

MEZCAL

The Distilled Soul of Mexico

By **CLAUDIA ALARCON**
Photography by **SARAH DOLIVER**,
Courtesy of Heavy Métal Premium Imports



If you've been to a restaurant or craft bar lately, you may have noticed the growing popularity of mezcal. Historically considered a peasant drink, distilled by local producers, mezcal has gone through a renaissance in Mexico where the humble spirit has surpassed tequila as the trendy spirit of choice. This trend has crossed the border, and now it's easy to find fine mezcal in local establishments and liquor stores. And if the mention of mezcal conjures a scary-looking bottle with a pale grub at the bottom, it's time to revisit this misunderstood spirit.

The word mezcal comes from *mexcalmetl*, the Nahuatl word for agave. Indigenous Mexican cultures have been producing a beer-like beverage called *pulque*, made by fermenting agave juice, for at least a couple of millenia. It is believed that mezcal was created from a *pulque*-like beverage after the Spanish introduced distillation in the 1500s; however, recent studies suggest that distillation existed previous to the Conquest. Either way, mezcal has been produced for more than 400 years.

It is important to note that any agave-based liquor is mezcal. Therefore, tequila is actually a type of mezcal, produced in only five Mexican states and made only from the blue agave. Mezcal is made from a wide variety of species of agave, both wild and cultivated, each imparting unique flavor and body characteristics. Although Espadín is the most widely used, it is possible to find other varieties such as Tobalá, Madre Cuixe, Barril, Coyote, Jabalí, Mexicano, Tepestate and Arroqueño. There are eight specific mezcal-producing regions in Mexico in the states of Oaxaca, Durango, Guanajuato, Guerrero, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas and Michoacan. Of all these regions, Oaxaca is the most important center of mezcal



production, with 80-90 percent of all mezcal coming from this southern state.

The elaboration process is very similar between the two spirits. For both, the agave leaves are sheared off by the *jimador*, a highly specialized tradesman who uses a *coa*, a long-handled stick with a sharp, flat blade at the end, to cut the leaves from the core. The agave core is known as "*piña*" because of its similarity to a large pineapple. Agaves can take between 10 and 15 years to mature for harvest, with mature *piñas* weighing up to 160 pounds.

The difference between tequila and mezcal lies in the cooking method. With artisanal mezcal production, the *piñas* are cooked in a pit fashioned into an underground earth oven. The pit is generally cone shaped, about ten feet wide and ten feet deep,

lined with volcanic rock. A wood fire is lit at the bottom, with the embers heating the volcanic rocks. The *piñas* are piled into the pit, covered with earth and cooked until they caramelize over a number of days. This process is the reason for mezcal's characteristic smoky flavor.

Once cooked, the *piñas* are traditionally crushed with a *tahona*, a large stone wheel pulled around in a circle by horse or donkey. Milling breaks down the agave meats and fibers and releases the liquids. The milled solids and juices are moved to open fermentation tanks, usually made of wood, but some *maestros mezcaleros* also use clay pots. Artisan producers use native yeasts which results in a slower fermentation process. Once fermentation is complete, mezcal is distilled twice in small copper or clay pot stills, with each distillation taking about two hours. Processing the harvest at most of these tiny distilleries takes a month, yielding around 600 to 700 bottles — hence the high prices of true artisanal mezcals. Mass-produced brands are less expensive, as is the case with tequila, but the lack of quality is noticeable. Mezcal can be *joven* (young) or aged in wood or clay vessels to create *reposado* and *añejo* varieties.

Traditionally, mezcal is served straight with orange slices on the side, dusted with salt and powdered chile. In Oaxaca, it is customary to serve *sal de gusano*, salt seasoned with toasted and ground agave worms, which impart a delicious earthy flavor. Savvy mixologists have embraced mezcal's unique flavor profiles to create signature cocktails and variations on the classics. The first of such concoctions I tasted was Jeret Peña's Mas Chingoni, a take on the Negroni using tequila and mezcal instead of gin to great success. Nowadays, you can bet there's a mezcal cocktail available at most bars, and in fact, some bars are dedicating themselves to the art of the spirit. Mezcalería Mixtli, in San Antonio's Olmos Park, is a small, modern space where Mexican-born chef/owner Diego Galicia is introducing San Antonians to mezcal culture. His menu of outstanding traditional Mexican *antojitos*, such as *sopes* and *tostadas*, pair well with a selection of mezcal and mezcal-based cocktails and thoughtfully reflect the humble origins of the drink. "Mezcal pairs well with food that requires the same attention to detail, same as the mezcal-producing process. For example, some huitlacoche quesadillas would pair very well with a Jabalí since they're both smoky, earthy and rustic. Mole and mezcal go hand-in-hand because they're both ancient and legendary. The complexities of flavors really mesh well. You can almost taste the history of that synergy. These really old Mexican flavors have some sort of symbiotic relationship. The flavors really support each other," says Galicia.

Austin barman Billy Hankey, co-owner of the King Bee Lounge, has made it his personal goal to have the most complete collection of mezcal available in the city, currently stocking at least 35 labels. The emblematic elixir has also spurred two special concepts



MEZCALERÍA MIXTLI, BY AMY GAWLIK

in Austin. Open only on Friday and Saturday nights, Mezcalería Tobalá is located upstairs at the popular bar Whisler's, serving half-pours (3/4 of an ounce) in clay *copitas* or full pours in *veladora* glasses. The most recent proponent of agave spirits is Techo, a quaint, rustic space occupying the top floor of the legendary Mi Madre's restaurant. Owners Edgar and Christina Torres have put their culinary backgrounds to great use, creating

signature cocktails such as the Hierba: Del Maguey Vida mezcal, Bourbon, Fernet, fresh lime juice, maguey sap and a pickled grape. The bar hosts educational seminars and specialty tastings as part of the Torres' efforts to create more fans of the smoky spirit. "Cocktails are a great introduction to mezcal," says Edgar. "People often believe that mezcal is stronger than tequila, so they are reluctant to taste it on its own. Once they have a cocktail and decide they like the taste, we can introduce them to milder mezcals and gradually guide them to taste different varieties. It is always fun to make a new mezcal convert." ♦



MEZCALERÍA MIXTLI, BY AMY GAWLIK