

INFO ON MEZCAL



Forget those bottles with the worm. Great mezcal is a world-class spirit. Some of the best mezcals come from villages in the middle of nowhere.

(SEE FLIP SIDE FOR PRODUCTION INFO)

MEZCAL is distilled from roasted, pulped, fermented agave plants.

The word MEZCAL comes from *mexcalmetl*, Nahuatl for agave. Indigenous cultures have been producing a beer-like beverage (*pulque*, from the indigenous word *octli*), made by fermenting agave juice, for at least a couple of millenia. The best guess is that mezcal was created from something like *pulque* after the Spanish introduced distillation in the 1500s. Mezcal has been produced for more than 400 years. It has historically been a peasant drink, distilled by local producers, and of widely varying quality.



Agave espadin

TEQUILA is a mezcal.



Agave *piñas* being fed by conveyor belt into an industrial steam autoclave

Tequila is distilled from the blue agave in a government-denominated area around the town of Tequila in Jalisco state. Due to the surging popularity of tequila (marked by events such as Fortune Brands' purchase of El Tesoro), almost all exported tequila is now produced as least partially by industrial methods: use of ovens instead of fire-pits or steam-cooking in (often huge) autoclaves, mechanical presses/shredders, big metal fermentation tanks using introduced yeasts, large-volume or non-copper stills. Unlike mezcal, tequila may be bulk-exported for bottling in other countries, and may contain up to 49% non-agave spirits (usually from corn or sugar). It is difficult to trust the label statements on many of the commercial tequilas.

ARTISAN MEZCAL is made 100% from agave.*

Apart from a couple of high-volume industrial producers, mezcal remains a local craft spirit, frequently produced in ways that defy the passage of time.

“Fine mezcal, made naturally from 100% agave, is probably the purest, most traditional spirit available on planet earth. Mezcal smells like history. It tastes like wonder and superstition. It finishes with ancestral connections to the past and mystical visions of the future.” – Lance Cutler

There is an informative article by Ian Chadwick at www.ianchadwick.com/tequila/mezcal.html. The website of Ron Cooper of del Maguey has tons of info: www.mezcal.com.



Destileria Los Danzantes

* the Mexican NORMA regulations permit a mezcal *mixto* containing up to 20% non-agave sugars. However, this is not what mezcal producers want, and they have petitioned to have the NORMA regs altered to 100% agave. Like all importers who really care, Craft Distillers brings in mezcals that are 100% agave.

Artisan distillation of mezcal

Here's what we believe in: spirits distilled by hand using traditional methods on small stills, spirits based on first-rate raw materials. It's possible to make pretty good spirits in other ways, but the authenticity and genuine individuality of spirits made by a dedicated distiller using craft methods make these spirits worth seeking out. We have no respect for producers who try to fool you into thinking their spirits are authentic when they're not, folks who put "100% agave" on the label but add sugar and/or glycerine and/or citric acid, or folks who talk about their traditional methods but use a steam autoclave to prepare their agaves.

Here's a brief description of craft mezcal production.

The agave (the "maguey") takes many years to mature. Young agaves make mezcal that tastes thin and green (if you look for it, this is obvious in some well-known tequilas). Mature agaves are some 10-14 years old, their flavors deep and complex. At harvest, the leaves - the spiny parts of the plant - are trimmed away, leaving the heart, or "*piña*." A mature *piña* can weigh 160 lbs. Small-village *mezcaleros* still transport the *piñas* on burros.

ROASTING. Roasting converts the agave's starches (carbohydrates) to fructose (sugar), which can be fermented into alcohol for distillation. Most commercial tequilas and cheap mezcals use steam autoclaves, making the flavors and aromas bland. An artisan *mezcalero* works with a *palenque*, or fire-pit. In the bottom of the pit (earth or stone), he builds a hardwood fire. The *piñas* are cut into quarters or eighths with a hand-axe. When the fire is going well, the agave segments are carefully mounded on top of the fire and then covered, first with a layer of wet canvas, then with a layer of earth & sand. The roasting takes about 3 days. Flavor from the fire-wood means that these slow-roasted mezcals taste smokey, especially when the fire-wood is mesquite.



MILLING. Roasting softens the agave, so it can be milled. The artisan distillers we work with use horse-powered stone mills. Milling breaks down the agave meats and fibers and releases the liquids.

FERMENTATION. The milled solids and juices are moved to an open fermentation tank, usually wood (Don Amado in San Juan Bautista Xayacatlán uses clay pots). Fermentation is yeast converting the sugars in the roasted agave to alcohol. Artisan producers use native yeasts, and it usually takes a while, like up to two weeks. You can tell the yeasts are working away by the bubbles rising to the surface.



DISTILLATION. At this point, tequila producers, who distill only the liquids, discard the solids. Artisan mezcal distillers include the solids in the distillation, which in good hands means a richer and more complex product. They distill twice (like cognac producers) in small pot stills. Most of the stills are copper, but some producers use stills made of clay, which produces a softer mezcal. The stills are small; each slow distillation takes about two hours. Working through a *palenque*'s worth of agaves at most of these tiny distilleries takes a month, yielding some 6-700 bottles.