

MEZCAL FESTIVAL, OAXACA MEXICO, JULY 2005

My eyes window the wind as I watch Hurricane Wilma whip Tampa Bay into a frenzy, reminding me of a promise I made the last time I'd experienced a hurricane such as this. It was across the Sierra Madre and up + 3 miles on the plateau where the ancient Zapotec, Mixteco and 14 other indigenous cultures call their city of [Oaxaca](#), 'home'. 2 years ago, I'd set my heart on visiting there 'soon'; who knew it would be Hurricane Emily greeting me with the dust, sand, pulverized shells and torrential unrelenting rains she carried through the lower Caribbean and up over the mountains to this sprawling wonderland of the Gods.

But, sun did shine that day in the form of my friend Doug, who collected me at the charming airport in Oaxaca, reminiscent of times gone by.

It's time to make good on that promise, as my trip to Oaxaca was for one primary reason: to attend the Mezcal Festival.

At 500 years and counting, Mezcal is the oldest distilled spirit in North America. Doug French is the President of Caballeros Inc. & Master Distiller (Mezcalero) of a delectable group of mezcals called 'Scorpion', which carries the exoskeleton of the bug in the bottle.



Pictured: Doug French, Caballeros Inc.; Jose Juan Alvarado Escobar, Don Juan Escobar Mezcal; Inspector from COMERCAM, the Mezcal certification board.

Folkloric legends & misconceptions...

Folkloric legends shroud these potables. Mezcal is thought of as a safe harbor for worms in the bottle. The 'worm' is not a worm at all, but, a future butterfly. Some live in the pina (heart of the agave plant), others, on the leaves. In ancient times it was believed 'in the worm lies the key to life eternal' which is how the worm came to be housed within the bottles and subsequently within the bodies of its libators. Neither Sotol nor Tequila has a 'worm'; most Mezcals don't carry one either.



Worm-shaped bottle from Beneva

And, contrary to popular belief, there is no psychotropic component to Mezcal.

The Maguey (Agave plant)...

Mezcal is made from the maguey (MAH-gay), also known as the agave (ah-GAH-vay) plant.



Espadin variety of agave



Tobala variety of agave

James Michener wrote in his novel 'Mexico', "the maguey" plant is a symbol of the Mexican spirit". Cultivated in Mexico for more than 9,000 years, "they are like dancers with beautiful hands. They lend grace and dignity to the land and have always been the symbol of peace and construction. From their bruised leaves were made the paper upon which records were kept. Its dried leaves formed the thatch for homes, its fibers, the threads that made clothing possible. Its thorns were the pins and needles while its white roots provided the vegetables for sustenance".

"And, its juice became the 'honey' from which Mezcal, Tequila and Sotol are distilled. The maguey, of the genus Agave, is aptly taken from the Greek

meaning 'noble'. Note: Pulque is also served in bars throughout Mexico. Pulque is fermented from agave juice, not distilled.

Distinctions Mezcal v Tequila v Sotol...

Mezcal, Tequila & Sotol are all spirits distilled from the agave plant (also known as the Century Plant--the agave, a succulent, is not a member of the cactus family, but rather comprises its own distinct botanical family, agavaceae). Tequila, however, must be made from one and only one type of agave, the blue weber agave. And, it must be distilled in the state of Jalisco. Sotol can only be made from the wild agaves which grow in the mountainous state of Chihuahua. Mezcal is made in 5 different states of which Oaxaca is the traditional main producer, and, it can be made from 18 different varieties of agave, including the blue weber. The espadin is the most popular variety; barril, arruqueno & tobala offer the best flavors.

The most distinguishing characteristic of Mezcal, and, the real departure from Tequila and Sotol is that Mezcals tend to be a little smoky in nature, as the pina's are baked in ovens (often subterranean) heated with wood charcoal.



Cooking pinas underground at Beneva Distillery

True of all agave sprits you will find each produces a Joven (HO-ven)-meaning 'young' (Blanco, Silver, White), a Reposado (Rep-oh-SAH-do) (Rested) and an Anejo (ahn-Y'-ho) (Aged). For the strongest agave flavor, it's the Blanco. Reposados are aged and resultantly mellowed at least 2 to 12 months in oak barrels. Anejos must be aged at least one year; some elect to age them as long as 7 years.

All Tequilas & Mezcals must be double-distilled by law, some are triple-distilled. Growing techniques, soil, climate, altitude, the production process, the age of the agave when harvested and other factors affect the flavors of each spirit.

There are currently +450 palenques (small artisan distilleries) in Oaxaca which produce hand-crafted artisanal mezcals.

At the Scorpion Distillery with Doug French...

The Scorpion distillery was the safest haven from the torrent outside. Upon entering, mountains of cooked pina's abounded and women were preparing them for the Presses for juice extraction



Cooked Pina's



Chopping Cooked Pina's

Other women began the laborious process of placing the chopped & cooked pina's into the Presses. Each batch is run through this process six times



Extracting juice from cooked Pina's

After the juice is extracted, it is distilled in copper (pot) alambique stills. Some stainless steel pot stills are also used. Then the ageing process begins; the distillate is placed within french oak barrels.



Alambic Pot Stills & French Oak Barrels

Ironically, Mezcal, the oldest distilled spirit in North America, was the last to receive a Denomination of Origin, and, only this year. Why is this so important? For one, quality control. What the bottle says it is, it is, 100% Mezcal de Agave. Representatives from the government test the distillate prior to bottling.



Analyzing the product for NOM certification

Secondly, some mezcaleros are producing mixtos. This is unaged blanco which has been colored and flavored with caramel. Additives might mean hangovers. There are no hangovers if they're 100% pure de agave.

The final stages for Doug's Scorpion brand of Mezcal calls for their signature scorpion which rests inside each bottle, with the Granddaddy of all resting in the 5 and 7 Year Old presentations.



Preparing the mezcal-drenched scorpions for bottling

Four hours later, and, while sipping from a newly-opened bottle of Scorpion Reposado (where *did* that bottle go?) I asked Doug why agave products are more expensive than other spirits, like vodka, rum, gin etc. He responded, first, that the agave plant takes years to reach maturity and needs to be 7-12 years old before it can be harvested. A flowering agave is not used for mezcal production as it uses up its own supply of juice and cannot be harvested. Flowering agaves are left to self-pollinate or through cross-pollination.



Flowering agave plant

Secondly, a blight in the late 90's caused the production of all pure agave spirits prices to soar.

I met Doug French and Barbara Sweetman, VP Marketing of Caballeros Inc. a couple of years ago, when they were introducing Scorpion Mezcal. My fascination with 'all aged spirits' prompted me to become acquainted with this spirit.

Resultantly, the 1st Spirits of Mexico event in 2004 featured an extensive variety of Mezcals.

To promote this unique brand, attendees braved ingesting the scorpion to win their prized **'I Ate The Scorpion'** T-shirt.







Scorpion Mezcal offers 7 types including a **Silver** (*Gold Medal BTI, Silver Medal SF Spirits Competition*); **Reposado** (*Silver Medal BTI, Silver Medal SF Spirits Competition*); **Anejo 1 Year Old** (*Spirit of the Year, Best Mezcal, Food & Wine*); **Anejo 3 Year Old** (*Gold Medal BTI, Silver Medal SF Spirits Competition*); **Anejo 5 Year Old** (*Top 50 Spirits 2005, Wine Enthusiast; Platinum Award & 96 points, BTI 2005; 4 Stars, Highly Recommended, Spirit Journal '05*); **Anejo 7 Year Old** (*Platinum Award, & 97 points, BTI, 2005*). The Reposado is also available in a 200 ml Flask.

Mezcal Festival...

Beginning on the 3rd Monday in July and ending on the last Monday, the Mezcal Festival coincides with the annual and ancient celebration, The Guelaguetza (gell-uh-GETS-uh), which attracts folklore groups from all over the State and offers colorful exhibitions of native music and dance.



Guelaguetza Festival



Performances

Accompanied by Barbara Sweetman, VPM for Scorpion, we endeavored to taste each of the mezcals present, which included Beneva, Bonachon, Chagoya, De la Vega, Del Amigo, Donaji, Don Agave, Don Ausencio, Don Gonzalo, Don Luis, El Cortijo, El Seniorio, Embajador, Gusano Rojo, Huatulco, Las Lomas, Los Amantes, Los Ancestros de Casa Legendario, Los Remedios, Matateco, Mistique, Mistico, Oro de Oaxaca, Pensamiento, Real Minero, Reliquia, Santa Catarina Minas, Scorpion, Tehuana and Tobala.



Scorpion Mezcal



Mezcal booths in a row



Las Lomas & Tobala



Matateco & Sinai



Beneva



Reliquia



Bonachon



Victor Chagoya & daughters; Barbara Sweetman



Don Luis



Oro de Oaxaca



Embajador



Don Agave



Eric Hernandez, Mystique & Los Amantes



Casa Legendario

Tasting Notes

Not all Mezcals were tasted, but, of those that were, here are some favorites.

NOTE: I concentrated primarily on the Reposados and Anejos on this trip.

Brand	Presentation
Bonachon	Pechuga
Don Luis	Reposado 6 Months
	Reposado 9 Months
Embajador	Reposado & Anejo
Joyas Oaxaquetas de Don Ausencia	Blanco
	Reposado
	Gran Reserva
Los Ancestros de Casa Legendario	Anejo Tres Anos
Mistico	Joven & Reposado
Mistique	Reposado
	Anejo
Oro de Oaxaca	Reposado con Gusano (with worm)
Pensamiento	Anejo 8 YO
Tobala	Joven (Lots of pure agave flavor)
	Reposado
Santa Catarina Minas	Reposado
Scorpion	Blanco
	Reposado
	Anejo 1 YO
	Anejo 3 YO
	Anejo 5 YO
	Anejo 7 YO
Sinai	Reposado

Note: There are a laudable group of Mezcals which did not participate at this year's Mezcal Festival. These are single village Mezcals from Del Maguey and include Chichicapa, San Luis del Rio, Santo Domingo Albarradas, Minero, Tobala, Pechuga and Crema de Mezcal. For further information, visit [Del Maguey](#).

Sojourneys...

Visiting Oaxaca is a year-round treat. Visit the distilleries...



Beneva Restaurant, Zoo & Distillery



Embajador Bottling Plant



Mistique Distillery

Visit for the World's Largest Pina Contest



Largest known Pina weighed-in at 500 Kilos/1,100 Lbs

Shop the boutiques



Oro de Oaxaca Mezcal Store

Tour Cathedrals



Cathedral

Dine outside in the many plazas...



But don't feed the animals, even though they're irresistible



Stay at [Casa Raab](#) and visit their authentic Mezcal palenque (features the ancient art of Mezcal made in Clay Pots)



Casa Raab



Doug French & Anthony Raab

Tour the Capital of the Zapotec Indians at Monte Alban (circa 500 BC), the pyramid of Dainzú, dating back to 600 BC...

Shop the local artisans, from villages specializing in Pottery, Rugs, Basketry, Cutlery, Iron Work, Jewelry, Leather Work, Textiles and Alebrijes (brightly colored representations of imaginary animals made out of copalillo wood) and more...

Visit when the Mezcal Festival is taking place. But, most importantly, when purchasing Mezcal read the bottle and make sure it has a NOM and says 100% Mezcal de agave.

There are no hangovers if they're 100% pure de agave!