

Tequila Dinners at Z'Tejas Southwestern Grill

By CARRIE WOOD

Bellevue Reporter

Like many zealous drinkers, Melanie Prowse appreciates the flavor and smell of premium tequila.

"I know that it's delicious," the Marysville resident said, "but in terms of the whole history and the making of it, I don't know that much."

She is not alone.

Last Tuesday evening, 24 people gathered at Z'Tejas Southwestern Grill at Bellevue Square to enjoy a Tequila Dinner and learn more about the drink.

Michelle Huynh, a Mountlake Terrace resident who came to the event with a group of coworkers, learned a lot about tequila the first time she came to a Tequila Dinner last March.

"I didn't actually know about the different types of tequila, like there's the Reposado and the Anejo," Huynh said. "I learned a lot about it and then after the third cocktail, I forgot all of it."

Since last year, Z'Tejas has offered the Tequila Dinner experience, which includes a five-course dinner prepared by executive chef Efen Chavez, paired with three selections of tequila drinks. The dinner costs \$40 and begins at 6:30 p.m. the first Tuesday of every month.

During the evening, patrons learned the background history of tequila and received expert advice from Aha Toro representatives. Aha Toro is a premium, handmade tequila that is imported by William Ryan Select, Ltd., a Bellevue firm. Z'Tejas carries all Aha Toro flavors.

"It's such a good deal and the food is so good: 40 bucks, five courses, three cocktails - you really can't beat anything like that," Huynh said of the dinner.

Z'Tejas general manager Adam Murphy said the dinner is a way to bring more people into the restaurant, especially on a Tuesday night.

"It's also a creative outlet for our chefs to be able to make something that we don't have on our normal menu," Murphy added.

The Reporter chatted with Murphy about the Tequila Dinner menu and Terri Nairn, Aha Toro operations manager, about the brand's background and what makes it unique.

Reporter: What's on the menu?

Murphy: Chef Efen and his staff have created a unique menu of tequila-inspired Southwestern dishes. Each dish is also prepared with an Aha Toro tequila.

We begin with an appetizer: Catfish Beignets topped with a serrano pepper glaze and served with a Baja Silver Slaw. This is followed by a baby spinach tossed salad with red bell peppers, jicama, cucumber and Silver Tequila Strawberry margarita vinaigrette.

The Bacon and Lentil Bean soup is made with Aha Toro Tequila Reposado.

The main entree is a Grilled Ribeye, topped with a wild mushroom horseradish sauce made with Anejo Tequila and served with potatoes au gratin and sauteed vegetables. This is finished with dessert: a mini mixed berry cheesecake topped with a coffee and Anajo Tequila cream sauce.

Reporter: What are the featured drinks and what courses are they paired with?

Murphy: Strawberry A Go-Go is served with the first course, but it's built to last through the first three courses. Our Top Toro Margarita is served with the first course and Pomegranate Two Layer Margarita is served with dessert.

Reporter: Tell us about Aha Toro tequila.

Nairn: I don't think you can find a better brand. It is 100 percent blue agave that comes from a family-owned distillery in Mexico that's been up and running for 100 years. It comes from the highlands where higher-quality blue agave plants are grown to full maturity.

The owner, Hector Lizrraga Castelo, owns all of his fields in the highlands, which is also rare. (The name Aha Toro came from one of Castelo's nephews. When they were riding around the plantation checking the crops, a bull stepped out in the road and to get it to move, his nephew yelled, "Aha, toro!")

Aha Toro has been imported in Bellevue for more than two years now.

Reporter: How is the tequila made?

Nairn: This is a big deal. It is all handmade and there are no additives or coloring, which most other brands have.

The agave is split into quarters and baked in an old brick oven for 30 hours (this provides the optimal time for cooking, without the rush for more flavor). With other companies, it's all about getting it out fast compared to the old-fashioned way that we use.

The cooked agave is then milled, where the extraction of juices is made without any excess pressuring. While many brands take all the juice from the mashed pulp, Aha Toro only takes the first juicing.

The fermentation is carried out just like it was in the 18th century when the tequila industry began, which is all natural. Then it is distilled, and double distilled - that's across the board. When the tequila is ready, it flows out of the still through an open-air system to avoid condensation of impurities. It goes straight into our hand-blown bottles.

Reporter: What flavors does Aha Toro offer?

Nairn: With any tequila brand, there are three flavors of tequila. Blanco is agave in its purest form that comes right out of the still. If you smell Aha Toro Blanco, you can actually smell the agave plant. It's almost a sweet smell, like floral. With other brands, it smells like alcohol.

Reposado is put into an oak barrel for 6-12 months and the third flavor - Anejo - is aged 18 months. Anejo is good for mixing, like in margaritas.

We also have a 10-year-old tequila out on the market called Extra-Anejo, which is rare.

Reporter: How's Aha Toro being received on the Eastside so far?

Nairn: I consider it like the micro-breweries and the wineries around the Northwest. Even though it's not made here, Bellevue is the only importer for the whole United States. It's neat when people find out we're in Bellevue.

On average, we sell 350 cases a month (prices of the bottles range from \$46-\$57).

Right now, we're trying to hit the Eastside market. We're in some Kirkland liquor stores, such as the one in Houghton that carries the Extra-Anejo bottle. Some Bellevue stores have the Reposado listed, but we're trying to get all three flavors into stores by April.

Carrie Wood can be reached at cwood@reporternewspapers.com or 425-453-4290.

To make reservations for the next Tequila Dinner on Tuesday, March 11, call 425-467-5911.

Z'Tejas drinks, created by Jay Schmidtke, bar manager

Strawberry A Go-Go

1.5 oz. Aha Toro Silver

3.5 oz. Margarita Mix

2 Strawberries

3 to 4 Basil Sprigs

Build: Premash basil and strawberries; mix all items and pour over ice in a margarita glass.

Top Toro Margarita

1.5 oz. Aha Toro Anejo

.5 oz. Patron Citronge

3.5 oz. Margarita Mix

1/4 Lime Squeeze

Build: Make like rocks margaritas and pour in margarita glass.

Pomegranate Two Layer Margarita

1.5 oz. Aha Toro Reposado

.5 oz. Triple Sec

2.5 oz. Margarita Mix

.5 oz. POM Wonderful Mix

.5 oz. Float Pama Liqueur

Build: Mix top four items; pour into martini glass and float Pama (it should float on top).