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MEZCAL WITHOUT THE WORM

By James Willimetz

Riding the uptown bus to 82nd Street, I looked up the word Toloache, the name of the Mexican restaurant, where I'm meeting Yira Vallejo for Sunday brunch to discuss mezcal. Toloache, I discovered, is a brew intended to bewitch the person you have your heart set on, but who shows no interest in you. Was Yira trying to "embrujar" me into becoming passionate about mezcal? If so, no need. I've been a fan since attending "Mezcal From Oaxaca," a tasting event Yira helped organize just two weeks ago.



First, I ask Yira the most obvious question: "How is mezcal different from Tequila?"

"Well," she replies, "in Mexico people always say that all tequila is mezcal, but not all mezcal is tequila."

She explains that tequila can only be made from the cactus-like blue agave and is mainly made in the state of Jalisco. Mezcal, however, can be prepared from various other cultivated and wild agaves and is mainly produced in Oaxaca. Tequila is highly industrialized and mezcal tends to be more artisanal, typically produced in small batches by individual families or villages. And while the blue agave of tequila is steamed, the various other agaves used for mezcal are buried in a pit over hot lava rock and smoked. It is this smokey flavor that gives mezcal its distinctive taste.

Dicen que tomando pierdes
La cabeza y el dinero
Pero a mí me crece el pecho
Con ese mezcal del bueno

*They say if you drink
You lose your mind and money
But I get my courage
From good mezcal*

(from Mezcalito, my favorite Lila Downs song)

Next, I feel obliged to ask, "What's up with the worm in the mezcal bottle?"

The worm comes from the maguey (agave) plant and some say it adds flavor, while others ridiculously claim that it proves the mezcal is strong enough to preserve the worm, that it isn't diluted. Many think it's just a marketing ploy. Most of the mezcal coming into New York doesn't have the worm and I tell Yira that I'll miss it. I want to swallow one to get bragging rights like many before me. Though, of course, I can still try to get the mezcal bottle with a scorpion in it. Yummy! "Don't worry," Yira insists, "You can still have your worm, but in a different form. The tradition is to sip mezcal with slices of orange and worm salt, ground bits of toasted worms mixed with salt and chilly peppers."





“What about that mezcal I tried at the tasting called Pechuga? It was great but was it really made with . . . chicken?”

Yira explains that it’s a tradition to sometimes add chicken breast during the fall harvest in November. This mezcal is distilled three times in total and before the final distillation, seasonal fruits are added to the pot and a chicken breast is hung directly over it. While it may sound weird, the chicken adds a gamey flavor that balances the sweetness of the fruit and blends beautifully with the smokey agave flavor. I have to admit, Pechuga is one of my favorite mezcales. Similarly, Pierde Almas, has a mezcal made with wild rabbit, \$40 a shot at Toloache. Quite nice as well.

But it would be a mistake to linger too long on the exotic. Like many, I originally (and ignorantly) believed mezcal to be only a cheap and poor quality spirit, a distant cousin of tequila. And some of it is. But Oaxaca, and indeed all of Mexico, has seen a rebirth in pride of all things Mexican, including mezcal. The mezcal coming into the New York market is high end (and high priced due to the small batch, artisanal way of production). And mezcal has become quite popular all over Mexico. Indeed, quite a few tequileros have become mezcaleros, welcoming mezcal’s variety in taste.

Yira’s company, Genesis, is trying to become an incubator for mezcal in New York, helping mezcal producers navigate through the difficulties of obtaining licenses and processes of local distributors, all of which takes time and money.

Mezcaleros always describe their spirit passionately. Siete Misterios mezcal has, for example, “delicate shades of butter, herbal nuances between mint and thyme, cooked agave, smoky tones and delicate floral presence, leaving a pleasant taste with flashes of wet earth.” Pierde Almas claims, “On the palate the effect is fruity and of short duration with emphasis at the root of the mouth followed by ephemeral tones of clove and scented wood, especially in the aftertaste.” Although I’m new to mezcal and I didn’t get any of these things when I tasted it, I did love it and I promise to keep practicing. I’m totally bewitched by the stuff. Eric Asimov, wine critic for the New York Times, seems to feel the same. “Mezcal is one of the world’s great spirits,” he writes. “Complex, gorgeous and endlessly intriguing.”

In any case, you know what they say, “para todo mal, mezcal, y para todo bien, también (mezcal for the bad times, and mezcal for the good times, too).

Hey, give it a shot.

www.mezcalfromoaxaca.com