

# LIQUID ASSETS

## DISTILLING IN DE LUZ

### Blue Agave North of the Border

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ALONGÉ



Societies have used distillation for centuries to make beverage spirits that are unique expressions of the culture and the place that produced them. Cognac from France, rum from the Caribbean, aquavit from Scandinavia, Scotch whiskey from Scotland and bourbon from the United States are but a few of the many distillates whose style is closely tied to their specific region of production. While it is possible to produce imitations of these spirits elsewhere, they rarely capture the essence of the originals.

Tequila, which is a distillate of the blue agave plant, legally must be made in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, or in limited regions of four other Mexican states. It is closely associated in most people's minds with South of the Border culture. Now, a local entrepreneur has set up his own distillery in De Luz, west of the Temecula Valley, to make beverage spirits from locally grown blue agave plants.

JB Wagoner's Skyrocket Distillery was born of one man's passion. Wagoner purchased a five-acre parcel in the rolling hills of De Luz in the late 1990s. His parents had acquired a 20-acre spread there almost 20 years earlier, so JB was already familiar with the area. As an escapee from the computer technology business in Los Angeles, he loved the peaceful nature of the place and proceeded to have a house built on his property. At the time, he did not yet have a clear vision of what he was going to do there.

"The land I purchased had a grove of Fuyu persimmons on it, but

I was more interested in maintaining my views than in being a farmer. I was equally concerned with water use, fire issues and potential farm labor costs. Right about that time, there was an agave shortage in Mexico and the prices had increased dramatically. It seemed like the perfect crop, hardy and not nearly as thirsty as the avocados and citrus which are typically planted here."

Agaves are part of the succulent family, water-retaining plants adapted to arid climate conditions. They store moisture in their leaves, stems and/or roots. It is a common misconception that agaves are cacti, but they are not. In fact, they are much more closely related to the lily family. Although there are scores of species of agave, only the blue agave (also known as the *Agave tequilana*) may legally be used to make tequila in Mexico.

Wagoner's original idea was to cultivate the blue agave and sell it to tequila producers in Mexico, but that plan proved impossible due to strict Mexican government regulations. Undaunted, he began to research what it would take to make his own blue agave distillate. He visited distillers in Jalisco, read whatever books he could find on the subject and used Google extensively. His first trials involved making small batches of agave spirits in a converted pressure cooker on his home kitchen range. Encouraged, he embarked on a yearlong process to deal with the bureaucracy and file all the paperwork necessary to establish a commercial distillery.

At the same time, Wagoner studied the growing conditions in De Luz and was pleased to discover that they were remarkably similar to those in Jalisco. The temperature, elevation, moisture level and volcanic nature of the soil all closely paralleled their Mexican counterparts.

"The hills here offer the same conditions as the Los Altos highlands in Jalisco, where the best agave plants are grown," he explains.

Wagoner is involved in every step of the production process. First, the plants are harvested and the *piñas*, or hearts of the plants, are quartered and heated in a commercial autoclave to soften the pulp. These *piñas* can weigh well over 100 pounds and it takes up to 12 years for the agave plants to reach harvest age. The pulp is then pressed to extract the juice, which is fermented and becomes agave wine at 18–20 percent alcohol content. The Skyrocket Distillery currently has a 3,000-gallon fermentation capacity in its straw bale storage facility. Finally, the wine finds its way into one of the distillery's four stills. Three of these custom stainless steel stills have a 600-gallon capacity each and the other can hold 300 gallons at a time. Bottling and labeling are performed in house, too.

"Our distillation capacity is sufficient at this point in time," JB remarks. "However, our fermentation and bottling capacities will have to be augmented as we grow."

The distillery released its first commercial product in 2005 and now produces up to 500 bottles a week. Their flagship product is JB Wagoner's Ultra Premium 100 Percent Blue Agave Spirits, similar to a *blanco* tequila, meaning that it is bottled with little or no oak aging and is completely clear in color. They also produce the American Oak bottling (also known as Private Stash), a rich, brown añejo-style distillate aged for up to a year in American oak barrels. Additionally, there is an organic Blue Agave Nectar as well as two flavors of Temequila Margarita Mix: Meyer lemon and blood orange.

There has been a substantial amount of controversy surrounding Wagoner's use of the name *Temequila*, a word that he formed by com-

binning the words *tequila* and *Temecula*. Although he has a trademark on the name, Wagoner has been challenged by the Mexican government based on their claim that *Temequila* is too close phonetically to *tequila* and will create confusion in the minds of consumers.

"I chose the name *Temequila* because of where my product is made and also because it's a tribute to the Tequila made in Mexico. I would really like to be able to use *Temequila* for my agave spirits, since mine is the only other 100 percent blue agave liquor," states Wagoner. For now, the issue remains under dispute.

Other agave spirit projects exist in California, but to date no one has gotten involved in every aspect of production like JB Wagoner. Saint James Spirits, a craft distiller in Irwindale in the Los Angeles area, produces an agave spirit called California Gold made from purchased blue agave nectar and aged in French oak barrels. Frank Leal, owner of Leal Vineyards in San Benito County, has recently planted 16,000 blue agaves with the idea of producing his own agave spirit once the plants mature.

The Skyrocket Distillery remains unique in this country. It functions as a 100 percent organic and biodynamic operation, producing a craft distillate of incredible quality, controlling the entire process from the plant to the bottle. That kind of passion puts JB Wagoner in the elite company of the world's great distillers.

*John Alongé is the owner of San Diego Wine & Culinary Center. Known as the Wine Heretic, John is a popular and entertaining speaker at corporate and private events all over the country. He can be reached at john@sdwineculinary.com.*

## INFO

For more information about Skyrocket Distillery products, visit [drinkjbw.com](http://drinkjbw.com).

For more information about agave, visit the California Agave Growers Association website: [calagave.com](http://calagave.com).

### Where to buy?

Wagoner's Agave Spirits can be found at many Beverages & More locations locally, as well as both Rancho Liquor and Old Town Liquor in Temecula.

### The Temequila Tasting Experience

Master Distiller JB Wagoner will lead you on a journey of discovery and tastings of his 100 Percent Blue Agave spirits. Of course you'll sample the Ultra Premium Silver and American Oak 100 proof spirits, then you can try products-in-development like Agave Absinthe, Limoncello and Coffee Liqueur—all 100 percent agave-based.

Ample fresh finger foods will be served as you relax in pond-side cabanas. After a couple of hours, guests will be treated to a leisurely sunset cruise back to Old Town Temecula or a local hotel.

Groups of up to 10 people are charged an all-inclusive rate of \$500. Friday afternoons are best, but other times can be arranged. Call 951-308-2665 to book your reservation.

