

BY JUDITH HENNESSEY

INTRODUCING THE DECADENT DUO

Tequila & Dessert

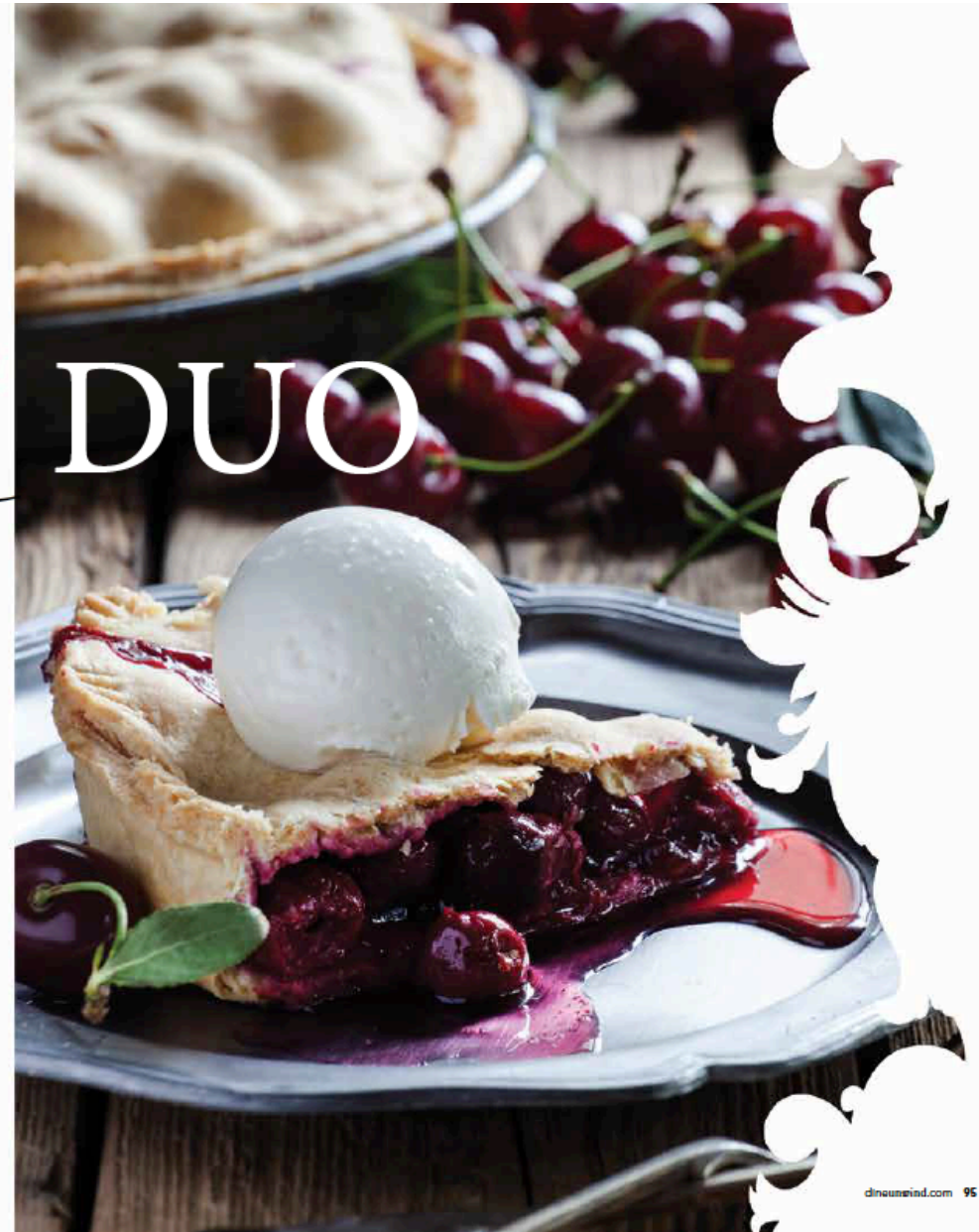
As a Midwesterner, it didn't take long to find out that Santa Fe was not just another pretty place and that my new love wasn't just a fleeting romance. Art abounds in a multitude of forms, but as a travel and food-writer, one of my favorites, the culinary arts, took me by total surprise. The regional cuisine, Mexican, New Mexican and Spanish was expected, but the international (French, Italian, Indian, Greek and Japanese, to name a few) was not. A plethora of eateries for every palate, mood, and pocket book awaits.

Though I've always been a vodka drinker, I pass on the yummy looking craft cocktail menus knowing the sugar will keep me awake or cause a hangover. On occasion, I will make an exception if a special wine is presented. Who can resist a ruby red cabernet with dark chocolate?



So, years ago I hesitated to accept a writing assignment about tequila. It was a black tie affair and an eye opening experience. These folks in Cancun, Mexico took their tequila very seriously. I quickly learned why, as the Catadores (yes, there are tequila experts out there, like wine sommeliers) explained how the spirit was distilled, its history and the aging process.

Some quick facts: There are now four types of tequila—blanco, reposado, añejo and the newest classification, extra añejo—all derived from a plant called Agave. There are huge differences between these spirits; how it is distilled, who makes it, and how it is aged, like wine, will affect the taste. Blanco is clear, thus the name, and is distilled twice in copper pots until it reaches 90 proof or higher. Reposado is rested for at least two months but less than a





year in oak barrels, giving it a light gold color. Añejo is aged in oak barrels for one to two years, giving it a deeper amber hue. The Extra Añejo is aged for 3 years or longer.

My assignment drove me to taste all kinds of tequilas and frankly, things did get a little fuzzy even though I did some spitting and took notes. But the really beautiful añejo's were hard to put down, smooth and silky, like a fine cognac or scotch.

When I returned to St. Louis it was hard to find those same spirits in a restaurant or local liquor store. I went back to vodka until I visited Santa Fe a decade later. I found a New Mexican restaurant that had over 90 tequilas. I was thrown back in time and started sipping, remembering all those glorious flavors. My love affair began anew. Years passed and tequila became more popular. I was able to find a few good brands like Patron and Don Julio and started ordering them neat, no ice, to follow a meal as an after-dinner drink. I found that it settled my stomach and aided in digestion. And the good stuff, meaning a spirit made with 100% agave, didn't give me a hangover. Tequila is as natural as can be for alcohol. It's gluten-free, has medicinal qualities, and can lower cholesterol. I'm dubious on this last fun fact but red wine can't take all the credit.

Incredibly, it wasn't until my recent visit to Santa Fe that I stumbled upon what I consider a gastronomical life-changing event. On my first night in town, having just finished a lovely meal at one of my favorite downtown haunts, I was pretty satiated when the dessert menu was placed in front of us.

"I have no room," I said, feeling a little sleepy. The day of travel and change of altitude was catching up with me. My friend leaned back and rolled her eyes.

The dessert menu sat there, taunting me until my eyes locked on "cherry cobbler with vanilla ice cream." I think I swooned. A tart cherry crisp is definitely my favorite and I had not seen or tasted one for an eternity. My friend and I agreed that we had to at least taste it.

"Well, it is my first night back in Santa Fe. I should have a tequila." I waved down our waitress who quickly suggested a small-batch Mexican blanco. I sipped it, noticing the mineral flavor undertones and a little too much bite at the finish.

When the deep red cherry goodness arrived, I scooped up a big spoonful along with a tiny scoop of melting vanilla ice cream. It was the perfect combination of tart and sweet, warm



and cold. I grabbed my snifter and took a sip of tequila and to my complete and utter amazement, everything changed. The spirit tasted totally different, much smoother, and the bite had disappeared. I took another taste of the cobbler. The sweetness was there but it was less tart. I looked at my friend, wide-eyed. She nodded knowingly. We had accidentally tripped on something we had never considered before: tequila was *really* good paired with dessert.

A few days passed when my husband arrived and we decided to attend the "Chile Amor" class at The Santa Fe School of Cooking. Chef Allen Smith was entertaining and knew his way around the kitchen, especially the peppers. Well traveled and trained, he was a walking book of culinary knowledge. As he spoke about cooking with chiles and how to adjust the heat, I was even more fascinated. He explained to us that adding more or fewer peppers wouldn't control the spiciness but that sugar (brown, honey, agave) and salt could. My brain started clicking and as I stirred my red chile sauce, that creative light bulb went off in my head.

I called my friend and said, "If you can adjust heat from a chile with salt and sugar, why not apply those same principals to tequila and pair them with desserts?"

In the name of culinary science she offered to help my husband and I do more research. We visited several local eateries, talked to numerous enthusiastic bartenders as we tasted, sipped, and experimented with multiple combinations of tequilas and sweets. We even held our own tasting at home. It was a tough mission but



someone had to do it. I went back to Chef Smith's premise in our cooking class, that if salt and sugar could cool a chile sauce, then maybe the level of sugar in a dessert could balance a tequila and vice versa. (Not that any dessert needs to be corrected, but sometimes things are too sweet for my palate and I'd still like to enjoy them.)

We started at an Italian restaurant and ordered tiramisu. It was creamy and pretty high in sugar, so we decided a Herradura Reposado would pair nicely. The spirit alone tasted smooth, with a whisper of nuts. A bite of the creamy tiramisu, followed by a sip of the Herradura, took on a whole new personality. It became creamier, softer, and the hazelnut was more defined. We spotted Banana Cream Pie on the menu and knew to go with another reposado. The bartender was determined for us to try Herradura's Double Barrel Reposado, aged 11 months in roasted white oak barrels and another month in a brand new oak barrel. It was smoother, slightly sweeter, and had strong hints of oak (go figure). He was right that it paired perfectly with the chunks of banana and velvety whipped pie.

Tasting a pattern, we went on to sample more reposados. Altos was soft, spicy, with notes of wood and it was delectable paired with a simple iced Tres Leches cake. The Cazadores, with its light fruity essence (pear and apples perhaps) balanced a carrot cake's allspice, nutmeg, and cream cheese icing.

After scanning dessert menus on my laptop, we moved on to blancos. I spied a Key Lime tart at a local eatery and what could be better than lime and tequila? The Patron Silver was easy to sip, slightly nutty and had a clean finish. The Key Lime nestled in a buttery crust and the blanco proved a quintessential coupling. We switched to the Herradura Silver, slightly salty with a hint of cinnamon. It was the obvious choice to accompany apple pie. Every bite was crisp and clean, like biting into an apple off a tree. The savory complimented the sweet, an exquisite duet. Blueberry pie was another touchdown. It was unanimous; you just can't go wrong pairing a citrus or fruit pie with a blanco tequila!

After a few days of dessert detox, it was time to sample at least one añejo partnered with something sweet. I had saved chocolate for something special and Jalisco's El Tesoro Añejo delivered. The spirit was smoky and stout, reminiscent of a bold scotch. We

selected a decadent layered ganache cake. It looked amazing and the rich dark chocolate melted in my mouth. I reluctantly reached for the El Tesoro, but to my surprise, found that the chocolate balanced the savory and created a whole new complex blend of flavors I'd never experienced before!

The bartender commenced to brag about their famous Bread Pudding. The dense sticky carb smothered in a gooey caramel sauce screamed for a bold companion, such as George Clooney's Casamigos Añejo. The amber liquid held intense vanilla and butterscotch notes. It was big and refined, more like a cognac and held up well with the thick, rich pudding. The bartender sensed we were hitting our limit on sugar yet insisted on pouring a sample of Casamigos Reposado. Once again, I forged ahead, tasting a lighter version of the añejo, but maybe even sweeter with hints of honey. I decided it could be the perfect dessert on its own. Or perhaps with something salty.

"How about cheese?" I blurted.

The crew that had gathered around was shocked into silence.

"A manchego, or parmesan, or even a blue cheese!" I explained.

"Like goat cheese with apricot jam!" someone shouted, sensing where I was going.

At home I served a cheese platter with tiny shot glasses of Casamigos Reposado. It was exactly as I had imagined, only better. The hard salty cheeses with the tequila were 100% superb, another savory and sweet combination. Brie was also in the line-up and we were delighted to find that the spirit took on a buttery characteristic, just like the cheese. I couldn't resist including a jalapeño goat cheese, fire engine hot! I reached for my sweet tequila and my palate was immediately cooled. Thank you, Chef Smith!

That same night we tried a light, gluten-free, vegan dessert, a chocolate hummus. We all dipped our spoons into the thick beans laced with chocolate and then took a taste of our tequila. The room went silent while we swallowed the hummus, then groans of sheer delight escaped from everyone's mouths. It was the birth of something pretty amazing. Tequila and dessert had made a serious impression, a decadent duo calling culinary enthusiasts to pay more attention! Happy sipping!

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