

10 Things You Didn't Know About Mezcal

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Mezcal, Mexico's wonderfully smoky contribution to the drinking world, works as a great [base for cocktails](#) or simply as a straight sipper. It also has a rich history. Here, Kendra Kuppin and mixologist Michael Zurkin from New York's [Spice & Spoon](#) cooking school bring you 11 things you probably didn't know about the complex spirit.

1. The word "mezcal" comes from the Aztec word *mexcalli*, which combines *metl* (meaning maguey, aka agave) and *ixcalli* (meaning cooked). The literal translation of mezcal is "cooked agave."
2. Mezcal is not a type of tequila—tequila is actually a type of mezcal. Mezcal refers to any alcohol made from agave, whereas tequila is made from a single type of agave—Weber's blue agave, also known as *agave tequilana*.
3. Though mezcal can be made from any type of agave, the most popular type used is called Espadín. If you know your stuff, you'll know that mezcal made from a different type of agave—Tobala agave—is very highly regarded. This type of agave grows wild in canyons at extremely high altitudes and under the shade of oak trees. Furthermore, you can only extract about 1/8 the amount of liquid from the heart of the Tobala agave compared to Espadín, making it rarer and more expensive.
4. Until the 1990s, mezcal had a bad reputation as nothing but poor-quality tequila. The bad perception came from a lack of regulation about what could properly be called mezcal, and as a result there were a lot of cheap knockoffs.
5. Much like true Champagne can only be made in the Champagne region of France, true mezcal must come from one of eight states in Mexico, the largest of which is Oaxaca.
6. Mezcal gets its smoky taste and smell from the way agave breaks down before fermentation. The agave is placed in a pit dug into the ground and filled with hot coals, where it sits for two to three days, acquiring its signature smoky essence.
7. Contrary to popular belief, the worm in mezcal isn't a worm at all, it's actually a larva. There are two types of larvae that are often added to mezcal: white-and-gold or red. The white-and-gold larvae live in the agave root, and the red larvae reside in the long leaves of the plant. Despite the worms' prevalence among mezcal brands, the larvae are not necessary. And no, it won't make you hallucinate.
8. Worms aren't the only creatures used in mezcal production. Pechuga mezcal is made by distilling the liquor along with a raw chicken or turkey breast. Sure, it sounds bizarre, but it adds a rich, meaty complexity to the drink that is actually quite tasty.
9. According to legend, mezcal was created when a lightning bolt struck an agave plant, cooking and opening it, then releasing the liquid inside. That is why people often refer to it as the "elixir of the gods."
10. Every year, Oaxaca sponsors an International Mezcal Festival. The festival starts July 18, and for under \$5 you can drink to your heart's desire as you explore a maze of traditional mezcal vendors.

Spice & Spoon offers in-home cooking and mixology classes, as well as classes hosted by chefs in their homes.

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