

MEZCAL

Mexico and developed a palate for true mezcal, is based in Antigua, Guatemala, where he owns a bar and restaurant, Café No Sé. "Once we started bringing in high quality, traditional, artisanal mezcals, we noticed that night after night, many of our customers were as intrigued by the dark and smoky flavor of quality mezcal," Myers remembers.

Fidencio is another Oaxacan mezcal newcomer made of 100 % agave espadín. Made by a fourth-generation mezcalero in the small pueblo of Santiago Matatlán, its flavor profile and production process is completely different from other mezcals on the market. Twice-distilled, Fidencio is produced without smoke. Agave is roasted in a radiant steam oven, creating a neutral heat; flavor isn't influenced by wood-burning or earthenware. This technique was developed by mezcalero Enrique Jimenez to create a smooth, clean mezcal that goes well in cocktails.

"We launched our mezcal with the intention of bringing the purity of the agave *espadín* to the consumer so that they might experience a mezcal in a way they haven't been able to do so before. The result is something that works both on its own and in cocktails," notes founder Arik Torren. "We hope that Fidencio will convince consumers that there are more expressions of mezcal than they might have thought."

GRAVING A "SMOKE"

With the proliferation of brands crowding the back bar, how does a growing category like mezcal stand a chance? Myers offers a solution: "If a mixologist with a good reputation and strong following can be brought on board, they will not only tell the story of mezcal, but bring their own craft and customers to the product."

Among this elite group is Phil Ward, whose NYC bar Mayahuel is a shrine to both Tequila and mezcal. He currently carries a dozen different mezcals and makes cocktails like the "Cinnsation" with Sombra, mulled apple cider, lemon, cinnamon bark and Peychaud bitters, as well as the "Red Ant Silver Swizzle", mezcal swizzled with sugarcane, lime and absinthe. These creations are turning out to be great vehicles for sampling mezcal.



At NYC's Death & Co., one of the mezcal cocktails served up is the "Last Train to Oaxaca"

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"I've watched maybe 5,000 different people have their first taste of mezcal at the bar," says Ward. "Palates go through phases; Tequila has been misunderstood and mezcal even more misunderstood, to the point people wouldn't even try it; that's changing."

Down the street at Death & Co., where Ward is an alum, head bartender Brian Miller whips up an old Tiki-style drink, the "Last Train to Oaxaca" with Los Amantes, Lillet and spices. "Mezcal is now almost a craze, like what we've seen with vodka in the past," he says. These days Miller is really enjoying the artisanal Tobala mezcal.

In the beginning, Bieler was skeptical of enjoying Sombra other than neat. That has since changed thanks to the inspired cocktails he's been tasting. "They have shown that single village mezcal can offer characteristics like smoke, citrus and spice that aren't just different, but delicious," Bieler says.

Sweetman notes that mixologists like

Dale DeGroff and Junior Merino have immeasurably strengthened Scorpion's profile and accessibility—Junior Merino's bold offerings include a "Frozen Mezcal-Avocado" with Agwa de Bolivia Coca Leaf Liquor. "Mezcal blends well with fruits, citrus, chocolate, coffee, avocado; products that are indigenous to the Oaxaca area. The end result also depends on the aging of the mezcal; the more it is aged, the more the smoky component comes out," she says. For Tales of the Cocktail this year, Sweetman served her own Scorpion-based cocktails, like the "Proud Mary," a mezcal version of the classic Bloody, as well as a "Pride and Passion," with passion fruit juice and peach bitters.

WHY THE TIME IS RIGHT

Torren believes the popularity of Tequila in the U.S. is a good omen for mezcal: "Now that they understand Tequila, curious people are in the position to move one category over to mezcal, what I like to call Tequila's cousin. Mezcal can be a challenging flavor profile, but Fidencio is a great entry point into a whole category we hope grows."

"The success of Tequila over the last 10 years has brought a broad awareness for Mexico, the agave plant and high quality spirit production in Mexico," adds Bieler. "This base of interest and understanding is important for the development of high quality mezcal as the qualities of something like Sombra are particular—and for some a reach at first—just as most Americans start with the richer, sweeter profile of bourbons before moving on to single malt island Scotches." To further expand Sombra's visibility, the mezcal recently joined the portfolio of Domaine Select's Classic & Vintage group. "C&V has an interest and appreciation of artisan handcrafted spirits like no other company we know, and so we instantly felt that this was the perfect place to grow Sombra," Bieler points out.

Even if the export market is currently underdeveloped, Myers is optimistic: "There's a buzz in the market these days that some larger producers are coming to the table and will be mass producing mezcal. But to do so, they will be sacrificing many of the traditional production methods. We are committed to keeping those traditions alive." ■

CATEGORY FOCUS

MEZCAL'S TURN

Mexico's Other Spirit No Longer
Plays Second Fiddle to Tequila

By Alia Akkam

It was eight years ago that Barbara Sweetman started importing mezcal, that oft-misunderstood distillate from agave plants. "Everyone called mezcal 'Tequila,'" the VP & international sales manager of Cabaleros Inc., importers of Scorpion and other mezcal brands, recalls. "Mezcal is the oldest distilled spirit in North America, but until now, one of the least known."

Earthy, smoky mezcal is primarily made in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, and unlike Tequila, which benefits from ample marketing muscle over in Jalisco, is often under the radar. Interestingly, all agave-based distillates are called mezcals, so Tequila is technically a mezcal. That is where the similarities end. While Tequila comes from just one type of agave—Blue—mezcal can be made from up to 28 different varieties. With Tequila, hearts of agave are baked in above-ground ovens, but in mezcal production they are roasted over hot stones in in-ground pits. Mezcal is typically distilled just once (in wood-fired clay or copper stills), whereas Tequila undergoes two or three rounds. Mostly handcrafted by family producers—a ritual tracing its roots back to several hundred years ago—mezcal's character changes remarkably from village to village. Unfortunately, this devotion to quality and tradition lost some of its luster decades ago when mezcal got a bad

reputation for bottles floating with worms inside—something appealing to spring break revelers more than spirits connoisseurs.

"If we had a much larger advertising and promotion budget, it would make a huge difference in sales, distribution and new audiences," Sweetman points out. "We certainly have yet to saturate the market."

Big marketing dollars or not, mezcal is undergoing a renaissance right now, thanks to curious mixologists, and a slew of new-comer brands like Sombra, Illegal, Fidencio and Los Alamantes.

FORGET THE WORM

If there's one person who is single-handedly responsible for illuminating mezcal's quality stateside, it's Ron Cooper, founder of the organic Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal. Instead of just promoting his brand, Cooper serves as a brand ambassador of sorts for the entire category, leading tastings and building

overall awareness of mezcal's distinct flavor profile. His most recent project is consulting on Sombra, a collaboration with Richard Betts, Dennis Scholl and Charles Bieler. "Thankfully, Ron Cooper, with his pioneering Del Maguey project, has been showing America that while there is plenty of uninspired mezcal, when handled correctly, it can be one of the finest spirits in the world," explains Bieler.

Betts and Bieler are attempting just that. Both come from a wine background, where attention to *terroir* is just as important as taste. Sombra, made of heritage agave (*Espadín*, the genetic mother of Weber blue agave), grown above 8,000 feet on steep slopes all around the village of San Luis del Rio, uses the same roasting, fermenting and distilling techniques that have been practiced for hundreds of years.

John Rexer, founder of Illegal Mezcal, started the company simply because he wanted to drink an artisanal mezcal. "The size of the category is not important to us," says Stephen Myers, global brand ambassador. "We'd rather do something small very well, where the process is still pure and where we can be proud of each bottle." Rexer, who spent years traveling through



The "Cinnsation," one of Phil Ward's mezcal creations at Mayahuel in NYC



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