



## A CAFÉ SAM REPORT: MEZCAL VS. TEQUILA 101

10/01/09

*Tequila may be 100% agave or mixto, but Mezcal is always the good stuff.*

After doing the research (and tastings), we are thinking Mezcal is best described as artisan Tequila. Compared to Tequila, Mexico's most famous spirit, Mezcal is small time. And that's part of the appeal. Tequila is bottled by big companies, many outside of Mexico, with big time advertising budgets. Mezcal is still made mostly by villagers in backyard operations. But lately those "mezcaleros" have been increasingly sought out by loyal aficionados wanting to market their handcrafted product.

Aside from the small production method, Mezcal is distinguished from its Tequila cousin in other ways that account for its high quality and unique flavor. That story begins with the succulent agave plant, which is indigenous to the Oaxaca region of Mexico. Mezcal can be made from many different types of agave, while Tequila can be made from only one – the blue agave. Mezcal, therefore, is produced in a broader range of flavors, similar to the use of grape varieties in wine making.

Harvesting the agave. When the plant sexually matures, a flower stalk begins to grow. The farmers cut off this new stalk, which accelerates the growth of the central stalk, known as the piña (a.k.a the pineapple). The pineapple can weigh anywhere between twenty-five and one hundred pounds.

Processing and cooking the agave. At the distillery, the pineapple is cut open. For Tequila, it is then cooked by slow baking in large steam ovens. For Mezcal, it is cooked by baking in small underground ovens heated with wood charcoal (that's what gives the Mezcal its distinctive smoky flavor). The pineapples are then crushed to extract the juice.

Fermenting. This stage determines whether or not what ends up in the bottle will be one hundred percent agave or "mixto". Mixtos may have alcohol derived from sugars that don't come from agave, and may be shipped to other countries where the agave content can be further reduced. Mezcal is one hundred percent agave and bottled near the source. Tequila may contain as little as fifty-one percent agave, with the other forty-nine percent coming from sugar cane or corn spirits.

Tequila may be 100% agave or mixto, but Mezcal is always the good stuff.

Today, much of the agave crop in Mexico is being replaced by corn. The agave plant is slow growing, taking five to seven years to mature, and local farmers are attracted to faster profits and high demand for corn as it is converted to ethanol and other fuels. (This change is part of an international crop conversion trend that includes Idaho potato farmers and even Bolivian coca growers who are moving into grains). It could lead to a shortage of agave and increased prices for both Mezcal and Tequila in the future.

Among the Aztec Gods was a God of merriment. The origins of Mezcal and Tequila go back at least two thousand years, to the Indian tribes of Mexico. They were first to discover that the juice of the agave plant, when left exposed to air, fermented and became an alcoholic liquid. Not long afterward, drinking this liquid became a religious event, limited to important holidays. Today, the drinking of the fermented juice of the agave plant may still be a "religious event" for some, but it is certainly not limited to important holidays. For those of you with an adventurous palate, stop by Café Sam anytime and give our top shelf Scorpion Mezcal a try!