



# Oaxaca Times

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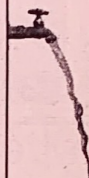
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# Mezcal: Good Drink, Bad Rap

*Mezcal is finally being treated like the class act it is, and it's making its way north of the border.*

*Report by Barbara Hansen, L. A. Times Staff Writer  
Photos by Jorge Luis Santiago*



**M**ezcal has a terrible image. It's fiery stuff, real rotgut, with a worm floating in the bottom of the bottle — at least, that's what most people think. Because mezcal sounds like mescaline, the psychedelic drug, it's surely hallucinogenic. Furthermore, it comes from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, where counterculture folk go to munch on magic mushrooms.

This, of course, is calumny. Like tequila, mezcal is a liquor distilled from the heart of the agave plant. Rather than rotgut, the best mezcals can rival a fine single malt Scotch or top-drawer Cognac. They're purer than tequila because they're made with 100% agave — tequila can be legally diluted up to 49% with other types of alcohol.

Often, there isn't even a worm.

Americans don't know mezcal because most of them have never tasted it. Distribution is limited even in Mexico. For a good selection, you have to go to Oaxaca. And to get the purest artisanal mezcals, you have to bounce over rough, unpaved roads to villages where people talk in Zapotec, not Spanish.

This is going to change, and soon. A few artisanal mezcals have begun appearing on the shelves of good liquor stores, including Wally's in West Los Angeles and Hi-Time Wine Cellars in Costa Mesa. Twenty Oaxacan producers have recently banded together to promote their brands, and their mezcals may be in Los Angeles as early as June, according to Porfirio R. Chagoya Mendez,

director general of the group and the producer of two brands, Donaji and Tehuana.

Advising the group is a savvy American businessman, Douglas French, who has lived in Oaxaca for 15 years. A mezcal producer himself, French has begun shipping his brands — Scorpion (formerly El Señor) and Caballeros — to the United States. "We'll ride in on the coattails of tequila," he says.

Compared with tequila, mezcal has an added smokiness and, often, a more pronounced agave flavor. The best mezcal should be sipped straight, like Cognac. In Oaxaca, lesser mezcal is used to make the Coctel Donaji — a refreshing mix of citrus juices with a smoky edge.

The main difference between tequila and mezcal is the method of production.

Mezcal dates back almost 500 years to the arrival of the Spaniards, who brought the art of distillation to Mexico. Tequila came later. Originally it was called "mezcal produced in the town of Tequila," which is far north of Oaxaca, in the state of Jalisco.

Today, tequila is made in factories, in high volume, and known around the world.

But mezcal is still hand-crafted and rustic. Like tequila, it starts with the hearts of the agave plant, known as pinas because they look like enormous green and white pineapples. For mezcal, the pinas are roasted in a pit dug in the ground. A wood fire heats a layer of rocks, and the pinas go on top, protected from direct contact with the rocks by a layer of agave fiber. Covered with more fiber, and then woven mats or canvas and

earth, the pinas roast for several days and are then crushed, fermented in wood tanks and distilled, usually in a copper still

This process imparts a distinctive smoky flavor. To smooth the taste, some mezcal producers use triple distillation rather than double distillation, which is the norm.

"The taste is clean — it has less bouquet, less flavor of smoke, for people who don't know mezcal," says Eric Adalid Hernandez Cortes of Mezcal Místico, a small family-owned distillery near the city of Tlaxolula, which is a center of mezcal production.

Some of the more modern Oaxacan mezcal distilleries, called palenques, employ charcoal filtration. Wood aging also sweetens and smooths the beverage. Joya gran reserva, from Ausencio Leon Ruiz y Sus Sucesores, spends 10 years in oak. Embajador produces a reserva aged in oak for seven years. French's añejos (aged mezcals) sit three years in American oak. To mellow the flavor, he combines pit-roasted agave with pinas cooked in a steam room.

While the best tequilas are produced only from agave azul, mezcal draws on five main varieties, with others allowed as long as they don't predominate. The most important variety is agave espadin. Another is tobala, a rare wild agave that grows in the mountains.

Don Amado, a brand developed by Jake Lustig of Northern California, contains one-third tobala, which is more pungent than espadin. This mezcal is produced at Real de Minas, a palenque at Santa Catarina Minas, near Ocotlan. The distilling takes place in clay pots, a technique that has almost vanished. German Bonifacio Arellanes Robles roasts the agave over wood transported by burro from distant mountains, a six-hour round trip. It takes one month to complete one batch, he says.

Some palenques crush agave by hand, some by machine, but horsepower is most common. At El Rey Zapoteco in Santiago Matatlan, tourists watch a horse pull an enormous stone wheel around a stone circle spread with roasted agave. A machine can shred agave in a few minutes. It takes the horse four to five hours.

Matatlan, located on the highway from Oaxaca city to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, takes pride in being the world capital of mezcal. A copper still is mounted over the highway at the entrance to the town, and tasting rooms line either side. Stands of spiky agave plants appear along the road. It's common these days to see truckloads of Oaxacan agave pinas headed for the state of Jalisco, where agave is in short supply.

The sun-baked town of San Baltazar Guelavila, reached by a dirt road that branches off the highway after Matatlan, is so quiet that burros



and goats wander freely over the road to a water trough in the center of town. Rustic palenques here sell their mezcals in bulk. Visitors taste them from gourd bowls, or from the caps of their containers. Empty houses abound in this town, built by emigrants now working in the United States.

Isaac Jimenez, 84, a founder of the mezcal industry in Matatlan, looks back decades, to when agave was crushed by hand, and mezcal produced drop by drop. He too laments the exodus of young workers as well as the local preference for cheaper alcoholic drinks. Jimenez, whose brands are Don Isaac and El Maestro, says tourists are the most important market now.

Bars in Oaxaca tempt tourists with two-for-one mezcal specials. One bar, La Cucaracha, offers a menu de degustacion that includes 1-ounce shots of five types of mezcal for slightly less than \$10.

Last July, the handsome Plaza del Mezcal opened in a 200-year-old building in the center of Oaxaca city. The equipment used to make mezcal is on display. Visitors can taste a variety of brands and buy not just mezcal but also chocolates flavored with the liquor and sal de gusano, a blend of salt, dried red chiles and agave worms that, along with lime wedges, traditionally accompanies shots of mezcal.

The plaza was founded by the Sociedad de Productores Agave del Sur, an ambitious new cooperative that is turning into a major producer. Formed by 303 villagers from towns in the vicinity of San Luis Amatlan, the cooperative is expected to have 3.5 million liters of mezcal on hand by year's end. Its aggressive promotional plans include shipping premixed mezcal cocktails to Malaysia. These were developed by Barbara Joy Logan, a Canadian who coordinates international sales.

The cooperative's brands, Don Luis and Armados, are organically produced and fermented naturally, without charcoal filtration. Logan is designing labels made of recycled bagazo, the residue of processed agave, for a 4-year-old reserva that is still in barrels.

The labels for Matateco mezcal were designed by Francisco Toledo, the artist who last fall spearheaded a protest against the opening of a McDonald's on Oaxaca's town square.

These are pure mezcals. Many companies also produce cremas, which are liqueur-like flavored mezcals. The first of these, El Mayordomo's orange-flavored crema, was introduced in 1950. Another type of mezcal is called pechuga (breast), because it was traditionally flavored with a turkey or chicken breast suspended in the still. A few producers still do this, but most pechugas today are flavored with fresh and dried fruits.

Adding worms started as a gimmick more than 50 years ago; then

Oaxacans learned to like the subtle flavor they imparted. Douglas French places a scorpion in his Scorpion mezcal. "Worms are for wimps," he says with a laugh.

Adulteration by adding other types of alcohol does occur. Some suspect the culprits are the middlemen who collect bulk mezcals for the bottling plants or the bottling plants themselves, eager for higher profits.

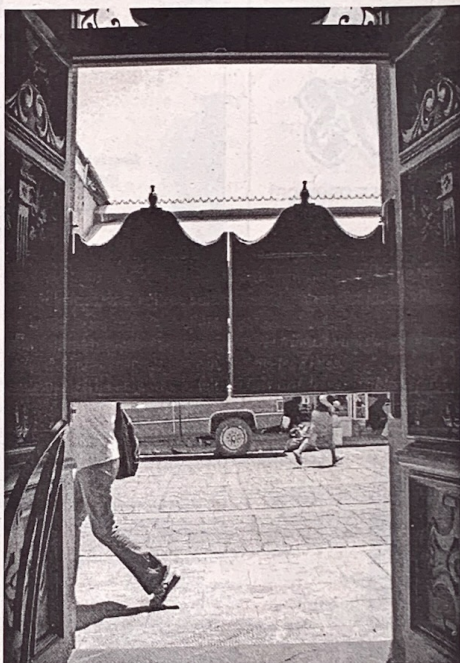
"There are no chemical analyses that can tell this," says French. "The only way to tell is on the tongue." Diluted or poorly made mezcal is fiery. But a good mezcal goes down smoothly, without burning.

Oaxacans demand pure mezcal for an

additional reason. "If you drink pure agave, you will never suffer from a cruda," or hang-over, says Roman Garcia Robles, founder and president of the Agave del Sur cooperative. "It doesn't matter how much you drink. You will still feel fine the next day."

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## Coctel Donaji

Total time: 10 minutes

Servings: 2

- 1 large lime, cut in half
- 1 tablespoon sal de gusano (or 1 tablespoon coarse salt mixed with 1/8 teaspoon red chile powder)
- 3/4 cup orange juice
- 3 ounces mezcal
- 2 teaspoons grenadine, or more to taste
- 2 small orange wedges

1. Use tall flutes, or broad-bowled, stemmed cocktail glasses or a margarita glass. Moisten the edge of 2 cocktail glasses with a lime half, then dip each glass in the chile salt to thinly coat the rims. Add 2 or 3 ice cubes to each glass, if desired.
2. Squeeze the juice from the lime halves. Mix about 1 tablespoon lime juice with the orange juice and mezcal. Divide between the 2 glasses. Float a little grenadine on top, place an orange wedge on each rim and serve.

