

Erie's Senor Coyotes adopts taste of Mexico

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I was sitting at the bar in Senor Coyotes working on a cold glass of Dos Equis. I'd been in this position before, back when Coyotes was known as Marketplace Grill. In terms of ambience, things haven't changed much. The lighting is dim, and you're surrounded by that rich, dark wood.

There are some notable differences behind the bar, however -- a prickly potted cactus, for one, and an abundance of new bottles. Just take a gander at the tequila section: Lunazul, Cazadores, Espolon, Cruz ... the list goes on and on.

"We're just getting started," said Ismael Aguilar, Senor Coyotes' executive chef and owner. "When the bar is fully stocked, we'll have between 40 and 60 different tequilas. This will be a true tequila bar."

It's unlikely you'll meet anyone more qualified to open a tequila bar. Aguilar hails from the Mexican state of Jalisco, home to the country's finest blue agave -- the plant from which tequila is distilled. If Aguilar hadn't left home to become a chef, he'd probably be in Jalisco growing agave or making tequila.

"My brother farms agave," he said. "The soil in Jalisco is perfect for it, and most of Mexico's tequila is produced there."

For me, the thought of tequila conjures up hazy memories of waking up in bathtubs with strange girls, limping to class with debilitating headaches and suffering through hours of lingering, repugnant aftertaste.

"That's because most of the tequila sold up here is the cheapest kind of Cuervo," Aguilar said.

He grabbed a bottle of Cuervo Gold. "If you read the label, it says 'made with agave.' It's a mixto -- a blend. The label on a quality tequila will say 100 percent agave. Don't get me wrong -- Cuervo makes some good tequilas, but this isn't one of them."

Aguilar put the Cuervo back and returned with a bottle of Don Julio 1942.

"This is more like it," he said. "100 percent blue agave from the Jalisco highlands."

He poured me a shot in one of the bar's custom 2-ounce glasses.

While I was savoring the smooth, golden nectar, Aguilar brought out another bottle, one with a shimmering crystal agave in its center.

"These Milagro bottles are all hand blown by glass artisans and individually numbered," he said. "The tequila's pretty good, too. They age it for six months in a wood barrel. You can taste the oak."

The Milagro was mellow and magnificent -- a Reposado, aged more than three months but less than a year. You can also get Tequila Blanco (aged less than three months), Anejo (aged one to three years) and Extra Anejo (oak-aged for three-plus years). You won't confuse any of them with Cuervo Gold.

If you're too timid to tangle with tequila but still want a south-of-the-border buzz, there are plenty of Mexican beers on offer at Senor Coyotes: Tecate, Modelo (Especial and Negra), Sol, Pacifico and Dos Equis.

Stay thirsty, my friends. I'll see you at the cantina.