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## Tequila moves beyond the margarita

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For a lot of people, the word "tequila" triggers The Champs' 1958 surf instrumental, "Tequila," in which the band shouts the title of the song three times to punctuate a riff.

Others recall sipping a Tequila Sunrise as The Eagles crooned a tune of the same name.

Then along came "Pee-wee's Big Adventure," in which Pee-wee Herman, a.k.a. Paul Reubens, did his goofy dance to the Champs' hit.

Beyond the pop song, tequila has come into its own as a liquor of choice, becoming the fastest-growing member of the spirit category, expanding by 77

percent in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Just within the past decade, a series of heretofore unknown names have crossed the border: Corzo, La Certeza, Herradura, Don Julio, Patrón, Tres Generaciones, Mayor.

Move over, Jose Cuervo; tequila's not just for margaritas anymore. It's integrated into recipes and sophisticated cocktails, such as the Tamayopolitan bartender Jesse Slaughter pours at Lower Downtown's Tamayo restaurant.

"It's a blend of pineapple-infused tequila, cranberry juice and guava that's smooth and not too sweet," he says. "Obviously it's a play on the Cosmopolitan, but with a tequila twist.

We infuse our own, but the (consumer) market has really responded to ready-made infusions. I prefer to use fresh pineapple or Valencia oranges. That, to me, is beautiful."

Tamayo offers horizontal and vertical tequila flights to familiarize customers with differences in tastes.

"I encourage people to smell and sip, like you would at a wine tasting," Slaughter says. "That's the only way to determine what you like. You don't get to spit, though."

Restaurateur Jesse Morreale named one of his restaurants Mezcal for the all-encompassing category of tequila variations.

"I think for a long time there was a stigma associated with te-

quila as a result of bad experiences," he says. "But in recent years, high-quality imports have increased. Like any other spirit, there are good ones and bad ones, same as if people drink bad gin or scotch."

Morreale is so gung-ho on tequila that he offers educational events, including occasional dinners, Friday tastings from 4 to 6 p.m. and "Beyond Jose" cooking classes on the first Thursday of the month.

There are more than 600 tequila brands, often bottled in exotic shapes with colorful labels and graphics, many of which can be found at Arognaut and Applejack liquor stores.

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