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## Everything old is new again

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Mezcal emerges from tequila's mass-marketed shadow into its own connoisseur-worthy spotlight

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Carrier pigeons, VHS, asbestos—sometimes the old way of doing things is better left in the history books. But in the case of mezcal, tequila's smokier, lesser-known cousin, history is definitely worth a second look.

Tequila debuted in the U.S. in the 1950s, during a post-war dip in whiskey production. Between the massive demand for liquor and the American market's unfamiliarity with the spirit, importers could get away with pretty much anything—and they did. Low-quality, mass-produced tequila flooded the market. Marketing gimmicks like the lime-and-salt ritual cemented themselves in the American consumer's psyche. In short order, tequila acquired a reputation as the swill of choice for binge-drinking coeds on spring break.

But if tequila has gotten a bad rap, mezcal's lot is even worse. It is more strongly flavored than tequila, so consumers sometimes (mistakenly) think of it as a less "pure" spirit. Mezcal was long considered a peasant's drink, even in Mexico. And then there's that business about the worm.

When Ron Cooper visited Oaxaca in 1990, he didn't pay attention to any of that. In each tiny village, he tasted small-batch mezcals made by Zapotec farmers. He was entranced by their beguiling smoky complexity. And as an artist himself, he reveled in the care and tradition that went into creating each one.

Mezcal was virtually unknown in the U.S. at the time—and what little Cooper could find back home left him unimpressed. He responded by founding Del Maguey Single Village Mezcals in 1995. "The original goal was to supply myself and my friends with good mezcal," he says. "The business part still isn't the main goal. Del Maguey was, and is, about supporting the tradition and the culture of mezcal." Today, Del Maguey imports seven single-village varieties made by individual family producers.

Despite its relative novelty in the U.S., mezcal has hundreds of years of history behind it. The spirit has been made the same way in Mexico since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Spanish conquistadors began experimenting with ways to distill the fermented agave beverage *pulque* that was enjoyed by their Aztec conquests. Mezcaleros—mezcal makers—harvest the core, or pina, of the agave plant and roast them in underground pits to create mezcal's bewitching smoky profile. The juice from these roasted cores is then fermented and distilled in batches so small that they rarely even see the inside of the bottle; almost all mezcal is consumed in the village where it is made.

When Del Maguey mezcal finally began working its way into the American market, it had all the makings of a cult classic: limited availability, a Scotch-like smoky flavor that can be an acquired taste, and a slight air of danger and mystery. So why hasn't mezcal gone the same mass-market route as tequila? The production process provides one natural limit. Tequila is made by steaming the agave pinas in ovens rather than roasting—a process that more easily lends itself to large-scale factory production.

The careful stewardship of mezcal lovers like Ron Cooper has also served to keep mezcal out of the mainstream. Rather than ramping up production of each Del Maguey varietal as sales grow, Cooper expands his business by adding new villages to his brand's portfolio.

The characteristic smoky flavor of mezcal—a result of roasting the agave pinas rather than steaming them—may limit mezcal's broad market appeal as well. Tequila is typically subjected to

one more round of distillation than mezcal, which brings it closer to the neutral flavor profile American consumers know best. “Mezcal is definitely an acquired taste,” says Phil Ward, co-owner of Mayahuel, a tequila-focused bar and restaurant in New York. “But I always say that an acquired taste is a just reward for an effort put forth.”

Other mezcal aficionados agree: like developing a taste for peaty scotch, learning to appreciate top-quality mezcal can take a bit of time. “When Guillermo and I started [our own mezcal label] Los Amantes eight years ago, we knew that people would eventually understand and appreciate it,” says Ignacio Carballido, co-owner of Casa Mezcal in New York. “We want it to become a drink that people enjoy like whiskey, cognac, armagnac, or bourbon.”

Ready to give mezcal a shot (so to speak)? Trust yourself to the hands of a skilled bartender like Ward or Carballido. Ward estimates that during his time behind the Mayahuel bar, he’s introduced about 1,000 people to mezcal for the first time, often as a component in a fruit-infused cocktail like the Cinnstation (mezcal with mulled apple cider, lemon, cinnamon, and bitters).

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