo tequilas. It was remarkable how much of that raw and roasted agave flavor comes through in the final product. We often hear folks inquire about why 100% agave tequilas are often expensive. We learned that agave plants generally grow for 10 years prior to harvesting. Further, it takes about 8 pounds of agave pina to make one liter of tequila.

Our verdict: Tequila deserves our respect as a noble spirit. It may currently lack the cachet of Scotch whisky, but the process by which it is made is no less impressive. We're committed to keeping up with tequila developments, and helping to sing its praises.