

# BAT-FRIENDLY TEQUILA

WITHOUT BATS THERE'S  
NO TEQUILA

BAT MAN TO THE  
RESCUE

SALUD!

TEQUILA BY ANY  
OTHER LABEL WOULD  
NOT TASTE AS SWEET



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## BAT-FRIENDLY TEQUILA

*Academics, producers, distillers, bottlers, marketers, and bartenders are joining forces to produce Bat Friendly Tequila and Mezcal™ and to defend the agave, its pollinators, and Mexico's national drinks.*

### WITHOUT BATS THERE'S NO TEQUILA

Bats and tequila are not words one would easily associate. While the former evokes darkness, caves and mostly disgust, the latter conjures sunny beaches, margaritas, and good times. But in reality, the fate of the two is inextricably linked.

Tequila is exclusively produced from the blue agave (*Agave Tequilana Weber*), and the lesser long-nosed bat is the plant's primary pollinator. Much like hummingbirds, bats feed on the nectar of agave flowers and hop from flower to flower carrying with them the pollen to fertilize other plants. However, industrial practices used for the production of tequila this past century have led to the loss of the genetic diversity of the tequila agaves and to the loss of an important food source for the lesser long-nosed bat, first listed as a threatened species in Mexico in 1994.

Despite the growing popularity of tequila, almost none of the plantations provided food for bats. For years, tequila makers seeking to boost the agave's sugar content, cut off the flowers before they could be pollinated, effectively cutting off bats out of the equation. They relied instead on clones that grow at the base of the mother blue agave plant to grow more plants, which stripped them of the genetic diversity and with it the resistance to diseases and plague.

In the late 1990s, producers experienced first-hand the results of unsustainable farming practices when crops were decimated by disease caused by a mixture of fungus and bacteria. It was reported that around a quarter of the country's entire blue agave plants had signs of disease.

### BAT MAN TO THE RESCUE

For over 20 years, Dr Rodrigo Medellín, also known as the 'Bat Man of Mexico', has led considerable efforts for the conservation of bats, including advocating for allowing a fraction of crops to bloom and to be

pollinated in the natural way, and drawing this to the attention of the Tequila Regulatory Council.

As a result of relentless efforts, in 2014 the lesser long-nosed bat became the first Mexican mammal to be de-listed as threatened species in the country. But on the flip side of this seemingly successful story, the outlook of the blue agave plant continues to be bleak – up to 40 per cent of the plants are believed to be diseased or dying and the bat still faces threats from habitat destruction.

Dr Medellín teamed up with the [Tequila Interchange Project](#), a non-profit organization and consumer advocacy group for agave distilled spirits comprised of bartenders, consumers and tequila enthusiasts, to help the bats and the agaves from inside the industry. This partnership directly approached tequila producers to persuade them that it is in their best interest to let some of their plants bloom and die in exchange for a 'bat-friendly tequila' label.

### TEQUILA BY ANY OTHER LABEL WOULD NOT TASTE AS SWEET

The 'bat-friendly tequila' label is a collaborative effort between academics, producers, bartenders and ultimately, consumers.

Mexico's exports of tequila have more than doubled since 1995, reaching 197.9 million litres in 2016, an all-time high. Although most of this is consumed by the United States, the tequila industry has recently started eyeing China as a potentially the world's biggest tequila market.

Faced with ever-increasing volumes of tequila demanded, producers participating in the pilot phase of the project understood that it was critical to start improving the current system if the viability of the blue agave and potentially the survival of the industry were to be sustained. By allowing 5% of agave plants to flower (about 200 plants per hectare), producers extend an invitation to those susceptible to help them: the bats!

Scientists involved in the project must verify that in the 5% of agaves left to bloom bats effectively pollinate the plants, that seeds are produced and that these seeds incorporate genetic diversity.

100% Puro De Agave



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PLATA



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But beyond bats and scientists much of the success of the label will also depend on consumers and those in the trenches, the bartenders. An increasing number of consumers integrate their beliefs and causes into their choice of purchases, and demand environmentally-friendly products. For the Tequila Interchange Project, bartenders play an important part in raising the profile of the bat-friendly tequila by informing consumers of the objectives of the project and the resulting superior quality of their tequila: a win-win situation.

## SALUD!

By late 2016, the pilot phase of the project released over 300'000 bottles of bat-friendly tequila from 5 different brands and at least three more brands of tequila and mezcal are expected to obtain the label in 2017.

This experimental phase of the project has already been acclaimed by the Mezcal Regulatory Council and has sparked the interest of dozens of tequila producers, to the delight of the leaders of the project that aim at establishing a platform of professional biologists to carry out the work across all the states that fall under the designation of origin Tequila and Mezcal – the world's largest protected designation of origin.

So raise up that bat-friendly tequila shot and let's say *salud!* to the future of this beloved drink and the bats that have made it possible.

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*The project team acknowledges the valuable contributions of Dr Rodrigo Medellín from the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico and Barbara Goettsch from the IUCN Global Species Programme.*

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