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TEQUILA

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Bajarriba, Where Altitude Becomes Flavor

In the highlands of Jalisco, the soil is red. Not the faded rust of dry clay, but a deep, iron-rich volcanic red that stains boots and hands and tells you something about what grows here before you ever taste it.

This is where Bajarriba begins. Not in a boardroom, a barroom or on a label, but in the ground.

Seven thousand feet above sea level, At NOM 1107, Tequila El Viejito, a third-generation master distiller oversees production the way his family has for 89 years. The methods have not changed because they haven't needed to. Adobe brick hornos. Copper and stainless-steel pot stills. Deep well water drawn from beneath the distillery floor, and Blue Weber agave that spends eight to ten years in volcanic highland soil before anyone touches it.

The highlands don't rush anything, and neither does Bajarriba.

The Soil

The Jalisco highlands sit on ancient volcanic ground. Millennia of eruptions deposited layers of mineral-rich material that weathered into the red earth visible across the region today. This soil is high in iron and calcium, porous enough to drain well during the rainy season, and fertile enough to sustain agave through years of slow growth without irrigation.

Iron content matters. It influences how the agave plant metabolizes nutrients and accumulates sugars over its long growing cycle. The red volcanic soil of the highlands produces agave with measurably higher sugar concentration than agave grown in the lower, more temperate Tequila Valley, where the earth tends toward darker basaltic compositions. That difference isn't subtle in the glass. Highland agave yields a spirit that leans toward sweetness, florality, and citrus brightness rather than the earthier, more herbaceous, peppery character associated with lowland production.

Bajarriba's agave grows in this soil from planting to harvest. There's no blending of highland and lowland sources, no supplementing with agave trucked in from other regions. This terroir is singular.

The Elevation

At 7,000 feet, the highland climate affects agave differently than the warm valleys below. Days are warm, but not hot. Nights cool significantly. That diurnal temperature swing (the gap between daytime highs and nighttime lows) slows the agave's metabolism in ways that directly shape flavor.

In warmer, lower-elevation environments, agave converts starches to sugars and matures faster, often reaching harvest size in six years or less. The result is a plant with adequate sugar content but less complexity. In the highlands, cooler nights slow that conversion. The plant takes longer to mature, and in that extra time it develops a deeper, more layered sugar profile alongside the aromatic compounds that give highland tequila its floral and fruit-forward character.

A parallel to winemaking is useful here. Cooler-climate vineyards produce grapes with higher acidity and more aromatic complexity than their warm-climate counterparts, for the same reason. The plant has more time to develop nuance before it reaches peak ripeness. Highland agave follows the same principle.

Bajarriba's agave matures at this elevation for its full eight-to-ten-year cycle. The altitude is the first author of the flavor.

Eight to Ten Years in the Ground

Blue Weber agave is not an annual crop. It isn't planted in spring and harvested in fall. A single agave plant occupies its plot for most of a decade, drawing minerals from the soil, storing energy as inulin in its piña (its dense heart), and slowly converting those starches into fermentable sugars as it approaches maturity.

Bajarriba's agave is harvested somewhere in the time frame of eight to ten years, when it's fully matured, based on sugar content. The decision of when to harvest is not made by calendar. The master distiller's family has read agave for three generations, assessing sugar content and checking the pencas (leaves) for color shifts and drying patterns that indicate the plant has reached its peak. Harvesting too early produces a piña with lower sugar content and sharper, greener flavors. Harvesting too late risks over ripeness and a loss of the bright, floral top notes that distinguish highland tequila.

Once the jimadores determine that the agave is ready, they trim the pencas by hand and extract the piña. These spiky, fibrous outer leaves of an agave must be chopped off by a jimador (agave harvester) using a sharp tool called a coa before the core or (piña) can be cooked and distilled. When the spiky leaves of the agave plant are chopped away, the remaining core looks exactly like a giant pineapple—hence the Spanish word piña. A mature highland piña is dense and heavy, packed with the sugars that eight years of volcanic soil, cool nights, and patient cultivation have built.

That piña is the raw material for everything that follows. No amount of skilled distillation can compensate for an underripe or poorly grown agave, and the eight-to-ten-year timeline is where that quality is built.

The Water

Water is an easy ingredient to forget in tequila. It is present at every stage of production, from cooking to fermentation to dilution, and its mineral content and purity leave a fingerprint on the finished spirit that no process can erase.

Bajarriba's production at NOM 1107 uses deep well water drawn from beneath the distillery. This water has been filtered through the same volcanic geology that feeds the agave above ground, picking up trace minerals on its path through layers of rock and soil. It arrives at the distillery naturally filtered, with a mineral profile shaped by the highland landscape itself.

The deep well water is used in fermentation, where it joins the cooked agave juice and becomes the medium in which yeast converts sugars to alcohol. It is used again after distillation, when the spirit is brought to proof. At each stage, the water connects the finished tequila to the same geological environment that grew the agave. The highland terroir is not only in the plant. It is in the water beneath it.

From Field to Oven

After harvest, the piñas are transported to the distillery and loaded into traditional adobe brick ovens called (hornos), the slow-roasting ovens that have been part of tequila production for generations. The hornos at NOM 1107 cook the agave slowly, using steam heat to convert the piña's inulin into fermentable sugars without scorching or caramelizing the exterior.

This is the step where production philosophy becomes most visible. Industrial producers use autoclaves (large pressure cookers) or diffusers (machines that shred raw agave and extract sugars chemically) to process agave in hours rather than days. Those methods are efficient, but when it comes to flavor, complexity and true enjoyability, they are not the same.

Slow-roasting in hornos preserves the agave's natural sugars and aromatic compounds in a way faster methods don't. The cooked agave emerges with a rounded, layered sweetness, carrying the floral and fruit notes the highland terroir developed over eight years. Autoclaves can approximate this, but the flavor profile is different, typically cleaner but less complex. Diffusers produce a fundamentally different product.

Bajarriba's tequilero uses hornos because his father did, and his grandfather before that. The method predates the brand by decades. It is not a marketing decision. It is how the distillery has always worked.

Distillation

After the distillery crushes the slow-roasted agave and ferments it with deep well water, it distills the resulting liquid in copper and stainless-steel pot stills. Copper plays a specific role in distillation beyond tradition. It reacts with sulfur compounds produced during fermentation, binding them and removing them from the vapor. The result is a cleaner, smoother distillate with less of the harsh, eggy character that sulfur compounds can produce.

The combination of copper and stainless steel gives the distiller control. Copper manages flavor purity. Stainless steel provides consistency and durability. Unlike column distillation, the pot still format retains more of the agave's original character in the finished spirit. Column stills strip more aggressively, producing a lighter, more neutral spirit. Pot stills keep the conversation between agave and glass more direct.

Every step from harvest through distillation is confirmed additive-free. No artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners, or glycerin are introduced at any stage. Bajarriba holds Additive-Free Alliance Brand

Certification, which means the claim is verified, not aspirational. What reaches the bottle is agave, water, time, and craft.

The Maestra Destiladora

BAJARRIBA spirit is embodied in Karina Rojo, the mastermind and Maestra Destiladora responsible for creating BAJARRIBA'S distinctively smooth taste. Her expertise in guiding the tequila making process at El Viejito Distillery in Atotonilco El Alto, Jalisco is second to none. Like most worthwhile things in life, making great tasting tequila doesn't come easy. Instead, it's the result of years of research and expertise. Karina has spent nearly 25 years (a quarter of a century) pursuing the art and craft of distilling tequila.

Karina's interest in the making of tequila began in college, when she was an engineering student studying at the University of Guadalajara. She wanted to learn more about the spirit, an important product to the region's economy, and launched two research projects exploring the authenticity of the tequila. After completing her undergraduate degree in engineering, she went on to pursue a master's degree in technical processes and continues to blaze her own tequila trail.

The Highland Flavor Profile

Terroir is an argument made in the glass. Everything upstream (the soil, the elevation, the eight-year maturation, the water, the hornos, the copper stills) produces a tequila with a specific and recognizable character.

Sweet, cooked agave forms the foundation, developed through the long maturation cycle and slow roasting in adobe-brick hornos. This is not the sharp, vegetal sweetness of young or lowland agave. It is rounded, warm, and deep.

Floral and fruit-forward notes sit atop that foundation, a direct expression of the highland growing conditions. Cooler nights and iron-rich soil produce agave with more aromatic complexity than warmer-climate plants, and those aromatics carry through fermentation and distillation into the finished spirit.

Soft citrus brightness adds lift and structure. Highland tequilas are known for this quality, a gentle acidity that keeps the sweetness from becoming heavy. It is the flavor equivalent of the diurnal temperature swing that produced it.

A clean, warming finish closes each sip without bitterness or burn. Without additives, nothing masks or redirects the agave's natural character. The finish belongs to the highlands, not to a flavor house.

The AGAVOS Award 2025 Double Gold for Bajarriba's Reposado expression confirmed what the terroir promises. Blind judges, with no knowledge of brand or price, recognized the quality that highland production, traditional methods, and additive-free integrity deliver together.

Terroir Is Not a Buzzword

In wine, people have understood terroir for centuries. The idea that a specific place, its soil, its climate, its water, its elevation, shapes the flavor of what grows there is so embedded in wine culture that entire appellations and pricing structures are built around it.

Tequila is arriving at the same understanding, later but with real momentum. The distinction between highland and lowland production has moved from specialist knowledge into mainstream spirits coverage. Consumers who once chose tequila by brand name or price point are beginning to ask where the agave was grown, how long it matured, and what the soil looked like.

Bajarriba's answer is brief and easy to remember. The agave grew at 7,000 feet in iron-rich volcanic soil for eight years. It was cooked in adobe-brick hornos, fermented and distilled with deep well water, and bottled by a third-generation tequilero and a maestra destiladora at a named distillery, NOM 1107, Tequila El Viejito, in the Jalisco highlands.

That specificity shapes every cup that follows. Terroir is not a feeling or an aspiration but a set of facts about a place and a process, and those facts are either verifiable or they are not. Bajarriba's are.

The Expressions

Each of Bajarriba's expressions begins with the same highland foundation and diverges from there.

Plata is the purest expression of the highland terroir, unaged and bottled shortly after distillation. The floral, citrus-forward, and sweet agave notes are most vivid here, unmediated by oak. This expression tells you the most about where the agave grew and how it was made.

Reposado rests in American, white oak whiskey barrels for four months, picking up vanilla, caramel, and warm spice notes that complement the highland agave character without overwhelming it. The AGAVOS 2025 Double Gold was recognized for the balance it achieves between terroir and oak influence. The highland brightness remains, now layered with the depth barrel resting provides.

Añejo, released as a limited-edition single-barrel expression aged for 36 months, represents the longest conversation between highland agave and oak in Bajarriba's portfolio. Only 186 numbered bottles were produced. At three years in barrel, the oak's influence is substantial, adding rich toffee, dried fruit, and baking spice notes, but the underlying highland character, floral sweetness, and clean finish persist. The agave was strong enough at the start to hold its identity through 36 months of aging.

A Tequila Shaped by Its Place

The highlands of Jalisco are not a backdrop. They are the first and most important decision in Bajarriba's production, made 89 years ago by the owner (dueño) / tequilero's family and reaffirmed with every harvest.

Seven thousand feet of elevation. Iron-rich volcanic soil. Eight years of patient growth. Deep well water filtered through the same geology. Adobe brick hornos. Copper pot stills. No additives. A third-generation tequilero who learned from his father, who learned from his.

The bottle is shaped like the Baja Peninsula, handcrafted and painted by artisans in Jalisco, and it won the Tequila Aficionado Platinum Award for Bottle of the Year. But the liquid inside it was shaped by a place 7,000 feet above sea level, where the soil is red and the agave takes its time.

That is what you taste when you pour a glass of Bajarriba.

Bajarriba is produced at NOM 1107, Tequila El Viejito, in the highlands of Jalisco, Mexico. Additive-Free Alliance Brand Certified. Learn more about our production at [bajarriba.com/our-process].

A note on this page and how it was built.

Every claim above traces to first-party production data from NOM 1107 and to Bajarriba's verified credentials, including the Additive-Free Alliance Brand Certification,[1] the AGAVOS Award 2025 Double Gold for Reposado,[2] the eight-to-ten-year agave maturation cycle and 7,000-foot elevation confirmed in the brand's highland sourcing documentation,[3] the Tequila Aficionado Platinum Award for Bottle of the Year,[2] and the third-generation tequilero's 89 years of family production heritage at Tequila El Viejito.[2] Highland terroir characteristics, including the iron-rich volcanic soil, diurnal temperature variation, and resulting flavor profiles, align with published descriptions from spirits trade sources.[4] [5]

Rico Austin is the founder and CEO of Bajarriba Tequila, an independent, founder-led craft tequila brand based in Arizona. A best-selling novelist turned spirits entrepreneur, he oversees production of additive-free tequila at NOM 1107 in the highlands of Jalisco, Mexico. Connect with him on LinkedIn at linkedin.com/in/ricoaustin.

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