

The San Diego Union-Tribune

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BY PAM KRAGEN

San Diego may have a well-earned reputation as a craft beer mecca, but it's quickly becoming a tequila town.

Several new restaurants and bars have opened from the Gaslamp Quarter to Oceanside with bar programs centered on upscale tequila and mezcal brands served in shots, flights and cocktails.

So when did the Mexican-made spirits transition from frat party favorites to upscale sippables for the hipster set? Ask Miguel Luna, founder of Callifino Tequila, which just opened its first U.S. retail store in Carlsbad.

"Good quality tequilas have been around for a while, just not embraced," Luna said. "We are starting to see a growing appreciation and enjoyment of finer tequilas. We are becoming more and more educated on tequila, and it is no longer just a spirit to shoot to get drunk. The public is starting to realize there are fine tequilas one can sip on and enjoy."

Here's a look at some of the region's newest tequila- and mezcal-centric restaurants and bars, as well as a new one coming this fall:

Blanco Tacos + Tequila, Fashion Valley

Blanco officially opens next week in the former California Pizza Kitchen space in Fashion Valley shopping center. It serves a menu of 11 signature tacos with an ambitious tequila and mezcal beverage program overseen by Matt Snapp. The location has 40 to 45 tequilas and eight to 10 mezcals. Snapp's signature cocktail is the Operation Dione, made with Campari, orange brandy, vermouth and Banhez mezcal, which comes from a collective of mezcal farms in Oaxaca's Ejulla Village. Tasting flights are served in a wooden box with six glasses that include three grades of tequila, one sangrita, a soda water and a citrus-flavored salt. fashionvalley.com, Suite 901, Mission Valley. (619) 592-2992. blancotacosatequila.com

Death by Tequila, Encinitas

Opened in mid July by Carlsbad residents Chad and Jessica Mestler, this Baja-inspired upscale Mexican restaurant and bar has more than 80 tequilas and 30 mezcals on its bar menu, as well as

DINING

TEQUILA-CENTRIC BARS, EATERIES ON THE RISE

Mexican spirits move from the realm of party shots to classy cocktails



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COLE FERGUSON

wines from Mexico's Valle de Guadalupe and Mexican beers on draft and in cans and bottles. It offers a variety of fruit-juice- and herb-infused margaritas on the rocks and 10 tequila cocktails. Signatures include the Tres Cueli, made with Hacienda Silver tequila, lemon, prickly pear, agave and Jarritos soft drink; the Los Muertos, made with Millagro Silver tequila, lime, mango and chile ash, served on the rocks; and Prothling in Puerto, made with Gracias a Dios mezcal, lemon, vanilla, pineapple and egg white served in a coupe glass. 569 S. Coast Highway 101, Encinitas. (760) 230-6108. deathbytequila.com

El Chingon, Gaslamp Quarter

Opened last year by GBOG Hospitality Group, this self-proclaimed "bad ass" Mexican restaurant/bar offers a unique Mexican spirits program. The restaurant has six cocktails that are customizable with a choice of four Mexican distilled spirits: tequila, mezcal, raicilla and sotol. The restaurant also serves margarita flights. 569 Fifth Ave., downtown. (619) 501-1919. elchingon.com

El Jardin, Liberty Station

Open since July, this regional Mexican restaurant and tequila bar is overseen by "Top Chef" star Claudette Zepeda-Wilkins, who hand-selected everything in the restaurant from the furniture and dishes to the menu ingredients and the selections in the bar. The bar serves 27 tequilas and 26 mezcals. There are also Mexican whiskeys distilled by Sierra Norte from yellow and black corn, Mexican bottled beer, wines from the Valle de Guadalupe and agua fresca. 2885 Perry Road, Liberty Station, San Diego. (619) 795-2322. eljardinrestaurant.com

El Roy's Tequila Bar + Kitchen

In mid-August, El Roy's replaced the former Candela's on the Bay restaurant at the Coronado Ferry Landing with this innovative Mexican restaurant and bar. It's owned by Bluebridge Hospitality, which runs numerous Coronado restaurants, including Stake Chophouse and LeRoy's Kitchen & Lounge. Its extensive bar menu features more than 90 agave spirits, nine margaritas and sangrias. It also offers three drink flights of tequilas and mezcals as well as

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