

THAT MAGIC MEZCAL

AS THE POPULARITY OF BROWN SPIRITS RISES IN THE BAR AND MIXOLOGY SCENE, THE NEXT BIG THING MAY JUST BE ONE OF MEXICO'S OAXACA REGION'S OLDEST LIBATIONS – THE ONE WITH THE WORM

By Carolyn Patricia Grisold

Everyone's had a tequila moment, but it's the mezcal moments that are worth remembering.

To generalize: mezcal is to tequila what Islay is to Scotch – deeper, richer and more lingering. Replace the peat with smoke, *et voila*, that's the essence of mezcal. This comparison fails only when you discover that mezcal is not a branch off tequila, the way that Islay is to Scotch, but that tequila is actually a type of mezcal. And it's bottles of mezcal, not tequila, that contain the infamous “worm,” really the larva of a moth that lives on the maguey plant.

All mezcals are made from the maguey, a form of agave; it's the blue agave, specifically, from which tequila comes. Maguey grows across Mexico but mezcal is mainly distilled in the Oaxaca region. Situated in south-western Mexico, Oaxaca is famous for tamales, mole sauces, and of course, mezcal. One of the most sacred plants in since pre-Hispanic times, maguey juices had been drunk for years before the Spanish experimented with the process in hopes of creating another hard liquor like they were used to drinking back in Europe. When sugar cane and grapes became taxed by the Spanish Crown, maguey plant liquors increased in popularity.


Created pretty much the same way they were 200 years ago, mezcal does not enjoy the present widespread popularity of tequila, but its star is rising steady and strong.

Due to its smoky flavour, it is often difficult to mix into cocktails, and does not yet have its own signature drink, such as margarita for tequila. But, according to Megan Jones, an associate at Reposado Bar & Lounge, this is quickly

changing. In Toronto's mixology scene, bartenders are constantly seeking ways to entertain and imbibe the discerning masses – and challenge their own skills at the rails. Gone are the days when gin cocktails sufficed; today, when everyone is a self-described foodie, what's old is new again and what was once only consumed by the knowledgeable few is becoming commonplace. On the trendy Ossington strip, with more than one hundred bottles of agave spirits lining their shelves, Reposado even features reduced-price Mezcal Mondays.

While multiple mezcals are available at Toronto's bars or through private sale, the LCBO currently offers just four brands: Leyenda Tlacuache Organic, Jaral De Berrio, Sinai Reposado Especial and the newly released, limited supply, Zache Reposado.

With tasting notes ranging from pungent to delicate, these mezcals are sure to please most palates. The Tlacuache Organic is clear and crisp, with its smoke resting on the centre of the tongue, and a clean finish. Its sharpness builds with each sip, but remains wet. Zache Reposado, meanwhile, presents the opposite experience: it is smooth, spicy and golden. The perfect accompaniment to a Cuban cigar. Leather, cinnamon and black pepper assault the nose, but apologize with a warm vanilla finish. Like a lover who bites your lip during a kiss. They always end on a soft note to keep you coming back for more.

It's no wonder mezcal is slated to be the next big thing. It even has a slogan: *todo mal, mezcal, y para todo bien también*; “for everything bad, mezcal, and for everything good as well.” 



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PETEY'S MEZCAL MUDDLE

MUDDLE A JALAPEÑO WHEEL WITH 3/4 JALAPEÑO SYRUP IN A BOSTON GLASS

ADD: 2OZ LEYENDA TLACUACHE ORGANIC MEZCAL, 1OZ FRESH LIME JUICE, SMALL HANDFUL CILANTRO
SHAKE, DOUBLE STRAIN OVER ICE IN A LAPHROAIG-RINSED GLASS. GARNISH WITH A LIME SLICE AND DE-SEEDED JALAPEÑO WHEEL.