

Thirsting for Knowledge

By STEVE MOLLMAN

The problem with sampling beer at a brewery, sherry at a bodega or cognac at a château is that you're captive to a particular brand. You can't complain too much, of course—especially if it's free—but what if you want a broader education that allows you to explore all the varieties of that beverage, regardless of who makes it? Increasingly, you're in luck.

For starters, more luxury hotels now offer alcohol-appreciation lessons as a way of keeping guests amused. "There is growing competition to offer guests paying premium rates an experience which carries some bragging rights when they return home," says Ritz-Carlton spokeswoman Vivian Deuschl. "There is only so much time hotel guests can lie in the sun. They want to learn something new that enhances their overall lifestyle." With that in mind, the Ritz-Carlton Rose Hall in Jamaica, ritzcarlton.com, employs a local "rummier" who—in a stimulating 30-minute course—teaches guests the difference between various dark, light, flavored and overproof rums. Classes are held on request and usually cost about \$20 per head.

Not to be outdone, the Four Seasons in Punta Mita, Mexico, fourseasons.com, offers its guests one-hour tequila lessons at its cultural center twice a week. Students learn to distinguish among tequilas that are silver (or clear), gold (colored with caramel), reposada (aged for at least two months), and añejo (aged for up to three years). The tequilas are from several different manufacturers, homemade sangria is on hand to cleanse the palate, and spicy bar snacks ensure that the booze doesn't go to your head too fast. The tasting is free for hotel guests.

At the Hotel Vintage House, hotelvintagehouse.com, in Portugal, lessons about port are held in the wine shop on request. The classes, which cost \$23 and typically last 90 minutes, use various samples of this fortified wine to show how, say, a white port differs from a tawny or a vintage is unlike a late-bottled vintage.

And it's not just hotels serving up lessons these days: industry-funded organizations are using them in a bid to boost trade, too. England's Beer Academy, beeracademy.org, was launched in 2003, with the support of breweries and beer retailers, to promote the idea that choosing suds is no less sophisticated than selecting fine wines. It offers a one-day foundation course (\$287) at historic pubs and breweries in London, Manchester and other locations. Participants learn the finer points of wheat beers, dark lagers, old ales and so on. "Our beer choices are global, and our intention is to let anyone who comes to our courses understand beer—not brands," says co-founder Rupert Ponsonby.

Where a formal industry or hotel course doesn't yet exist, there may be a casual class to drop in on. In Tokyo, various kinds of sake are explained by independent expert John Gauntner, sake-world.com, in English-language seminars staged about once a month. Popular with expats and tourists, the events typically draw about 40 people and are held in restaurants or sake pubs. Each seminar costs \$60 (including a meal) and lasts about three hours. "Going to these seminars helps people know what to look for, what makes one kind of sake different from another," says former participant Melinda Joe.

She's not the only one eager to educate her taste buds. "Consumers have developed very sophisticated palates either through travel or exposure," says David Kendall, principal of the Seattle brand consultancy Kendall Ross, which works with a number of wineries. "They are also more curious about the product, the producers, where it came from and how it was made." Fortunately, getting to the top of the class has never been more enjoyable.