

# Viva Tequila

A SHOT OR A SIP



"Tequila goddess" Monica Royce explains the ingredients for her \$99 goddess elixer margarita to Isla Mexican restaurant patrons Louis Prima Jr., center, and Michael Gerbino.

RALPH FOUNTAIN/REVIEW-JOURNAL

## The misunderstood spirit now has a goddess dispelling myths

By **SONYA PADGETT**

REVIEW-JOURNAL

**W**earing an angelic smile and a devilishly red dress that clings to her perfect figure, Monica Royce introduces herself to a couple dining in Isla Mexican restaurant in Treasure Island.

"Hello, my name is Monica, and I'll be your tequila goddess," she says over the Tuesday dinner rush din. Pause. An exchange of confused expressions.

"Our what?" the couple asks. They didn't hear wrong; the couple's response is one Royce, Isla's "tequila goddess," gets often. Another response, less frequent but a little more shocking: "Is that your stripper

name?"

Oh, there's so much hell to pay as a goddess. Royce takes it in stride.

After all, she gets paid to look good and sell tequila and sometimes drink it, too.

Despite her title, the goddess job is less about tequila and more about entertaining diners, says Ben Chatham, general manager of Isla. On Fridays and Saturdays — and occasional weekdays — Royce can be found in the restaurant, gliding among tables with a bottle of Paradise or the restaurant's tequila of the month, offering guests a complimentary taste. She pours all tequilas and mixes her \$99

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*Tequila taken seriously*

### TEQUILA GETS CLASSY

For the past six years, Americans have developed a near unquenchable thirst for tequila, and some Strip bars and restaurants have attempted to slake it by offering a tequila for every taste bud and wallet. Tequila Bar at Bally's, which opened in 2003, offers about 75 tequilas, from Don Julio Royale (\$56 a shot) to Patron Platinum (\$26 a shot), says Alam Leyva, beverage director for Bally's and Paris Las Vegas.

"It's such a great spirit; it's been coming out of its shell over the last five or 10 years," Leyva says. "Now it's more about experiencing the spirit, and a lot of producers have done a lot of work to build a spirit that is sippable, not harsh and bold. There's something for every taste."

Don't look for the worm in the tequila bottle; producers, especially those who make top-shelf tequila, don't use that kind of marketing ploy, Leyva says.

From 2002 to 2006, U.S. tequila imports grew from 7.1 million cases to 10.1 million cases, according to the Distilled Spirits Council. The largest increase has been in superpremium tequilas. The market has grown from 358,000 cases to 1.2 million, during that same time period.

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goddess elixir margarita table side. It's apparent, from the looks on diners' faces, that Royce's presence imbues them with the south-of-the-border spirit.

"The name itself isn't what it's about," Chatham says. "It's about the girl and our guests ... having a good time. It's almost like she's a concierge, to help make sure the people are having fun."

But before you go thinking this Las Vegas native and petite brunette with the sparkling brown eyes is just another pretty face and hot body, think again. Yes, Maxim magazine is interested in profiling her, but Royce also can rattle off the qualities of Isla's 100-plus tequilas, from the after-dinner smoothness of El Toserô Pâradiso to the sharp bite of Patron Grand Platinum.

In a couple of months, Royce will go on a restaurant-sponsored trip to Agave, Mexico, to tour distilleries and farms and get a firsthand account of how agave is grown and then turned into tequila.

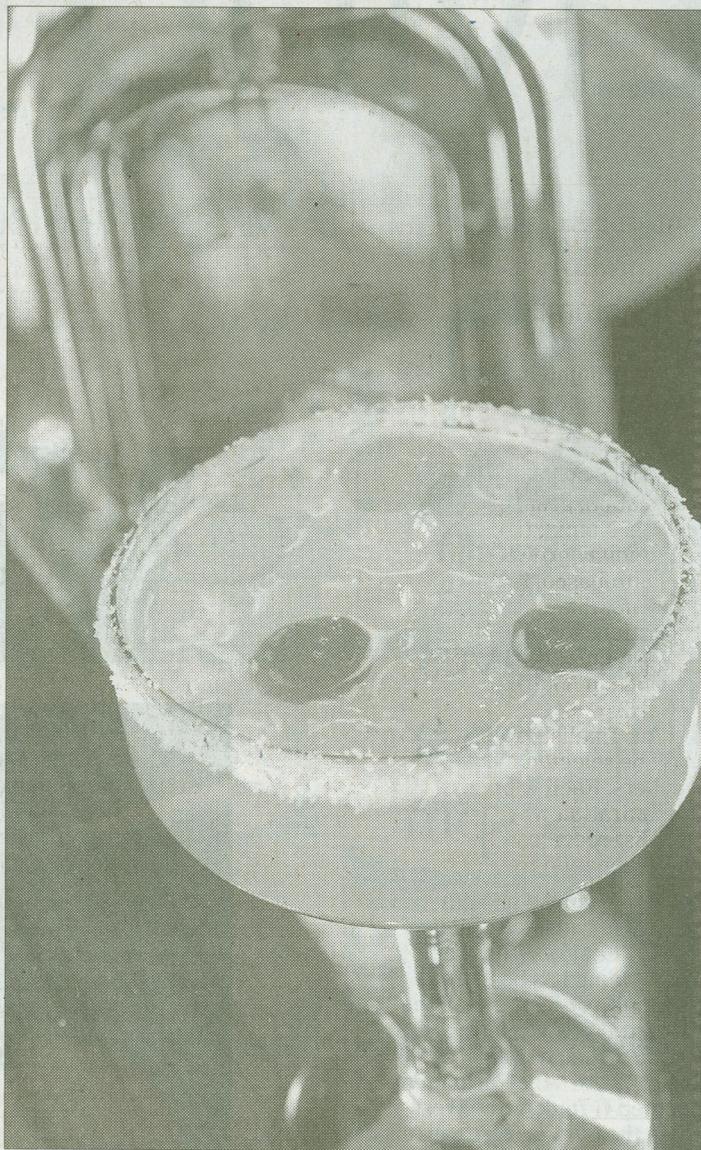
Isla takes tequila seriously, Chatham says.

It has long been a misunderstood spirit that the tequila goddess helps to dispel. Not all are made for shooting; some are as smooth as cognac and can be sipped in a similar fashion, Royce says.

"Just like with wine, tequilas are complex and flavorful. They can be served with food or after dinner," she says.

Royce, the fourth woman to have the title, has been Isla's tequila goddess since she answered an ad in May. She says she was perplexed by the description. It sounded too good to be true.

"I never thought there were jobs like this," says



The \$99 goddess elixir margarita is mixed table side by Monica Royce, Isla Mexican restaurant's "tequila goddess."

Royce, who has worked as a bartender since she was 21. She declined to give her age, saying only that she's in her 30s. "When they were going over the description, I said, 'Is this really a job?'"

Tequila is the sort of spirit that people bond over, as most anyone who has had tequila has a story about it. Royce gets to hear them all.

Aside from the obvious — pouring tequilas — what

are the qualities of a good tequila goddess?

"You can't be shy," says Royce, a former lingerie model. You also have to love tequila.

"When I was 21, my favorite drink was tequila sunrise," she says. "Plus, what woman wouldn't want to be a goddess?"

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