Mezcal's Old Soul

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by Logan Ward - Mexico - June/July 2014

Tequila's country cousin may be the new hip spirit these days. But in the dusty Mexican landscape outside Oaxaca, it's a tradition with very deep roots

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?There?s a trick to drinking mezcal,? Silvia Philion Muñoz tells us in thickly accented English as she fills three short glasses from a bottle of clear liquid. The red-haired, thirty-something Mexican perches on a stool behind a dimly lit bar at Mezcaloteca, the mezcal tasting room in Oaxaca she co-owns with her business partner, Marco Ochoa. Because of mezcal?s high alcohol content (usually 45 percent and up), she says, we should rinse our mouths with the first sip. ?The rinse is going to be strong, all about the alcohol. With the second sip, the complex flavors of the maguey will start to dance on your tongue.?

I sip and swish, feel an electrical buzzing zap my mouth. Sure enough, the next taste washes over my tongue more smoothly, revealing hints of wood smoke, salt, honey, and anise. My drink of choice has long been two fingers of bourbon in a tumbler. At 51 percent alcohol, this mezcal (in Mexico, conventionally spelled with a *z*) is stronger than my favorite whiskeys. But it goes down easy, with a pleasant effervescent burn. Though young and unoaked, it swirls with complexity. That, Silvia says, is the magic of the maguey.

Maguey (pronounced mah-*gay*) is the local word for agave, the genus of spiky green succulents from which mezcal and tequila?a tightly circumscribed and industrialized variety of mezcal?are made. Although there are about two hundred species of agave, by official decree since 1978 tequila can originate only from *Agave tequilana Weber*, or blue agave. In Oaxaca State alone, *mezcaleros* use some twenty-five agave varietals. More on that in a moment. What really blew this whiskey lover?s mind is how long makers must wait to harvest the bulbous, sugar-storing agave heart?about seven years on average, with the most prized mezcal magueys tapping minerals and water from Mexico?s arid soil for a quarter century or more. Every other liquor feedstock?corn, barley, rye, potatoes, apples, sugarcane, grapes?produces new harvests annually. They age later, usually in wooden barrels. Mezcal ages up front, within the maguey plant itself, meaning even the youngest mezcal can have an old soul.

?For whiskey, barrel aging is good,? Silvia says. ?But wood kills the flavors of the maguey.?

Maguey may distinguish mezcal from other spirits, but capturing the maguey?s essence requires the alchemical talents of a *maestro mezcalero*. That?s why I?m here?to meet the makers of the Western Hemisphere?s oldest distilled spirit. Like moonshine, backyard eggs, and other rustic consumables, mezcal suffered an image problem during the twentieth century. The more refined tequila, on the other hand, took off, with annual exports climbing nearly 270 percent between 1995 and 2013. Mezcal tried to keep up, but the stuff mass-produced for export tastes like Everclear and cigarette butts and comes bottled with a worm, a meaningless marketing ploy.

Lately, thanks to a new appreciation for small-batch, high-quality spirits and those who make them, a great

mezcal awakening is under way. U.S. imports are way up, and they include dozens of new artisanal brands. Mezcal-centric bars have opened in places like Atlanta (Escorpión, La Urbana), Houston (the Pastry War), and New York (Mayahuel and others). ?The classic cocktail scene has embraced mezcal, which is telling,? says Ron Cooper, an American who imported the first maestro-made mezcal, his Del Maguey brand, in 1995. Mixologists love it for its nuanced character and diversity of flavors. Like moonshine, it has deep connections to its rural provenance. ?Mezcal tastes like the place it was made,? says Houston mixologist Alba Huerta, co-owner of the Pastry War. The more you know about mezcal, she says, the more you love it.

Enter Mezcaloteca (where Huerta got religion during a 2012 visit). Turns out even most Mexicans misunderstand mezcal. In 2010, Marco and Silvia started their bottling company and appointment-only tasting room to educate people while supporting rural Mexico?s dying breed of small-batch mezcaleros. The hushed space looks like a bar but feels like a library; rather than books, wax-sealed bottles, each bearing the same old-fashioned text-heavy label, line the wooden shelves.

Only the labels are *not* the same. Between sips, my tongue glowing with menthol, I compare labels from two opened bottles atop the bar. Each one lists eighteen distinguishing characteristics, including maguey variety, method of roasting, type of still, and the maker, the maestro mezcalero. Trying to decipher the details makes my head spin (that may be the mezcal, but Silvia swears the pure, additive-free spirit is a clear-headed, happy buzz that leaves no hangover). I hold up a bottle made from a maguey called *tobalá*, which grows wild on remote mountain slopes.

?Who is Felipe Cortés?? I ask, trying to get a handle on this. What?s his operation like? And how did his mezcal find its way into this glass bottle?

?Ah!? says Silvia, brightening. ?You?re going to visit Don Felipe tomorrow. He is Marco?s great-uncle.?

The next day, traveling south through the Valley of Oaxaca, we?re racing between speed bumps when Marco slams the brakes and?*blam!*?nails one of the asphalt humps nearly full on. My head tags the Jeep Cherokee?s felt ceiling, and we bottom out, the metal undercarriage thunking and scraping underfoot.

?Sorry! Sorry!? says Marco, cringing. ?That?s a new one.?

Marco has the route memorized, down to the speed bumps marking every sleepy pueblo, but my mezcal interrogation is distracting him. I?m riding shotgun; in the back are the rustling leaves of four potted citrus-tree whips bound for Marco?s ranch. The hilly, dusty terrain streaming past our windows seems ideal for agave, but I see none. When I ask why, Marco, a short, thirty-five-year-old, thick-built man with the black cropped hair, stylish beard, and black Ray-Bans of an auteur, shakes his head. ?*Los coyotes*,? he says. Smugglers.

Wild agave once dotted the countryside, he explains, but lately crews from tequila-producing Jalisco State have been buying every agave heart, or *piña*, they can get their hands on, hauling away trailer trucks loaded with fifteen or twenty tons each. They pay double what local mezcaleros can afford, driving up prices and giving landowners incentive to strip the land of agaves. When locals protest to the authorities?since tequila can only legally be made from blue agave?the buyers claim the agaves are for syrup production. As if on cue, we spy a tall slat trailer on the highway shoulder nudged against a pickup truck off-loading agave hearts.

?Can we stop and talk to them?? I ask.

?That?s not a good idea,? Marco says. After ten or fifteen more miles, we stop to inspect a pile of agave hearts waiting to be picked up. A few are bigger than beer kegs and weigh hundreds of pounds.

The blue agave requirement for tequila implies that blue agave is the best. It?s not, but it is consistent. Over the decades, blue agave has been wrangled into a monoculture, cloned again and again to meet global

demand. The blue agave hearts that make tequila are processed with chlorinated water in industrial pressure cookers and then distilled in giant stainless-steel stills. ?There?s no maestro involved,? Silvia told me. ?There?s only machine number seven.? Even top tequilas bearing the 100 percent agave label are allowed to contain caramel coloring, glycerin, and chemically extracted oak flavoring. The majority of tequila, however, falls under the ?*mixto*? category, which can be made with up to 49 percent alternative sugars, such as cane sugar or even high-fructose corn syrup. Hello, hangover. Yes, there are fine tequilas, but generally speaking, tequila is closer to Wonder Bread, while mezcal is more like a rustic sourdough loaf. Tequila owes much of its success to marketing.

SEE MORE:Photos from this story [1]

Two hours after leaving the city of Oaxaca, we turn onto a dirt road and wind past cacti, parched arroyos, and long spiky rows of cultivated agave before reaching Marco?s modest family ranch. A pair of low-slung blue-and-white bunkhouses flank a chalky, packed-earth courtyard dotted with shade trees and colorful bougainvilleas. The wind-tossed needles of an *ocote* tree (Montezuma pine) fill the yard with the archetypal sound of lonesome. A newer, stucco-covered bottling building stands nearby. The ranch is named Los Nahuales, from a Nahuatl word for a shaman who shape-shifts into his spirit animal?fitting, considering that five years ago Marco found his own spirit animal here after dropping out of Mexico City?s rat race. He was working as an advertising copywriter. His last project was for Red Bull. ?The work,? he says, ?wasn?t feeding my passion.?

Marco was raised in Mexico City, but his family often visited his mother?s family here in the Oaxacan countryside, always returning to the capital spiritually replenished and loaded down with moles, *tlayudas* (crunchy tortillas smothered in shredded pork, beans, lettuce, and other goodies), *tasajo* (Oaxacan beef jerky), stacks of homemade tortillas, and plastic jerricans sloshing with mezcal. Mezcal has been part of Marco?s life since his mother rubbed it on his teething infant gums. As a boy, he helped his great-grandfather make it, the old man busting hump for weeks handling tons of maguey hearts. The maestro?s standards were immutable and as crystal clear as the distillates that dribbled from his still: Pure and simple ingredients, patience, and age-old technique produced a mezcal that was ?*legítimo*.? Authentic. Proud mezcaleros still use the word, clenching their fists when they say it: ?*legítimo!*?

By the mid-2000s, with Mexico City?s trendy bars and restaurants awash in high-end tequilas, mezcal became the Next New Thing. Marco remembers ordering an insanely expensive glass of it, taking a sip, and thinking, ?That?s not *legítimo*.? His spirit animal reared its head. He designed a label on his computer, pumped a few dozen copies out of the agency?s ink-jet printer, and slapped them on glass bottles with the modest goal of introducing his friends to authentic mezcal. For that, he drove to Miahuatlán and bought fifty liters from his great-uncle Felipe.

?Those bottles sold like *that!*? he says, snapping his fingers. The next year, he sold 400 liters. The numbers kept climbing, and in 2009 he quit his job. He and Silvia moved to the ranch for a year to remodel and build the bottling facility. After that they moved into Oaxaca and opened Mezcaloteca. They sell roughly 5,000 liters per year through the tasting room and by mail order throughout Mexico for 300 to 1,500 pesos ($23 to $115) per liter. They have no sales force. The handful of high-end bars and restaurants that serve their bottles pay retail. When one buyer scoffed that he could buy two bottles of Absolut for the price of one bottle of Marco?s mezcal, Marco told him, ?Then buy the Absolut.? He knows how much work goes into every bottle. Good mezcal is worth it.

?Marco?s secret,? says Alba Huerta, ?is he always puts people who make the spirits first.?

Felipe Cortés climbs a ladder, leans over the edge of a head-high cedar-stave barrel (it looks like a Marin

County hot tub, circa 1974), and dips a calabash into a fibery, bubbling, tea-colored soup. The bronze-skinned sixty-five-year-old has ivory-colored sideburns and mustache, lives in a well-seasoned cowboy hat, and carries himself with the pot-bellied swagger of Robert Duvall.

?*Está viva!*? he says, raising the fermenting liquid. It?s alive!

Nearby, two other barrels bubble and murmur, filling the air with the sour, morning-after smell of a beer bar. A fourth, no longer bubbling, might be ready for distillation. Felipe mounts another ladder and shoves his arm deep into the muck to feel for warmth. ?*No está lista*,? he says, shaking his head. Not yet.

Don Felipe began making mezcal at age twelve with his father, who himself learned from his father. His open-air *palenque*?four fermentation barrels, two copper stills encased in brick above wood-burning ovens, and a medieval-looking ox-drawn millstone for mashing roasted agave?appears to have changed little over the decades. Felipe leads us through scrub brush to a pair of round roasting pits, each nearly ten feet across. One is empty and ringed by dirt and scorched limestone boulders.?The other is capped by a mound of dirt, warm to the touch, with a small cross stuck in the top for good luck. Inside, magueys slow-roast over rocks and hot coals. After a week, the smoky, caramel-colored piñas are unearthed and the mashing, fermenting, and distilling begin. It?s backbreaking work. Felipe?s twenty-two-year-old son, Ageo, the old man?s apprentice since he was eleven, says the whole process takes longer than a month. In a good year, they?ll produce 6,000 liters, selling some through Mezcaloteca and the rest locally in plastic jugs and recycled water bottles.

?That?s a lot of work,? I say in Spanish.

?Some people use chemicals to speed up fermentation,? Ageo says. Others drop ammonium sulfate tablets into their mezcal to enhance the appearance of the ?pearls,? or bubbles, that maestros look for in a quality mezcal.

?Are you ever tempted to take shortcuts?? I ask.

?No,? he says, vigorously shaking his head. ?Our mezcal is totally natural. Pure. It takes a long time to make, but the results are worth it.?

That afternoon, relaxing in the shade of the family?s porch, I get to judge for myself. Ageo lugs a glass carboy full of *tepeztate* mezcal. We sip from palm-size calabashes as father and son beam proudly. I rinse, as I was taught to do, and take a second sip, relishing the salty-minty tingle and the peacefulness of the experience. A wild variety that clings to rocky cliffs and often requires a quarter century to mature, tepeztate is one of Oaxaca?s most prized magueys. Don Felipe sells the mezcal from here for 200 pesos per liter, about $16, but it can sell in Oaxaca?s bars for that much per glass.

The next day, we drive to a neighbor?s palenque, where sixty-nine-year-old maestro mezcalero Ramón Cruz Garcia scoops mash from a fermentation barrel with his hands and slops it into five-gallon buckets. Hauling the buckets one by one, Ramón?s sons, Joaquin and Rolando, who are in their thirties, fill a pair of copper stills, seal their caps with cloth strips soaked in mud and stringy agave pulp, called *bagazo*, and light wood fires beneath each. Long copper pipes slant down from each still cap to a central basin, where they coil through cool water to a spout below. After a couple of hours, alcohol steams up, condenses in the coils, and drips from the spouts into plastic jerricans. After completing this first distillation, the men will distill it again for an even more pure and high-alcohol spirit.

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Though traditional, Ramón?s palenque is slightly more refined than Don Felipe?s, thanks to a $50,000 grant from the Mexican government that paid for the large metal-roofed building, automated mashing machine, and three large stainless-steel storage tanks. As mezcal fever spreads, the government is getting more involved. In 1997, it established a regulatory board, COMERCAM, modeling it after the one started for tequila in 1978, making Marco and others worried about the tequila-zation of mezcal. A few decades ago, the government introduced a cloneable, sugar-loaded agave call *espadin*. Ramón keeps a net-covered tabletop nursery covered with hundreds of espadin seedlings, like sage-colored baby octopuses. When they?re the size of houseplants, he transplants them in long dusty rows in a nearby field. Espadin is the most common mezcal agave, and it makes an impressive spirit, but traditional mezcaleros still rely on wild agaves for roughly half of their production. We visit other palenques and hear the same lament?not enough magueys. The *coyotes* from Jalisco have cornered the market.

Even so, Marco feels confident the tradition will survive. Our last visit, to a palenque featuring clay stills, offers a glimpse of hope that it will. One common theory holds that Mexico?s indigenous groups fermented an agave nectar beer called pulque before the Spanish arrived but that mezcal only came about when the Europeans introduced distillation. If that?s true, both metal and clay stills have been in use for more than four hundred years. When we arrive at Felix Angeles?s palenque, he and his skinny fifteen-year-old son, Ramiro, have just lit three fires beneath double-stacked clay pots with stubby stove pipes angling out behind a bamboo wall. The clay pots are small and must be replaced when they break, and all the parts are handmade, including pipes made from reeds, so I ask Felix why he doesn?t just use a copper still, which would last for years.

?Because clay is better,? he says with a crooked smile.

?Why??

?The taste. It?s more pure and clean,? he explains. ?People come here because they don?t like the taste of copper.? They pay more for clay-pot mezcal. If most mezcal is a kind of slow food, then clay-pot mezcal is especially, and deliciously, unhurried. Felix sometimes feeds his stills day and night for a week straight, dozing next to them on a rocky ledge.

By now, I understand the significance of Mezcaloteca?s labels, with their long list of characteristics. Every choice?maguey variety, oven type, mashing method, water source, still material?changes a mezcal?s nuanced flavor. This is terroir taken to the nth degree. The labels tell the spirit?s story, Marco says. ?If you don?t list those details on your bottle, you either don?t have anything to say or you have something to hide.?

The next day, I?m homesick for the palenques even before I leave Mexico. At the airport, I pop into a gleaming duty-free shop, curious to learn what mezcal brands they carry. A salesman shows me a shelf with a dozen varieties, priced from $13 to $70 per liter. The bottle he recommends comes with a worm.

?What?s the most traditional mezcal you have?? I ask.

He pours a sample of El Señorio Reposado, 38 percent alcohol, into a plastic cup. It tastes foul, like vanillin and aspartame.

?What?s the difference between mezcal and tequila?? I ask, baiting him.

?They?re made in different regions,? he says. ?*Nada más*.?

?What about the types of agaves? Any difference??

?It?s all the same plant,? he says. ?Do you want to buy the bottle??

?No, thanks,? I say and head for my gate. Inside my checked bag, bound in bubble wrap and duct tape, are three liters, straight from the maestros. I clench my fist and whisper, ?*Legítimo!*?

Mezcal Legitimo

Can't make it to Oaxaca? These brands are a good bet stateside

Tracking down artisanal mezcals north of the border can be as much of a treasure hunt as exploring the palenques of Oaxaca. New small-batch imports are turning up all the time, but here are a few recommendations to get you started.

Del Maguey:
Chichicapa [2]

Ron Cooper was the first to begin importing "single village" mezcals under his Del Maguey brand. "They're all good but all so different," says Washington, D.C., bar owner and writer Derek Brown, whose joints include Southern Efficiency and Eat the Rich. "Chichicapa has a nice, light smoke and citrus. It's a beautiful introduction to mezcal and one that I keep coming back to."

Ilegal Mezcal:
Reposado or Añejo [3]

"Purists stick to unaged mezcal, but it's great aged as well, especially as a replacement in old-fashioneds," Brown says. "Try Ilegal's Reposado [four months] or Añejo [thirteen months] for caramelized and confectionery notes."

Mezcal Vago:
Arroqueño en Barro [4]

"Every week we find new products made from a different agave we'd never tasted before," says Alba Huerta, partner with Bobby Heugel at Houston's the Pastry War. Mezcal Vago imports a number of excellent varieties, including one of Huerta's current favorites, Arroqueño en Barro. Made by Salomón Rey Rodriguez, whose entire family helps him hand-grind roasted arroqueño maguey hearts, it's distilled in clay pots and has notes of pine and earth.

?Produced by Blair Richardson

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