

(CNN) — Located 45 miles northwest of Guadalajara, in the Mexican state of Jalisco, the town of Tequila is known as the birthplace of the drink that bears its name.

The picturesque township, with its colorful buildings and cobblestone streets, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The federal government of Mexico calls it Pueblo Magico or Magical Town.



Tequila's women play a large role in the production of the spirit and have found a way to make a living through other crafty means as well.

Courtesy Fundación Beckmann

It's here that casual sippers drink this aromatic spirit, but there's one secret they may not know: Without the women of Tequila, there'd be no tequila.



About 45 miles south of Guadalajara is the town known as the birthplace of tequila.

Courtesy Sucheta Rawal

The cultivation and annual replanting of the agave blooms in the states of Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit and Aguascalientes in Mexico, has historically been left to the women of Tequila.

No one knows exactly when women became an integral part of growing agave, but it's believed that when the male farmers ate their lunch and rested under parota trees, their wives stepped in to lend a hand. The women, who it turned out were exceptionally skilled at sorting and taking care of the young plants, began working in the fields sometime in the 16th century.

Related content

[La Merced: Eat your way through Mexico City's largest market](#)

Reviving economy

ADVERTISING

[inRead invented by Teads](#)

Twenty-five years ago, there was only one hotel and a handful of restaurants in Tequila. Today it's bustling with Mexican and international tourists who've come to learn about the history of the spirit and its important role in Mexican culture.

Visitors can take a walk through agave fields, visit [The National Museum of Tequila](#), watch production and enjoy a tasting at one of the 22 tequila houses in town, partake in a professional tasting guided by a Maestro Tequilero, a certified master of tequila, and take in a range of Mexican art exhibits at the newly opened [Centro Cultural Juan](#)



Dance and music performances are held for Jose Cuervo Express passengers before they depart the town of Tequila.

Courtesy Kaitlyn Mathis

The Tequila train

On weekends, about 300 passengers take a day trip on The José Cuervo Express, also known fondly as the tequila train. The two-hour journey from Guadalajara to Tequila travels through the Rio Grande Canyon, which provides sweeping views of bluish agave fields and midget oaks spanning against the backdrop of Tequila volcano. Traingomers can watch an Aztec dance performance before getting on board; upon their return, the performances are live mariachi and folk dancers.

During the ride, guests can enjoy tamales, chips and guacamole and unlimited tequila-based cocktails.

Related content

[See the beauty of Mexico's Isla Mujeres](#)

Growing agave

To be officially designated as tequila, the beverage must be distilled from agave grown in certain regions of Mexico, mainly Tequila and surrounding municipalities. The rich volcanic soil and dry climate make it ideal to grow Agave Azul Tequilana Weber (blue agave), a plant native to the area.

If you walk or horseback ride through Jose Cuervo fields surrounding the town, you can see the growing, harvesting and pruning of agave plants.

Farmers wearing cowboy hats to shield their face from the hot sun, cultivate and harvest the prickly cactus-like agave plants, while the women of Tequila select, care for and plant the small delicate seedling, called hijuelos (little children).



The women sort the hijuelos by size and by strength at Jose Cuervo agave fields in Tequila.

Courtesy Kaitlyn Mathis

Dressed in long-sleeve shirts and long pants, the women can be seen working in the fields from February to July, when the agave plants sprout shoots. They inspect, clean and sort the young plants and send them to the nursery for further care, until they are ready to be planted.

Indeed, there's something about knowing the care and dedication involved in the process that'll make you appreciate your salted margarita even more.

Bertha González Nieves, chief executive and co-founder of Casa Dragones, tells the story of her brand's famous tequila and why the liquor is so misunderstood. Video by [Black Buddha](#)

Making tequila

Visitors walking through Tequila's main square hear church bells chiming on the hour; they smell the sweet aroma rising from the chimneys of the distilleries in the area.

Once the piña (pineapple) of the agave plant is harvested, it is brought to a distillery, where it is roasted for 36 hours, releasing its sugars and juices.

A 90-minute guided tour through La Fábrica La Riojeña, Latin America's oldest active distillery established in 1795, takes groups through the entire production process, from the brick oven to the cellars. It concludes with Jose Cuervo's premium tequila tasting experience where a master (equivalent of sommelier) demonstrates the proper way to sip tequila from an elegant slender glass.

"There are a lot of men but no more than 10 women certified as 'master of tequila' in Jalisco," says Sonia Espínola, one of the first women in Tequila to earn this designation. She passed the entrance exams based entirely on her own experience working in the tequila industry, and she went on to take the full course at a recognized university. She now conducts guided tastings and seminars.

Related content

Agave by-products



Alma Karina Cordero Villalobos, Evelyn Monserrat Achutigui Serna and Sandra Elizabeth Serna Caballero make paper books from agave for additional income.

Courtesy Kaitlyn Mathis

Since only the piña of the agave plant is used to make tequila, Mundo Cuervo's nonprofit arm, Fundación Beckmann, found a way to utilize more of the plant and offer local women more of an opportunity to create and produce — and get paid for their work. Workshops for aspiring women entrepreneurs teach how to use agave bagasse and recycled tequila bottles for artisanal crafts.

Espínola, who is also the director of Fundación Beckmann, says, "The women don't only learn how to make the products, but how to sell, incorporate their businesses, create business plans, logos and much more."

Demonstrating their support for Tequila's ambitious women, many hotels including Hotel Solar de las Animas and Hotel Villa Tequila proudly display agave paper notepads and journals in the bedrooms for guests' use, a commitment to the local products of the region.

Related content

[The best things to do in Guadalajara, Mexico](#)

"When my 10-year-old daughter needed prescription glasses, I asked her to help me make agave paper so she can earn extra money," says Sandra Elizabeth Serna Caballero, one of the women currently enrolled in this particular program. "I feel useful, plus the creative process is quite relaxing," she adds.

One example of how the foundation, largely funded by tequila tourism, has directly impacted women in the area is through Ernestina Carrero Cortez's story.

Cortez, a Jalisco native who was experiencing financial difficulties, approached the foundation about work opportunities. Cortez's husband was a construction worker in the US, her son had fallen ill, and she'd resigned herself to cooking food in her home and selling it in the town to help pay for medical expenses. But it wasn't enough.

And so Cortez, through the foundation, learned to knit handbags and wallets using agave fiber. Her original designs became so popular that she started her own brand label, Puntadas. After seven years with the foundation, Cortez now employs 22 women in her business, some as old as 83, and she sells her products through boutiques, museums and hotels around Tequila.

The women's handicraft enterprises also make use of tequila bottles that are discarded by bars and restaurants. Used tequila bottles donated by Mundo Cuervo brands are recycled, selected, cleaned and given to the women at the foundation.



Carolina Garcia Torres finds that working with recycled glass requires focus and precision.

Courtesy Fundación Beckmann

Mother of six, Carolina Garcia Torres faced psychological trauma when she was pregnant with triplets and was concerned with the future of her family's financial health.

"I was worried how my husband, who works in a tequila distillery, would support our family," says Torres. She was instantly drawn to glass-making workshops offered by the foundation, where she learned to cut recycled tequila and wine glass bottles to create decorative pieces like vases and spoons."

Every day, there's an open market in the town plaza where local women sell handmade bags, lotions, paper, jewelry and decorations. Visitors will want to save room in their luggage for gifts and self-care purchases.

Preserving Culture

Mundo Cuervo's Beckmann Foundation started 15 years ago with a mission to preserve the cultural heritage of the women of Jalisco. About 10 families participate in the foundation's culinary program through ongoing festivals, the opportunity to sell homemade products like jams and juices, home-hosted meals and cooking classes.

One such festival is Fogones y Metates (Ovens and Fans). In its second year, it will be held in early December in the town of Tequila.

The event brings together women from different regions of Jalisco to share and preserve old culinary traditions, using native ingredients such as blue corn and criollo beans.

Three generations of women, Amparo Rivera, Evalia Castaneda Rivera and Emma Ramos Castaneda, participated in the festival last year.



Fogones y Metates is an annual culinary festival organized by Fundación Beckmann in December. The theme for this year's festival will be chili and tequila.

Courtesy Fundación Beckmann

Travelers who want to have a gastronomic experience can pay to dine at The Rivera's home, where dishes incorporate local ingredients from the family's own ranch, called El Chiquihuitillo.

This home-hosted meal for visitors to Tequila is a popular foundation initiative. At the Rivera home, guests sit in the open-air patio and sip ciruela juice while they watch Evalia and her husband make fresh corn tortillas and warm gorditas de horno (corn and cheese cakes) in a wood-fired oven.

Curated dining experiences like this one are privately arranged through hotel concierge and tour operators familiar with Beckmann Foundation. The price of such an experience depends on the group size, dishes and more. Evalia said some people just call her to pick up one dish, or a few dishes; others are joined by friends around a table at the Rivera's house.

The food is very different from what you would find at restaurants. "This is how my family eats every day. It is simple for us, yet visitors find it exotic!" Evalia says.



Guests are invited to dine on homecooked specialty dishes from Jalisco at La Cocina de Evalia Rivera or Evalia's kitchen.

Courtesy Kaitlyn Mathis

A visit to Tequila not only involves insight into the history of the popular beverage and a greater appreciation for it, but also an opportunity to learn about the Jalisco region — its culture, traditions and people.

Almost all of the world's tequila comes from Jalisco, and in Tequila, the women ensure that the tequila way of life continues.

[A year of the world's Best Beaches](#) There's a perfect beach for every week of the year. Join us on a 12-month journey to see them all
[Go to the best beaches](#)

