



FOOD & WINE

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BOTTLE SERVICE, TEN GREAT MEZCAL TO SEEK OUT

By: Ray Isle

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BOZAL ENSAMBLE

Ensamble mezcals are a traditional style in which different varieties of agave are roasted and distilled together. Bozal uses cultivated espadín plus wild barril and mexicano agaves; its emphatically smoky up front, but herbaceous green pepper, pine, and mint notes linger as you sip it.

BOZAL / ENSAMBLE MEZCAL

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WHY WE LOVE MEZCAL

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BOTTLE SERVICE

COCKTAIL HOUR

A Mexican Original With its roots in culture and craftsmanship, mezcal is one of the most complex and varied spirits in the world.

By Ray Isle

At Atla in New York City, beverage director Yana Volfoen makes this super-refreshing Watermelon-Cucumber Cooler using Yola Mezcal (recipe p. 59).





An agave plant is shorn of its sword-like leaves by machete, as mezcalero Arturo Martínez Lopez demonstrates. Later, he tests the alcohol level of newly made mezcal by checking the perlas (bubbles)—larger bubbles appear when it's over 45% alcohol.



IN THE BEGINNING was the agave. With most Mexican spirits—mezcal, tequila, and their less-well-known cousins comiteco, bacanora, and raicilla, at least—it all comes down to one spiky-leaved, tough-as-nails succulent plant that's been harvested and turned into alcoholic beverages (as well as rope, paper, food, and many other things) since the time of the Aztecs. Known as maguey in Mexico, agave is the source of one of the few liquors that could be considered truly of the Americas: Native to North America, parts of South America, and the Caribbean, the agave was here long before national borders existed.

Mezcal, the definitive agave distillate (tequila is technically a type of mezcal) is having its moment in the U.S. But its origins unquestionably lie with the indigenous peoples of southern Mexico. Even the word *mezcal* derives from the Nahuatl *mexcalli*, which basically means “cooked agave.” But even in Mexico, the embrace of mezcal outside of its origin states came slowly. Gonzalo Goût, the 33-year-old co-owner and beverage director

of mezcal destination Ticuchi in Mexico City, says, “For my grandmother, drinking tequila was something ranchers did. Then my mother and father’s generation started drinking tequila before a meal. And my generation moved to mezcal.” Goût offers between 150 to 200 mezcals on his list every day. As to what his grandmother would have thought of that, he says, “She probably would have said, ‘Wow, mezcal is so popular that you’re opening a whole bar for it?’” He laughs and adds, “Then she would have said, ‘Definitely too strong for me. I don’t get why you drink this!’”

As to what’s fueled mezcal’s recent rise in high-end bars around the world, Yana Volfson, the beverage director for chef Enrique Olvera’s restaurants in the U.S. (Cosme and Atla in New York City, Elio in Las Vegas, and the yet-to-be-opened Damian in Los Angeles), says, “I think mezcal is the story of the little engine that could. Today you have expensive bottles of mezcal in Paris, in Milan, in Tokyo and New York, yet it really remains a spirit of the villages and pueblos.” She cites a number of

ELEVEN TOP MEZCAL DESTINATIONS

SAN FRANCISCO MOSTO

San Francisco is chock full of good mezcal bars, but Mosto tops the list with its library of 300 different mezcals, thanks to the encyclopedic work of Mike Barrow, who started the bar program in 2010. (mostobar.com)

OAXACA, MEXICO MEZCALOTECA

Tasting room? Bar? Either way, this tiny, wooden-shelved spot in Oaxaca City has been a premier destination for learning everything there is to know about artisanal mezcals—and drinking them—since 2010. (mezcaloteca.com)

NEW ORLEANS ESPIRITU

Co-owner and Master Mezcalier Jason Mitzen’s list of 90-plus mezcals is bolstered by weekly Mezcal Society tastings, not to mention chef and co-owner Nanyo Dominguez Cervantes’ excellent cooking. (espiritunola.com)

LAS VEGAS MAMA RABBIT

Over 170 mezcals, displayed in a cool, visual list that denotes each distillery’s altitude and location using transparent maps, draw people to this high-design shrine to all things agave at the Park MGM. (drinkmamarabbitlv.com)

NEW YORK CITY ATLA AND COSME

Chef Daniela Soto-Innes’ sublime cooking and beverage director Yana Volfson’s expansive mezcal lists—and her terrific cocktails—make these two restaurants must-visits for mezcal fans. (atlanyc.com, cosmenyc.com)

reasons for mezcal's explosive growth in popularity around the world: "It sort of hugs the green movement of natural wine and this moment in wine and in food of having a deep appreciation of things that really come from small farms." That sentiment is echoed by Miguel F. Lancha of Washington, D.C.'s Think Food Group: "It's the social idea of supporting local producers who aren't giant corporations; there've been voices raised in favor of that for a while now." And Graciela Ángeles Carreño, who oversees Mezcal Real Minero in Santa Catarina Minas, Mexico, and whose family has been making mezcal for generations, adds, "Mezcal's particular aromas and flavors—which are both expected and a surprise—are the engine that motivates many people to continue getting to know and discover it. Mezcal is like inexhaustible art: It always surprises you and reinvents itself. When you drink it, it shows you the time, the passion, the dedication, the history of those who preserve this tradition."

And yet for many U.S. drinkers—even tequila lovers—mezcal remains somewhat mysterious. It's a distillate of agave, yes, but agave is a genus—there are hundreds of agave species, many of them not used for mezcal. Both Goût and Volfson suggest that it can be helpful to think about parallels to wine: In some sense, agave is to mezcal as grapes are to wine. Just as different grape varieties contribute different characteristics to wine, different species of agave contribute different flavors and aromas to mezcal. Of course, the analogy only holds so far. Wine is a fermented beverage and mezcal is a distilled spirit, for one thing. Also, Goût says, "Wine is very structured and has a structured language to it. Mezcal doesn't have that. I've seen agave species called Ramirez just because they're on Mr. Ramirez's property."

Making mezcal is, in essence, a straightforward process. Agave hearts, or *piñas*, which weigh between 80 and 200 pounds, are layered in a stone-lined pit or in an oven (*horno*) and roasted. Cooking converts the agave's starches into sugars, imparts the smokiness that mezcal is known for, and cooks and softens the *piña* enough that its juices can be extracted. It's a laborious process, done either by smashing the cooked *piñas* with wooden mallets or axes or else by crushing them under a *tahona* (a large stone wheel). Yola Jimenez of Yola Mezcal says, "Mezcal is still rural and handcrafted. People come to our *palenque* [a mezcal distillery] and are just shocked. It's a 300-year-old process, the same now as it was when it started."

"Mezcal is still rural and handcrafted. It's a 300-year-old process, the same now as it was when it started." —YOLA JIMENEZ

After the juice is extracted from the roasted *piñas*, it's fermented and distilled, typically in copper pot stills, and then bottled. But, Ángeles Carreño says, "In the case of traditional mezcal, the process is a very important factor in the flavor—for example, clay pot still or copper still, spring water versus well water, wild yeast versus controlled yeast strains, fermentation times—as is the style of the maestro *palenquero*. All of that differentiates one mezcal from a specific region, type of maguey, maestro *palenquero*, and production house from another." In the end, good mezcal isn't simple at all. In truth, it's one of the most complex and varied spirits in the world.

And, unlike other spirits, which are distillations of grains or fruits, mezcal is made from a green plant. Regarding the flavors and aromas of artisanal mezcal, Volfson says: "Think about what stems of tulips smell like when they're snapped fresh. Or what freshly picked spinach tastes like. Or the skins of cucumbers. Or maybe more culturally relevant flavors like grilled cactus. It's smoky at first because cooked agave is caramelized, but when you start to learn about mezcal, you move beyond that first sip." The species of agave itself also helps define flavor. Ángeles Carreño explains, "Each contributes a unique aroma and flavor to a mezcal. Broadly, I classify mezcals as being floral, herbal, woody, fruity, or spicy. For example, a *largo* would be in the herbal range while an *arroqueño* would be in the floral range. Even when produced under the same process, in the same *palenque*, and by the same maestro *palenquero*, the plant has a personality that imprints on each mezcal." Add to all that the fact that artisanal mezcal comes from small, family-owned *palenques*—which, as Yola Jimenez

points out, may produce as little as three or four hundred bottles a month—and that there are hundreds of those distilleries scattered throughout Oaxaca (and, to a lesser extent, the states of Durango, Guanajuato, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, Michoacán, and Puebla as well), and that each maestro *mezcalero* at each *palenque* has their own way of doing things ... well, the range of variables affecting the character of an individual mezcal starts to seem infinite. As Gonzalo Goût says, laughing, "Someone once told me, with mezcal, if you come to Oaxaca and you don't leave more confused than when you arrived, you're doing something wrong."

But that, of course, doesn't remove the pleasure of pouring yourself a *copita*—full and simply drinking it.

NEW YORK CITY LEYENDA

Before stopping by bar-star Ivy Mix's mezcal-stocked Brooklyn spot, order a copy of her comprehensive new book, *Spirits of Latin America*. It's a great primer on mezcal, tequila, pisco, singani, and many others. (leyendabk.com)

HOUSTON THE PASTRY WAR

Bobby Heugel of Houston's The Pastry War says, "I've been to about 90% of the distilleries on our list, so when I look at our back bar, it's like looking at a group of friends rather than a wall of bottles." (thepastrywar.com)

WASHINGTON, D.C. OYAMEL

Miguel F. Lancha's list at this José Andrés spot offers between 130 and 150 mezcals at any given time. "It's never exact because some rare mezcals run out, but new ones are also always appearing," he says. (oyamel.com)

SEATTLE BARRIO

Bar manager Maggie DiGiovanni focuses on artisanal mezcals "who employ fair practices in their businesses or are owned by the producers themselves" for the lengthy list at this Seattle bar. (barriorestaurant.com)

MEXICO CITY TICUCHI

Co-owner Gonzalo Goût archives 20% of the bottles he buys for this bustling *mezcaleria*. "I'm creating a library!" he says. "Twenty years from now, I want to be able to taste what mezcals from Oaxaca in 2020 were like." (ticuchi.mx)



BOTTLE SERVICE

TEN GREAT MEZCAL TO SEEK OUT

MARCA NEGRA ESPADÍN (\$60)

“Marca Negra works with several maestro mezcalderos, but this espadín has been in their portfolio from the beginning,” Yana Volfson says. “It showcases the way espadín expresses terroir and can stand up to the stronger flavors in a Mezcal Negroni (recipe p. 59).”

REY CAMPERO ESPADÍN (\$48)

“Rey Campero is a sustainable project run by a single family,” Yana Volfson says. “Their espadín is a solid expression of traditionally made mezcal. It’s at a price point where you can make a cocktail with it, but it’s also great as an introduction to what espadín mezcal is like.”

SOMBRA (\$35)

“I like Sombra’s sustainability efforts, like using bagasse (cooked and pulped agave fibers) to build houses for people who lost them in the 2017 earthquake,” says Miguel F. Lancha of D.C.’s Think Food Group. “Sombra’s smoky and intense but great for the adventurous.”

DEL MAGUEY MINERO (\$99)

Bobby Heugel of Houston’s The Pastry War says, “This comes from a palenque in [Santa Catarina Minas] Oaxaca, where the agaves are crushed by hand with wooden bats. That approach is increasingly rare, but it makes for a greater range of complex flavors.”

KOCH EL ESPADÍN DE SOLA DE VEGA, OLLA DE BARRO (\$97)

An *olla de barro* is a clay cooking pot; for mezcal, it means the spirit was distilled in clay rather than copper. “I like the en barro process, which gives a more mineral, earthy, chocolaty tone to mezcal,” Yana Volfson says.

BOZAL ENSAMBLE (\$50)

Ensamble mezcals are a traditional style in which different varieties of agave are roasted and distilled together. Bozal uses cultivated espadín plus wild barril and mexicano agaves; it’s emphatically smoky up front, but herbaceous green pepper, pine, and mint notes linger as you sip it.

MEZCAL VAGO ELOTE (\$57)

Mike Barrow of San Francisco’s Mosto says, “The agave used for this mezcal is grown together with corn, then dried corn kernels are toasted and put in the still to infuse it with flavor. Since corn is a bedrock of Mexican cuisine, that’s just a lot of cool culinary synergy.”

YOLA MEZCAL (\$60)

Oaxaca native Yola Jimenez seeks to empower women in Oaxaca’s rural community with her brand. “We employ 98% women. I wanted them to be able to make a product they could be proud of,” Jimenez says. Espadín plus a little wild madreague gives Yola a soft subtlety.

REAL MINERO BARRIL (\$145)

“Barril is vegetal and crisp but also dark and musky, like fresh-cut grass on a damp forest floor,” Ivy Mix, of NYC’s Leyenda, says. “You get classic cooked agave flavors of papaya, banana, and vanilla and a lot of minerality. It’s a fantastic sipper.”

EL JOLGORIO CUISHE (\$160)

Miguel F. Lancha recommends all of El Jolgorio’s mezcals. Of this one, he says: “It’s unusual because cuishe is a wild agave—you have to head up into the foothills to harvest it. Like tobalá, it makes a mezcal that’s fruity and incredibly complex.”

THE DEEP DIVE

The best artisanal mezcals are made in tiny amounts. But seek them out. Yana Volfson loves **Lalocura**, “the epitome of maestro-driven mezcals that respect tradition and nature,” and also recommends **Neta**, a brand that works with a community of maestro mezcalderos in Miahuatlán. Gonzalo

Goût says: “Look outside Oaxaca, too—**Origen Raíz**, for instance, up north in Durango. And also, look for anything from **Cuish**—they just have amazing quality across all of their mezcals. Unfortunately, these two names aren’t easy to find in the U.S., but there’s quality behind every bottle they make.”



Oaxacan Coffee

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

With a float of whipped cream and just enough sweetness to temper the bitter coffee and herbal notes in the mezcal, this spiked coffee cocktail is well-balanced and fortifying. To make piloncillo syrup, simmer 1 (8-oz.) cone of piloncillo in 1 cup water in a small saucepan until dissolved, about 10 minutes.

- 3 oz. hot freshly brewed coffee
- 1½ oz. mezcal (preferably Koch El Espadín de Sola de Vega, Olla de Barro)
- ½ oz. piloncillo syrup or simple syrup
- Sweetened whipped cream, for garnish

Stir together coffee, mezcal, and syrup until combined. Top with whipped cream.

Mezcal Margarita

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

A combination of slightly sweeter Combier and mildly bitter Cointreau balances the floral orange notes in this drink. Double the Cointreau if Combier is unavailable.

- 1½ oz. mezcal (preferably Rey Campero Espadín)
- ¾ oz. fresh lime juice, peel reserved
- ½ oz. Combier
- ¼ oz. Cointreau
- Salt, for rimming glasses
- Lime wedge, for garnish

Combine mezcal, lime juice, Combier, and Cointreau in a cocktail shaker. Fill with ice cubes; cover and shake until shaker is frosty, about 30 seconds. Rub half of glass rim with lime peel; dip in salt. Fill glass with ice; strain margarita into glass. Garnish with lime wedge.

Watermelon-Cucumber Cooler

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

Sweet watermelon juice complements the clean, refreshing notes in mezcal. If you can't find store-bought watermelon juice, blend chunks of fresh watermelon and strain through a fine-mesh sieve.

- 3 oz. fresh watermelon juice
- 1½ oz. mezcal (preferably Yola Mezcal)
- Thinly sliced cucumber, for garnish

Fill a highball glass with ice. Add watermelon juice and mezcal, and stir until chilled. Garnish with a cucumber slice around the interior of the glass.

Mezcal Negroni

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

This riff on the classic gin and Campari cocktail has an earthy richness courtesy of smoky mezcal. Carpano Antica Formula vermouth is full-bodied and flavored with herbs and spices, lending dry, barely sweet flavor to this Negroni. Cocchi Americano and a generous citrus garnish bring a light, citrusv bite.

- 1¼ oz. mezcal (preferably Marca Negra Espadín)
- ¾ oz. Campari
- ¾ oz. Carpano Antica Formula vermouth
- ¼ oz. Cocchi Americano
- ½ cup ice cubes
- Orange peel twist, for garnish

Combine mezcal, Campari, Carpano Antica, and Cocchi Americano in a mixing glass; add ice cubes, and stir until drink is chilled and diluted, about 30 seconds. Place 1 large ice cube in a rocks glass; strain drink over ice. Garnish with orange twist. —YANA VOLFSON, COSME AND ATLA, NYC

ILLUSTRATION: RACHEL CARNEY



WHEN POPULARITY IS A PROBLEM

As mezcal's sales rocket up, and as big players enter the business—Bacardí, Pernod Ricard, and Diageo have all invested in mezcal brands recently—concerns have risen about whether such steep growth is sustainable. Agaves require years to reach maturity, and unlike tequila, which relies on one type of agave from commercial plantations in Jalisco, mezcal is made from a range of agaves grown

on small farms or from wild agaves, an even more limited resource. But how to keep production in check is an ongoing question. As Graciela Ángeles Carreño of Real Minero says, "It's important to take into consideration how nature has financed mezcal for many years. We're at a critical moment for the planet, where we must think very carefully about how our actions can favor disappearance or survival."