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Complex and assertive, mezcal makes a splash in U.S.

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Let's get this out of the way: Good mezcal has nothing to do with worms or psychedelic trips.

Good mezcal is a unique and complex spirit. It's smoky in a way that reminds me of Islay Scotch, with a vegetal sweetness that could come only from Mexico and an earthiness imparted from 400-year-old distilling methods.

"There's not very much in the world, especially in the spirits world, that is original and made the old way," says Ron Cooper, founder of Del Maguey Single Village mezcals and a mezcal missionary.

As Cooper tells it, he first tasted mezcal in the 1970s while road-tripping through Mexico. On return trips to Oaxaca, where most mezcal is made, he sought out palenqueros, or mezcal makers, and collected rare bottles. But the spirit he loved was hard to come by in the U.S., so he started Del Maguey in 1995 to import it.

"I brought it out to make sure it was available to me and my friends," Cooper says. "It's spread slowly by word of mouth."

And Cooper's sheer dint of will. He has spent untold hours introducing mezcal to enthusiasts, bartenders, distributors and retailers — efforts that have gradually turned mezcal into a craft cocktail darling.

Ryan Maybee, co-owner of Manifesto and the Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange, hosted Cooper during a bartender event in 2009. He then traveled to Oaxaca last year with Cooper and drinks expert Steve Olson to visit mezcal distilleries in what proved a transformative experience.

"Ron's legacy is not just introducing a cool product here, but the impact he's had on those villages," Maybee says.

That's because even as technology and corporate ownership have reshaped the global distilling industry, mezcal has remained a largely rustic family affair.

Agave, also called maguey, is still harvested by hand and hauled by burro to tin-roofed, open-air distilleries. The maguey hearts, or piñas, are piled into an earthen or stone-lined pit, or palenque; covered with rocks, earth, banana leaves, palm fiber mats or other plant material, depending on the distillery; and roasted for days or even weeks.

After roasting, the now sweet and smoky piñas are crushed with horse-powered stone mills called tahonas, fermented in wooden tanks and double-distilled in small, wood-fired clay or copper stills. (Check out Del Maguey's website, mezcal.com, for photos of the process.)

There are no computers, hydrometers or automated bottling lines, just what the "Complete Encyclopedia of Wine, Beer and Spirits" (Calton Books, 2000) describes as "nothing more than local resources, intuition and soul."

The process sounds romantic, but it is in truth grueling work that has until recently generated little cash, says Ansley Coale, a partner in Craft Distilling, which owns the Los Nahuales and Mezcalero brands.

"Anyone making good mezcal was doing it because he was gifted and really cared, not because of the money," Coale says.

That may be changing as Americans find new appreciation for the spirit, especially in cocktails.

“The beauty of mezcal is that it’s not bashful about what it is,” says Beau Williams, Manifesto’s bar manager. “We try to play that up rather than cover it up.”

Williams matched Del Maguey’s Crema de Mezcal with lime juice and fig syrup in the La Prohibida to win second place in the 2009 Greater Kansas City Bartending Competition. The drink remains a staple on Manifesto’s menu. Upstairs at the Rieger, bar manager Jenn Tosatto combines Del Maguey’s Vida, Dimmi Liquore di Milano herbal liqueur, agave nectar, lime juice and hot water for a toddy-ish drink.

Mezcal is also a perfect fit for the Mexican street food-style cooking of Port Fonda, the stationary outpost of the Port Fonda El Comedor food truck that’s set to open in Westport this spring. The bar menu will include mezcal margaritas and Bloody Marias, as well as craft drinks that match the spirit with fresh juices and grilled fruits.

4 Olives Wine Bar in Manhattan, Kan., stirs Sombra mezcal (a micro-batch, single-village mezcal), Luxardo maraschino liqueur, Grand Marnier, muddled thyme and house-made Jerry Thomas bitters into a Manhattan-like cocktail.

Mezcal is not only for mixing, though. Even though most mezcals are released immediately as blancos, they are smooth and complex enough to sip neat. Del Maguey’s Single Village mezcals — so named because each comes from a single village in Oaxaca — range from the floral and fruity to the deeply spicy. Los Nahuales ages its reposado and añejo mezcals for nine to 12 months and 18 to 24 months, respectively, in French oak, making them a delicious alternative to whiskey.

The spirit’s versatility means it’s also surprisingly food-friendly — some even match with dessert. Craig Adcock of Jude’s Kansas City Rum Cake proved that point during a recent Slow Food Kansas City event, where he paired Del Maguey’s Crema de Mezcal with his buttery, pecan-studded rum cake.

“If you shoot it, you’re not going to get it,” Adcock says. “But if you sip it, you’ll be blown away.”

MEZCAL VS. TEQUILA

As the saying goes, all tequilas are mezcal, but not all mezcals are tequila. Here’s why: tequila can be made only with the Weber blue agave within a defined geographic area (most of which is in the state of Jalisco); the agave is usually cooked in steam ovens or autoclaves. Mezcal is made from many agave varieties throughout Mexico; the agave is roasted in wood-fired earthen or stone-lined pits.

The future of artisanal mezcal producers is in flux though, thanks to proposed regulations that would restrict the use of the word “agave” and dictate the specifications, proof methods and commercial information related to alcoholic beverages produced with agave.

For more information on the issue, go to the Tequila Interchange Project (tequilainterchangeproject.com/stop-nom-186.html). For more information on production, visit:

- Del Maguey Single Village mezcals, mezcal.com
- Los Nahuales and Mezcalero, craftdistillers.com
- Sombra, sombraoaxaca.com

TASTING NOTES

Mezcal can be distilled from many varieties of agave, or maguey. Some, like espadin, are cultivated, while others, such as tobala and tepeztate, are wild and rare. As a result, artisan mezcals range from light and bright to bold and spicy — all with an overlay of smoke that’s inherent to the spirit. Most are unaged (also called blanco or joven) and at least 80 proof.

- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Chichicapa (\$69) is smoky but delicate, with herbal notes and hints of candied fruit, green peppercorn and citrus.

- Del Maguey Crema de Mezcal (\$41) is sweetened with unfermented, roasted agave nectar. The result is supple and clean, with vanilla, tropical fruit and a little smoke.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Santa Catarina Minas “Minero” (\$69) tastes a bit of flowers and burnt honey, with a long finish.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Pechuga (\$199) is made by combining Minero with wild mountain apples and plums, red plantains, pineapples, almonds and uncooked white rice and distilled a third time. A specially prepared chicken breast is suspended above the still and acts like a filter during the process. The result: candied apple aromas and deeply complex fruity, smoky and supple flavors that give way to a long finish. This is the rarest of Del Maguey’s mezcals; only 25 to 30 cases are produced each year.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal San Luis del Rio (\$69) is rich and textured, with spice, fruit and a hint of citrus.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Santo Domingo Albarradas (\$69) is structured, its spicy brightness tempered by minerality and grilled pineapple notes.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Tobala (\$120) is distilled from a wild maguey variety said to grow only in highest reaches of the Oaxacan Mountains. It’s smoky, with fruit and black pepper notes and a floral character that could come from the wild roses growing a few feet from the open-air still.
- Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal Vida (\$36) is smooth, light, a bit briny and excellent in cocktails.
- Los Nahuales Blanco (\$52) is smoky, spicy and smooth.
- Los Nahuales Reposado (\$65) is a weighty mezcal, rich with vanilla, oak, spice and agave sweetness — well worth sipping.
- Los Nahuales Anejo (\$97) is a powerhouse along the lines of a single-malt Scotch whisky; its smoke and spice are tempered with oaky sweetness.
- Mezcalero (\$80) is akin to a single-barrel whiskey — each release is unique. Release #3 is described as rich, brisk and clean; Release #4 as spicy, suave and complex.
- Sombra Agave De Oaxaca Mezcal (\$40) is smoky yet bright, with a mineral-like character and grassy, tropical fruit notes and clean finish.

Old Oaxacan

I first tasted mezcal at Manifesto in the Crossroads Arts District, and the bar’s Old Oaxacan (which is now off the menu, but you can always request it) quickly became a favorite. Indeed, I find it hard to resist anything on the menu that’s made with mezcal. As Ansley Coale of Craft Distillers says, “Mezcal seems to bite people and not let go.”

Makes 1 drink

2 ounces Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal, preferably the Chichicapa or Minero

1 bar spoon agave nectar

3 dashes Angostura orange bitters

Lemon zest

Stir all ingredients over ice until well chilled. Strain into a rocks glass over one large cube. Garnish with lemon zest.

Per drink: 206 calories (none from fat), trace protein, 19 grams carbohydrates, no fiber, no fat (no saturated fat), no cholesterol, 7 milligrams sodium.

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