

March 7, 1999---(I seem to recall)

SOMEWHERE IN THE CARIBBEAN --- It was just a matter of time before I found the world's first tequila bar at sea. I've done my share of landlocked shots, but the only time I was a man overboard was after a night of drinking with rumrunners at the Green Parrot tavern in Key West, Fla.

The world's first tequila bar at sea is a fun hook of the seven-day Texaribbean cruise aboard the Norwegian Sea. The year-round cruise began sailing from the Port of Houston (Texas) in mid-December.

The tequila bar is hidden away in Oscar's Pub, which is part piano bar, part lounge. It needs to be part-cantina. The bar features 75 tequilas, 10 mescals and four Mexican liqueurs. For chasers, there are bottles of Corona beer (\$3.50) and Shiner Bock (\$2.95) from the Spoetzi Brewery in Shiner, Texas.

I've always found a measure of spirituality in a decent shot of tequila. I've fallen in love through tequila, I've calmed a root canal through mescal, I've fallen out of love through tequila.

Mescal and tequila are two different things.

Tequila comes from the pineapple-shaped heart, or pina, of the blue agave cactus in the valley of Tequila, Mexico, about 40 miles northwest of Guadalajara. The hearts are steamed for two days in room-sized ovens and the juices are extracted to be fermented.

Mescal is famous for the dead agave worm that bobs in the bottle. The worms are extracted from the cactus hearts during harvest. Zapotecan Indians from the hills of Mexico believed the worm gave mescal its aphrodisiac powers. Even today, Zapotecs make tortillas and salt from ground-up worms.

By law, mescal is guaranteed 100 percent agave with an official seal. Tequila is watered-down mescal (whose name is derived from mexcalmetl, the ancient Aztec word for the agave plant). Confronted by demand and limited land, most tequila distillers add up to 49 percent cane liquor or other alcohol unless the label states otherwise.

While limiting my time in the world's first tequila bar at sea to an hour, I did sample a shot of Peihuga mescal. With Peihuga, slices of chicken bones are used instead of worms, which results in a tantalizing smoky flavor. It's like having a shot of Popeye's chicken.

At the time we set sail in early February, the Norwegian Cruise Line was still developing a helpful tasting menu that explains the tequila varieties. For example, the bar offers 15 types of "Tequila Silver/Blanco." The menu explains that "Tequila Silver/Blanco" is the grandfather of all tequilas as the white (blanco) tequila is bottled directly from the distillation process and does not undergo aging. Just like Dick Clark. This is the stuff that works best with salt and lime. Just like Dick Clark.

Norwegian Sea bar manager Luis Carlos Rueda was our congenial host on the only evening the tequila bar was actually promoted to the 1,400 passengers onboard. About 30 people showed up at Oscar's Pub, which has a capacity of 67. That doesn't include lounge singer Derek Lewis, who provided ambience with country-tinged covers like Steve Goodman's "You Never Even Called Me by My Name."

Rueda, 37, is a friend of mine. He bought me a shot of Porfidio, an extremely smooth special edition tequila (which normally goes for \$24 a shot).

The world's first tequila bar at sea offered \$2.50 shots from 12:15 a.m. to 1 a.m. on a Saturday, but the bar did extend last call a half-hour after my cruisette companion called out for overtime. And she had only had half a shot of Las Trancas (normally a \$7.40 shot), a "Tequila Reposados," which means it was "rested" or aged in oak barrels. Modest dashes of fruit and gentle wood aromas gave Las Trancas its smooth flavor.

"This is the first and largest tequila bar at sea," Rueda said in a pre-tasting interview. "And the tequila bar will get bigger. I am the one who selects and tastes the tequilas.

"Sometimes I come in quite happy."

Rueda, 37, is a native of Cali, Colombia. He is the first Latin American manager in the cruise ship industry. "I'm very proud of that," said Rueda, who has been with Norwegian Cruise Lines since 1988. "I've been in every position on a ship from bellboy to waiter to bartender to wine steward." His mother, Emma, is one of Colombia's earliest jewelry makers, and before Rueda joined Carnival Cruise Lines in 1977, he was a noted poet and drummer around Barranquilla, Colombia, where he was reared.

Rueda doesn't come near Waylon 'n' Willie territory when it comes to knocking back shots, but he referred to El Conquistador "Tequila Anejo" ("aged" for one to six years in white oak barrels) as one of his favorites out of the 75 varieties in the world's first tequila bar at sea. Most "Tequila Anejo" should be tasted straight, in a sniffer.

The ship's shot of El Conquistador goes down for \$12. The smooth-as-velvet El Conquistador carries hints of oak, fruits and berries. "El Conquistador is fantastic,"

Rueda said. "Because of the whole flavor and the bouquet."

And if you don't have the time and wherewithal to take a cruise, just do what I do on those occasional lonely Saturday nights. Set sail for your local toy store. Stock up on a small fleet of plastic boats, and then drive over to Sam's Wines & Spirits in Chicago. With 92 tequilas and seven mescals, Sam's has the largest selection of tequila drinks in the city.

Head back to your crib and fill up the bathtub. Throw in a Flaco Jimenez tape. Jump in the tub, mix the boats with a couple of shots and you're home cruising. "There's more and more interest in tequila," said Joe Congiusti, a.k.a. "Joe C," Sam's popular tequila consultant. "More people are traveling to Mexico and coming back with different things. Tequila isn't all rough and ready like it was years ago. It's a little more delicate and more aging goes into it. The distilling methods are better, too."

Bon voyage!