



INTRODUCTION

Every November, toward the end of the month, the residents of Tequila, Mexico, celebrate the *Feria Nacional del Tequila*, the National Fair of Tequila. The two-week event culminates on December 12, the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and includes *charreadas* (Mexican rodeo), cockfighting, carnival rides, firework displays, art exhibits, and musical performances. Like most annual fairs, the festivities are marked by the return of family members from other parts of the country and the United States. Preparations begin the week before the festival: The main square is populated with ornate stages, banners are draped on streetlights, and promotional posters are liberally affixed to the doors of small businesses. Once Saturday arrives, street vendors with balloons, cotton candy, and churros set up shop all along the perimeter of the large plaza in front of the local Catholic Church, St. James the Apostle. As its bells ring, every hour on the hour, excitement flows through the streets of the centuries-old town.

With the exception of the municipal website, there is little outside publicity for the yearly festival—even in the nearby state capital, Guadalajara, the nation's second-largest city, located just forty-five minutes south, the event goes relatively unnoticed. I arrived to the inaugural parade as floats, marching bands, Aztec dancers, and *charros* (cowboys) on horseback started lining up on the pageant route. At the end of the procession, a truck pulled a mid-sized stage from which Miss Mayahuel and members of her court waved to gathering onlookers. Clapping and cheers abounded, a cannon exploded—boom!—

and the procession began. When the parade finished, loudspeakers repeatedly played the 1958 song by The Champs, “Tequila,” and the large crowd eagerly waited for the mayor to signal the start of the next stage of the celebration.

As important and anticipated the festival is for residents of Tequila, almost no one thinks of it when they hear the word *tequila*. Outside of Mexico, tequila is likely to conjure images of rowdy celebrations, body shots, or heavy hangovers. It is a drink to consume quickly—an effective means to an inebriated end. Within Mexico, tequila is often associated with weddings, birthdays, or just drinking with friends; in other words, tequila is frequently thought of as a libation to commemorate a range of noteworthy and quotidian festivities. Sometimes it is shot, but most often it is sipped. Beyond when and how it is consumed, tequila, as a complex cultural commodity, is first and foremost about people—and in this case, about the people of Mexico.

This book explores the political, economic, and social relations of tequila as a symbol of national identity, an emblem of resistance, a touristic destination, and its link to a rural town that is associated with its namesake. Tequila, like all commodities, is dynamic, active, and relational—it is promoted and interpreted by a diverse range of groups and individuals. Even with its many potential meanings, one association holds true above all others: Tequila is a preeminent marker of *lo mexicano*, or what is commonly known as Mexican-ness. Curiously, there are dozens of distilled drinks that, like tequila, reflect aspects of Mexico’s rich history: *bacanora* from the state of Sonora, *sotol* from the state of Chihuahua, *mezcal* from Oaxaca and Zacatecas, and *raicilla* from Jalisco, to name a few. So what is so special about tequila? Why is tequila the enduring symbol of Mexican-ness? Tequila has not always been the nation’s drink. Over the years, tequila manufacturers, consumers, government officials, authors, performers, and movie producers have each strengthened tequila’s ties to *lo mexicano*. This book will show that the close association between *lo mexicano* and tequila was hardly a given, despite contemporary representations that portray it as such (see Map 1 and Figure 1).

Stories that emphasize an object’s intrinsic ties to national identity are far from neutral. Instead, claims of authenticity tend to hide more than they reveal. For every aspect of national unity that tequila is said to represent, there are numerous untold tales of exclusion and struggle. Simply put, over the last two centuries, tequila has meant different things to different groups of people. Mexican elites initially dismissed tequila as backward and cheap—preferring instead to drink cognac and other European beverages—while the poor and



MAP 1. The tequila-producing regions of Jalisco, Mexico.

working classes embraced it as a symbol of resistance against the privileged classes. These associations would also evolve through cinema, in literature, on the radio, and within legislative measures. New meanings of tequila gained momentum through everyday channels where the components of *lo mexicano* were continually being forged.

Tracking Tequila

Analyzing tequila's production and consumption casts important light on some of the unfamiliar actors and episodes that influence—often behind the scenes—attributes of Mexicanness. Unraveling tequila's iconic reputation enables a better understanding of how the nation's sense of self evolved for both powerful and ordinary people. Commonplace items, such as bottle labels, provided clues that helped shape some of my initial queries. I wondered, for



FIGURE 1. Field of blue agave in Tequila, Mexico. Photo by Gwyn Fisher.

example, why images of the revolution played such an important role in contemporary tequila branding and advertising. This question, and others like it, led me to a broader set of materials that provided information on tequila's lesser-known travails, and, in the case of the revolution, its connection to the infamous General Pancho Villa. Why was Pancho Villa heralded, in *corridos* (ballads) especially, as a tequila drinker? Given this popular association, I started to consider how song lyrics and films from Mexico's "Golden Age" of cinema (c. 1936–1969) could fill in some of the details that seemed nowhere to be found, but that were often hinted at, in earlier historic works on tequila.

Over the course of two years, and then later during several follow-up visits to Mexico, I talked to hundreds of individuals about tequila. During infor-

mal conversations in places like tequila-themed markets, the gym, or even on the city bus, I discovered that people had a lot to say about the topic. For instance, while in line for food at the *tianguis cultural* (a weekly artisanal market), a vendor told me of the rumors surrounding the beloved *ranchera* singer, Lucha Reyes, whose song “*La Tequilera*” (the female tequila drinker) served as a soundtrack for women who unapologetically drank tequila. In addition to the circumstances of her untimely and tragic death, there was also talk that the singer was a lesbian.

My interviews with individuals involved with formal aspects of tequila’s culture (for example, tequila company owners, tour guides, agave farmers) likewise resulted in a treasure trove of information. Details such as learning about the increasing infighting among producers—especially the debate over whether officials should allow the manufacture of flavored tequila (for example, mango and strawberry)—deepened my understanding of the tensions inherent in the politics of tequila in the present day. As a participant observer, I spent a great deal of time in Tequila, Amatitán, Arandas, and Guadalajara, in particular locales where people interacted with tequila. For example, I took dozens of tequila distillery tours, attended formal tasting events, regulatory meetings, and tequila-themed conferences; I even enrolled in a university-sponsored tequila studies diploma program. I also hung out in cantinas and tequila-themed bars, oftentimes with friends but sometimes by myself. I frequented tequila-themed restaurants that offered tequila-based appetizers, desserts, and meals in addition to a large tequila selection. Whenever a free minute presented itself, I took written notes in my journal or on a napkin and sometimes audio-recorded my observations either at my table or in the bathroom.

I began this project initially thinking that I would focus on tequila’s place in modern-day Mexico—I would spend most of my time in distilleries, talking to members of the official group that oversees the industry, the Tequila Regulatory Council—charting the spread of tequila’s global popularity. I very quickly realized that such an approach was myopic; the meanings associated with tequila required a step back in time. Surprisingly, a deeper understanding also required a step across national borders. Heeding the insight of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, I decided to follow tequila as a “thing in motion”¹ and consider the broad scope of its uses and values. I allowed myself (often reluctantly) to be surprised by the attributions, motivations, and human transactions that enhanced it with meaning.

When I one day typed the word *tequila* in a U.S. newspaper archive search engine, I discovered that it had its own history in the United States. Tequila had a transnational trajectory for more than a century before its formal entrée into the global marketplace. In the United States, tequila was endowed with divergent meanings, sometimes described as diabolical and sometimes proclaimed as distinguished. Journalists, scientists, and temperance activists warned of tequila's wicked and immoral attributes, while late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigrant entrepreneurs ran ads in Spanish-language newspapers announcing the arrival of their tequila shipments. Based on this information, I decided to expand the scope of my study and incorporate aspects of tequila's travels, which included analyzing magazine and newspaper articles and talking to American-based ethnic Mexican tequila drinkers. Applying a cross-border lens allowed me to better understand the contours of national and cultural identity. As I discovered, there was more to tequila than I expected.

Tequila and *Lo Mexicano*

No ordinary drink, tequila uniquely reflects Mexican society by linking the past to the present and transcending class boundaries, writes Alberto Ruy-Sánchez Lacy, editor of the popular book series, *Artes de Mexico*.² Echoing this enthusiasm, noted cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis describes tequila as embodying the visceral and symbolic aspects of what it means to be Mexican. Tequila, he muses, imprints *lo mexicano* wherever and whenever it is poured. In his words, tequila defines “the nation at play.”³ For these and other Mexican historians, writers, and poets, tequila is heralded as exemplifying and provoking a range of powerful sentiments: “temperance and excess, joy and sorrow, health and sickness, the celebration of life and the consummation of death.”⁴ To be sure, no other drink is as renowned or celebrated within Mexican popular culture.

Tequila is synonymous with the attributes that comprise what Mexican scholars (and other writers) call *lo mexicano*. *Lo mexicano*, or what I will interchangeably refer to as Mexicanness or *mexicanidad*, represents an idea, a sensibility, and the fiction that there exists a collective, unified Mexican national consciousness. The notion that there is one true way of being Mexican is an essentialist ideal that, although oftentimes reflecting well-intentioned sentiments, forecloses on diversity. Yet there is something intrinsically human