



Brand Builder

An Interview with J. Gary Shansby,
 Founder and Chairman, Partida Tequila, LLC



EDITORS' NOTE Gary Shansby provides marketing vision, strategy, and brand building guidance for Partida Tequila. A noted brand builder, he co-founded a consumer goods private equity firm and has developed and marketed such notable household products as Vitamin Water, Famous Amos Cookies, Terra Chips, and La Victoria Salsa. Prior to founding his own private equity firm, Shansby was Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Shaklee Corporation and brings more than 40 years of brand development experience to Partida Tequila.



J. Gary Shansby

COMPANY BRIEF Headquartered in San Francisco with offices in Guadalajara, Mexico, Partida Tequila (www.partidatequila.com), combines traditional tequila-making methods with cutting-edge technology. Partida is an award-winning, 100 percent blue agave, estate-grown tequila. Its special ingredient is the pure natural essence of blue agave, which is cultivated for 10 years until the piñas are ripened with concentrated sugars, harvested by hand, and slowly baked in state-of-the-art stainless steel autoclaves. The marketing of Partida Tequila reflects the true heritage, passion, and pride of Mexico.

Within the premium tequila market, how challenging is it to differentiate?

It is extremely challenging. I decided that the only way to produce something really unique in the sunset of my career was to learn it from scratch. I went to Mexico off and on over the course of three years and studied everything, starting with the source of tequila, which is agave.

I was a grape grower in the Sonoma Valley so I know that 80 percent of the quality of most wine is related to terroir. I discovered that it was the same thing with agave.

I then discovered that agave is grown for six to eight years and harvested because it's very expensive to grow over a longer period of time. But if you take an eight-year-old agave plant versus a 10-year-old plant, which is what we use, you'll find the 10-year-old plant may be as high as 12 to 15 feet versus seven to eight feet for an eight-year-old plant. The piña,

which is the center of the agave plant, has a much more concentrated sugar content.

I also discovered that the oven the agave is processed in is very important. About 90 percent of the tequila over the past 10 years has been processed in old stone, brick, or clay ovens, and the smoke that is produced permeates the agave. The American palate likes non-smoky tequila – if it's smoky, they want light smoke, not heavy smoke.

I went to more than 30 distilleries, and all but one had been using those ovens. But I found a stainless steel autoclave type of production, which was a new generation, and the cooking is basically heating. With steam and heat, they can also fully clean the oven after every cooking session. When I tasted that agave, I could taste the actual agave, which tastes like a sweet yam, and I wondered why are 90 percent plus of the makers, including all the big brands, using the stone oven?

It's because they didn't do their research and they felt that it must be the best method because it's used by almost everyone, including all the big makers.

The third thing I learned is, when it comes to aging, that reposado, which means rested in Spanish, is a minimum of two months and a maximum of 12 months, and almost everyone ages two to four months. Yet, the wood that is in our American oak barrel doesn't begin to penetrate and give any nuances of flavor until it has been in there at least three or four months. So I experimented with everything from two months to 12 months, and decided that six months gave our Partida Reposado the nuances we wanted.

Añejo, which means aged and is the product a lot of people prefer in California and New York, is aged 12 months minimum and three years maximum. But no one ages them for three years – it's too expensive a process to lay it down too long. They mostly do 12 months. Ours is aged 18 months.

The other variable is that all barrels have different profiles. I went through a dozen different barrels, and the ones I discovered that I thought were the best were actually American White Oak made by the Cooperage for Jack Daniels. I buy them from Jack Daniels, hot distill wash them twice, dry them, and then use

them for a period of 36 months – three times on Reposado and once on Añejo, and then we destroy them. I found this imparts a slight taste of sweetness, which is a factor of the wood having had Jack Daniels aged in it for a couple of years, and I liked it.

In addition, we use only natural enzymes in the fermentation – we don't triple distill, which strips all the character from the final product.

So I developed a couple of products: one that I insisted on doing in a stone oven and one that I insisted on using a stainless steel autoclave for. Then I took 11 brands to Mexico, including Patron, and conducted a blind taste test with the Tequila Regulatory Council and our autoclave product finished number one. I then did the same with the tequila experts in the U.S. and it won again.

Our process, formula, and aging is only completely known by four people in the world. Others can try to copy it if they want, but if you build a brand that you design yourself with the help of experts, it's very different than if you modify something that someone else does.

While Partida has received many accolades, you've had a limited distribution. In 2011, do you see opportunities to expand in the U.S.?

Right now, we're in the 27 states that account for a little more than 80 percent of the tequila consumption in the U.S., which is the biggest consumer of tequila in the world. Mexico and the U.S. together account for approximately 85 percent of the world consumption.

My most important objective was to take each state one at a time and make the approach personal for each market. We basically follow where the chefs and restaurants are going. They always have great wine programs, and fine tequila has many similarities with fine wine, which does well in the metropolitan markets. This year, we're going to potentially expand into another four or five new markets.

I'm of the belief that you establish your following through the mixology community, and the wine and chef people; you don't go out and push the brand – you help the brand get discovered. It's not something you put on TV and blast with a bunch of movie stars; you have to nurture it. ●

Menin agave field (upper left); Partida Tequilas (upper right)