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# Move Over, Tequila: Why Artisanal Mezcal Is on the Rise

AUGUST 20, 2015 5:37 PM  
by CHANTAL MARTINEAU



Photo: Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum Photos



Mexico's most iconic liquid export has long been tequila. But before tequila, there was mezcal. This ancient spirit, distilled from the agave plant, is made in remote mountain villages around Mexico. Once misunderstood as little more than moonshine, mezcal started gaining a cult following a few years ago for its intense, smoky flavors and the hyper-artisanal way it's made. Today, mezcal is having its moment.

"There is this romantic quality to it," says **Ivy Mix**, a partner in *Leyenda*, a new cocktail bar in Brooklyn inspired by Latin American flavors. "Mezcal tastes rustic, like it has a story behind it. You look at pictures of the guy and his burro out in the agave fields and it looks like a postcard. And people are, like, 'Hey, I want to drink a postcard!'"

While tequila is mostly made from farmed blue agave, mezcal can be made from more than two dozen varieties of the agave plant, many of which grow wild. Considered sacred by the Aztecs, agave has been a Mexican staple for 11,000 years. More than 200 varieties exist worldwide, but most are native to Mexico. Certain types used for mezcal can take a decade to reach maturity, while others might take 25 years. Consider that grapes and grains can be harvested annually for wine or whiskey production and you start to grasp mezcal's romantic appeal.

After waiting so long for the main ingredient, traditional mezcal is produced with great care in extremely small batches in rustic open-air distilleries. The heart of the agave is roasted in underground pits, sometimes over several days, then crushed either by hand with a mallet or with a *tabona*: a two-ton stone carved out of volcanic rock that gets pulled along by a mule, horse, or donkey. Once the agave juices are collected, they are fermented naturally in open wooden or concrete tanks, then distilled in small copper or clay pot stills. The resulting spirit can be potent, oftentimes well over 90 proof compared with tequila's standard 80 proof. But it's meant to be sipped rather than slammed and a little goes a long way in a cocktail.

Despite the two spirits coming from the same plant, tequila and mezcal can be like night and day. Mezcal is smoky thanks to roasting the agaves underground rather than cooking them in an oven, as with tequila. Mezcal can also be more vegetal, more herbaceous, spicier, and more savory than tequila. Replacing tequila with mezcal in a cocktail can be tricky. For some drinks, it can work measure for measure. But you might start by substituting half the tequila in a recipe for mezcal. Really smoky expressions should be used most judiciously. And, just like you wouldn't make a whiskey sour out of a fine single malt, the rarest varieties are best enjoyed neat.

Mezcal has been made in Mexico for at least 500 years, but certain researchers believe it may be even older than that. Given its history and indigenous raw material, many consider it the first truly native American spirit.

## 6 Bottles to Try

### Fidencio Sin Humo

Mezcal can be as smoky as Islay scotch or it can have just a hint of smoke on the finish. This rare “without smoke” expression is made from oven-baked agave, sweet and spicy.

### Del Maguey Minero

Named for the town of Santa Catarina Minas, where it’s made in a small clay pot still equipped with bamboo tubing, this mezcal is delicately floral and fruity.

### Mezcal Vago Cuixe

Made from the Cuixe agave variety, which is scarce and requires a longer cooking time, it’s a dry mezcal with tropical aromas and savory flavors.

### Koch El Mezcal Wild Agave

Many mezcales were once made as field blends, using whatever agave varieties might be growing nearby. This blend has a stony minerality and bright citrus notes.

### El Jolgorio Tepeztate

Made from a variety that can take 25 years to reach maturity, the mezcal is intensely perfumed and candied. Like tepeztate in general, this one is precious and hard to find.

### Mezcal Amarás Cupreata

Most mezcal comes from the state of Oaxaca. This one hails from the village of Mazatlán in Guerrero. It tastes of the desert: herbaceous and vegetal.



### 3 Mezcal cocktails

Ivy Mix of Leyandra shares her three favorite takes on the artisanal spirit:

#### **Tia Mia**

*A refreshing take on a Mai Tai served with a pretty orchid garnish makes for a dreamy introduction to mezcal.*

1 oz. Appleton Estate Reserve Rum

1 oz. Del Maguey VIDA San Luis Del Rio mezcal

1/2 oz. Orgeat Works T'Orgeat Toasted Almond syrup

1/2 oz. Curacao Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao

3/4 oz. lime juice

1/4 oz. simple syrup

Build in a rocks glass with crushed ice. Garnish with an orchid, mint sprig, and lime wheel.

#### **La Piñata**

*Elegant and aromatic with a tropical twist. Your margarita mix will miss you.*

1 1/2 oz. Illegal mezcal

1/4 oz. green Chartreuse

3/4 oz. lime

1/2 oz. simple syrup

1/4 oz. egg white

3 pineapple chunks

Pinch salt

Muddle the pineapple in the bottom of a tin shaker with a pinch of salt. Add the other ingredients, dry-shake to emulsify, then add ice, shake, and strain into a coupe. Garnish with a pineapple chunk.

## Ojala

*Agave spirits and sherry are like whiskey and vermouth: a match made in heaven. Who knew?*

3/4 oz. jalapeño-infused tequila

3/4 oz. Fidencio Clásico Mezcal

1 oz. Lustau Dry Amontillado sherry

1/2 oz. Lillet

1/4 oz. St. Germain liqueur

Build in a glass and stir with ice. Strain and serve up. Garnish with a twist of lemon.