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By Amanda Kehrberg Mon., Dec. 12 2011 at 10:24 AM

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Tequila-tasters who reached the front of the Cruz Tequila line could take their time sampling the brand's silver and reposado varieties, as well as a sweet and cool margarita.

Since its **launch in 2009**, the **Phoenix Tequila Fest** has grown into a big annual event - maybe a little *too* big. This past weekend, crowds descended on US Airways Center - that is, just outside the doors and inside the entryway - **to taste smooth tequilas, margaritas, and samples from local Mexican restaurants.**

Long lines collided with each other and left guests standing for 10 minutes at a time without any forward movement. It was hardly a testament to the allure of the West's wide open spaces; but then, after waits like that, **tequila never tasted so good.**

We started with a taste of the **El Sagrado Tequila Reposado** (meaning "rested," this class of tequila is aged for two months to one year, and has a warm, gold color).

We have a hard time leaving the Cruz Tequila booth - plus tacos and tortas - after the jump.



The new Caldero Mezcal & Tequila Bar of Scottsdale served chimichangas and chips with queso, which we paired with one of Steve's Strawberry Frozen Chillers.

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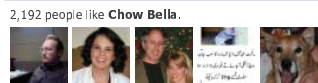
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This torta from Los Reyes de la Torta may look like it's hiding a pea from a princess, but its real secret is a complex collection of fresh flavors.

Served in a **tiny plastic cup that, with a little color, would make a perfect red solo cup for your kids' Barbies**, this tequila woke up our palette with a very strong flavor. Which is good, because the chimichanga sample we had next - from the **new Caldero Mezcal & Tequila Bar in Scottsdale** - was filled with white meat chicken but undeniably bland. It was paired with chips and queso; the **queso had a pleasantly spicy aftertaste**, but the whole plate had cooled off by the time we started eating.



Local favorite lunch spot America's Taco Shop served its signature Carne Asada taco.

Outside, the lines were worse (sorry, **Citizen Public House**, but **even the promise of an award-winning margarita wasn't enough to get us to stand practically on top of the Hidalgo Cigar booth to someday reach your table**). Phoenix's **Los Reyes de la Torta** restaurant served one of its **signature tortas**, a mini-sandwich piled high with fresh jalapenos and avocado, with at least five different flavors in every bite. We cleaned our plates in the line for **America's Taco Shop**, serving up their own local favorite: the **Carne Asada taco**. Savory and sweet - and above all, fresh - this taco was another moment of rest amidst the chaos.



This Spiced Cider Margarita, served by Cruz Tequila, was a refreshingly cool afternoon treat.

We found **another oasis** in the **Cruz Tequila** booth, which wouldn't let guests leave without sampling both their silver (in contrast to reposado, this class of tequila is clear in color and either un-aged or aged less than two months) and reposado tequilas, and then topping that off with a **Spiced Cider Margarita**. Cruz Tequila **boasts that it's refined enough to sip**, and after our failed experiment sipping El Sagrado, we found this a fair statement. Very smooth and more subtle on flavor, both samples brought that **warm aftertaste** you look for. The margarita was sweet and excessively drinkable, but tasted more citrusy, like a Tequila Sunrise.

Inside, we finished up our tequila rounds with a sample of the **silver and reposado varieties** of the **Familia**

Camarena Tequila. This tequila has a history dating back to the 1700s, and while the reposado (aged for 60 days in this case) had a more robust flavor, both were **distinguished by the same smooth, thick, almost syrup-like feel**.

With this year's **\$45 entrance fee**, the Phoenix



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Max's

Tequila Fest needed to offer its worth in gold (tequila, that is). But with long lines and an **awkward, overcrowded venue**, that entry bracelet grew less and less valuable. That said, the real stars of the event were the vendors themselves: **always friendly, knowledgeable, and wildly generous with samples**. It was no wonder that once we all reached our turn at the tables, we wanted to stay a while.

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LA sensation Monte Negro took the stage, on rock-band time, late Saturday afternoon.

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