









Serious Smoke: Mezcal Cocktails in New York

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- [Mixologist Miguel Aranda of Yerba Buena Perry St. - New York, NY](#) 
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- [Mixologist Jason Littrell of Dram](#) 
- [Mixologist Greg Seider of Summit Bar](#) 
- [Mixologist Michael J. Neff of Ward III](#) 

Recipes

[Accidental Tourist - Mixologist Jason Littrell of Dram - New York, NY](#)

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[The Mayan - Miguel Aranda of Yerba Buena Perry - New York, NY](#)

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“Para celebrar, es condición jamás perder la fe, abrir el corazón y servir el mezcal.”*

- Jose Manuel Aguilera, *El Mezcal*

If you can't play with fire, play with smoke, right? That's what mixologists are teaching us in New York City and beyond as they toy around with mezcal, a spirit mixologist Sam Anderson calls the “dangerous step-brother of tequila.” By comparison, tequila production has effectively gentrified over the years, with large-production stainless steel vats and dedicated spirit-dens like *Mayahuel* introducing tequila's many incarnations to patrons eager to widen their Cuervo- and Patron-bound horizons. But mezcal production is still squarely in the realm of the rustic artisanal—and not the Pottery Barn kind of artisanal, the knuckle-bleeding rustic artisanal—the kind that incorporates everything from giant fire pits and rusty machetes to teams of horses and donkeys dragging ancient-looking stones across the charred remains of agave hearts. Hardly the typical spirits operation.

In place of more standard flavorings and infusions? Mounds of old earth, a small forest's worth of smoldering wood, those infamous caterpillars (gusanos) and the occasional raw chicken breast—to make Pechuga mezcal, a delicacy. But that's no surprise coming from a liquor that has historically proven its quality with a dead caterpillar—the lack of decomposition means the alcohol content is just right. Add to that mezcal's cultural ancestry in the milky, frothy drink Pulque (made from fermented, mashed agave), beverage of choice for ancient sacrificial rites, and you've got shadowy history in every bottle. And if that's not enough cultural intimidation, remember that according to legend, the first thing to ever roast an agave plant—and give rise to what would eventually become mezcal—was a lightning bolt.

Mezcal Renaissance

Many mixologists wisely take caution when approaching a spirit with this much backbone, a spirit with 400 years of history in the grit and sweat of Pre-Columbian Mexico. But among bartenders in the boroughs—and a few across the country—mezcal is neither feared nor misused, but embraced with open arms and cocksure imagination. Sure, we've seen mezcal in New York before, but this year we've seen a greater variety of successful, bold mezcal cocktails, not to mention a dedicated “mezcaleria” in the just-opened *Casa Mezcal*, proof that mixologists have finally harnessed the highly distinct and surprisingly variable flavor profile of the smoky spirit.

And it's not an easy spirit to harness. Even though mezcal production comes from centuries of unchanged tradition, the resulting spirit isn't just a singular broad-shouldered smoke monster. From year to year, mezcal can display very different characteristics. Its major component—smokiness—might be ever-present (owing to the 2 to 3 days of below-ground roasting), but the degrees of smokiness, not to mention the flavor profile against which the smoke lingers, can vary depending on several factors. The topography of Oaxaca (which is to mezcal what Jalisco is to tequila) is so variable with valleys, mountains, and tropical jungles, that the state is like a mosaic of micro-climates with extremely distinctive growing conditions. And while 90% of mezcal produced is made with espadin agave, the same plant will have different expression in different soils and in the hands of different mezcaleros. And as larger companies like Los Amantes go in search of mezcals made from silvestres, or wild agave plants, the mezcal spectrum—and mixing potential—will only continue to expand.

Aging

Mezcal varieties can range by age, purity, and additives. **Joven**, or blanco, is the youngest and most smoke- and pepper-forward variety. At *Dram*, Jason Littrell uses just a splash of Los Amantes Joven mezcal to add heat and smoke to [The Accidental Tourist](#), a tequila-based cocktail that balances St. Germain with lime juice, honey syrup, mezcal and bitters for a dry, clean finish. Michael Neff at *Ward III* makes joven mezcal the marquee star of his [Los Labras](#) cocktail, pitching its brash young expressive smoke against Lillet Blanc and agave nectar—and taming the whole mixture with the silky texture of shaken egg white.

Reposado, as any tequila-lover knows, literally means “lying down,” which is what reposado mezcal does for anywhere between 3 to 18 months, typically in an oak barrel and sometimes with fruit. The resulting spirit has more char than pepper, and can be smoother and even fruitier depending upon the method used by the mezcalero in the final stages of its production. At *Summit Bar*, Greg Seider plays up the char of Illegal Reposado mezcal with chipotle-infused agave nectar while also highlighting its smoothness with an ounce of Dimmi Italian Cordial for his [Breaking the Law](#) cocktail. “Mezcal plays well with other liquors,” says Seider. So much for being a smoke bully.

Añejo mezcals aren't typically made by the mom-and-pop producers of Oaxaca; it takes too much time to age—at least three years if not more, on top of eight years for any agave plant to mature—and the yield is too narrow for profit. But aged mezcals are worth seeking out. All those years in oak barrels (typically French or American oak, often previously used for wine or brandy) can add a depth and complexity to the essential smokiness for a finish that's at once rich, smooth and dry. But beyond three years, says Ignacio Carballido of *Casa Mezcal*, the result is a loss of the essential character of the agave. For [The Mayan](#), Miguel Aranda uses a [Fidencio](#) mezcal that is aged for 10 years in very small batches and roasted without wood. The result is a mezcal more redolent of agave, fruity and spicy, with a clean, smooth finish which Aranda combines with a house-made corn elixir, Royal Combier, and hibiscus bitters for something that straddles ancient and modern flavors.

Locality

Beyond age, mezcals can vary between villages. Most of the 5000 producers in Oaxaca produce only for local consumption, with a certain amount of trading and sampling between villages, as often in a contest for local pride. Del Maguey mezcal takes great advantage of this, offering single-village mezcals which take the philosophy of single-origin (chocolate, coffee, etc.) to a whole new level of specificity. The single-village mezcal is a true reflection of the palenquero's, or village mezcal-producer's, style and traditions. For the [Ring of Fire](#) Sam Anderson uses Del Maguey Minero mezcal, aged in old-school clay pots for flavor notes of vanilla, spice, and charred honey, and a pervasive warmth throughout. Anderson creates an infusion with fresh rosemary and Minero mezcal, with yellow chartreuse to bind the flavors.

The whole variety of mezcals is as yet untapped—most of the variety will remain squarely in Oaxaca, traded between villages and sought after by spirits-loving tourists with an empty jug. But New York is showing new confidence with mezcal, and these cocktails are likely only the beginning. The recent opening of *Casa Mezcal* in New York and another mezcal spot on the West Coast, *Las Perlas Mezcal and Tequila Bar*, and with Rising Star Mixologists like [Julian Cox](#) working mezcal into the program at *Rivera*, it seems like the spirit will likely become a smoky staple of mature cocktail programs across the country.

***“To celebrate, we must never lose faith, open our hearts and serve the mezcal.”**