

AGAVE A—Z

A WORKING AGAVE GLOSSARY PROJECT DEVELOPED FOR
THE ROCHESTER COCKTAIL REVIVAL

Mezcal is Mexico's liquid national treasure.

The word 'mezcal' is derived from the native Nahuatl words 'metl' and 'mex calli,' which roughly translates to 'cooked agave.' Mezcal is legally produced in nine of the 31 states in Mexico. Tequila, the most famous of the mezcals, must be produced in the five states surrounding the town of Tequila and made from the Weber Blue Agave (Agave Azul). Ninety-five percent of tequila is industrially produced, while 95 percent of mezcals are artisanally produced, many in backyard palenques. To most of these palenqueros, making mezcal is all they know; it is in their family blood. Mezcal is the liquid which binds generations. Mezcal is life, art, pleasure and pain: "Para todo mal, mezcal, y para todo bien, también." ("For every ill, Mezcal, and for every good as well.")

We hope you find this 'Agave A to Z' guide useful. It is now yours, so please share and improve it. We look forward to your comments and your appreciation, and we hope you can visit the distilleries someday.

May we meet you there. Viva Agave!

**Adam Schuman
John Henry
Josh Wortman**

A

AGAVE

A monocot belonging to the Agavaceae family, Liliaceae order. 150-250 species. Source of food for 11,000 years. Takes six to more than 15 years to mature (some agave to 25 years - for example, Tepeztate). Plants native to the New World distributed primarily between Mexico and the southern U.S., with some in the Caribbean and other countries in the Americas. Currently, mezcal is less than one percent of the total of tequila exports, but growing. It takes approximately 14 kilos of agave to make a liter of mezcal, while it takes about half that (seven or eight kilos) to make a liter of tequila.

ABOCADO

A mezcal to which color and flavor have been added. *See Joven.

AGUAMIEL

"Honey water," liquid from mature agave plants. Fermented into Pulque. NOT the process for tequila/mezcal. A common misconception is that pulque leads to tequila/mezcal. (Don't get us started on mescaline or the mystical power of the worms myths...)

ALAMBIQUE

Copper pot still. Introduced by the Spanish. Main still for mezcal. Small, handmade. Could be stainless.

ANEJO

Aged mezcal or tequila. At least one year and up to three years in medium-sized oak barrels, not larger than 600 liters.

ARROQUENO

Agave Americana varietal. The 'big ones.' Considered to be an ancestral parent varietal to Espadin.

AUTOCLAVE

Pressure cooker. More typical in industrial tequila production, because it can cook faster and offers more control. Can be used effectively in tequila. Industrial for mezcal. Most industrial, used to cook the raw agave juice.



B

BACANORA

A mezcal that is the state spirit of the Mexican state of Sonora. Prohibition 1915-1992. Mexican D.O. 2000.

BARRO

'Olla de Barro,' clay pots used for distillation. En Barro mezcals del Mezcal Vago.

*See Graciela de Real Minero

BURROS

The small mules which often are the palenque workhorses. They pull the large stone Tahona wheel which crushes the cooked agave in traditional mezcal making.

BAGASSO

Agave fibers post-roasting and crushing. Often reused as insulation in the next cook. Can be made into paper and labels (Vago and Pierda Almas).

BLANCO

A white or silver, unaged mezcal or tequila.

BULBOS

The roots. Also small offshoots of the agave.



C

CAPON

A mature agave whose quiote has been cut. *See quiote

COPPER, CLAY

Two common types of pots used to cook agave.

CUPREATA

Wild agave species. Most common species used for mezcal in the state of Guerrero. Also called 'Papalote.'

CABEZAS

Head. The first part of the distillate to come through the still, usually discarded. Also called punta. Also another name for piña, the core of the agave.



COA

Sharp circular blade attached to a stick. Used by jimadores/cortadores for trimming the agave leaves.

COPITA

Small cups used to drink mezcal. Traditionally made of clay.

CORAZON

Center sweet spot of distillation, "the heart."

COMERCAMCRM/CRT

Mexico's Governmental Regulatory and Certification Bodies for Tequila and Mezcal CRT Consejo Regulado de Tequila: Tequila Regulatory Council). A non-profit organization, founded in 1994, that verifies the performance and the fulfillment of Mexican standards (normas) concerning tequila. It also guarantees the mezcal or tequila's authenticity and quality, and protects the Denomination Appellation of Origin (see AOC) worldwide. Members of the Council include the Mexican government, agave farmers, tequila producers, bottlers and distributors.

D

DISTILLATION

Heating the fermented must (mosto) to separate the alcohol from water. Tequilas and mezcals are distilled twice, although some companies offer triple distillation for some premium products. After distillation, the alcohol is filtered and bottled or put in wooden barrels or casks for aging.

DIFFUSER

Processes raw agave resulting in a raw agave juice that is then cooked into an autoclave. Used in only the most industrial form of tequila and mezcal production.

D.O.

Denominacion de Origen. Validation of where the agave spirit comes from. (As with Champagne and Cognac.)

E

ENSEMBLE

A mezcal which combines agave varietals, AKA a "blend."

ELOTE

Roasted corn. Vago Elote is an alluring mezcal featuring local roasted corn infused between second and third distillation.

ESPADIN

Agave Angustifolia. The cultivated maguey/agave most commonly used to produce mezcal.

EXTRA ANEJO

Introduced in 2006, it is for tequilas aged in small barrels (not more than 600L) for three or more years.

EXPORTACIÓN

The process to export agave spirits. Not all small mezcal producers can afford or want to go through the process.

F

FERMENTATION

The conversion of sugar to ethanol with yeast. In traditional mezcal production, mostly wild, natural fermentation.

G

GUSANO

A butterfly larva (Hippopta Agavis) also called a worm. It lives in the heart or leaves of agave plants. It is sometimes placed in bottles of mezcal, but never in tequila. There are two kinds of worms: gusano de oro (gold) and the more prized gusano rojo (red). Also called 'gusano de maguey.'

GUERRERO

State of Mexico west of Oaxaca. Most mezcal is made from the wild agave cupreata. You tend to see some glass aging.

GUADALAJARA

Second largest city, the "Los Angeles" of Mexico. Gateway city to Tequila Country.

H

HIJUELOS

Buds that sprout off to the side of the agave plants.



HORNO

A traditional oven used to bake the agave piñas. Brick/stone for tequila; earthen for traditional mezcal, sotol, bacanora, raicilla. Tequila: 36-48 hours. Mezcal: three or more days, then cooled for several days.

HYDROLYSIS

Converting the starches into fermentable sugars.

IXTLE

Agave fibers which can be woven into carpets, bags, cloths, nets, and other uses.

JALISCO

Central-Pacific Mexican state where the town of Tequila is located. It is also where the vast majority of the agave used for tequila is harvested and distilled. It is located roughly 40 miles northwest of its capital, Guadalajara.

JICARA/JICARITA

A natural gourd cup for sipping mezcal

JIMADOR

In tequila, the harvester, trimmer of the agave. In mezcal: the Cortador.

JOVEN

Young or gold tequilas. Usually caramel and other colorings added. The ones that cause the dilemma are called 'tequila trauma.'

KARWINSKII

Known as Cuishe, Cuixe, Madre Cuishe, Barril, Tobaziche, Cirial. Intense herbal flavor.

LOS ALTOS

Highland tequilas (Patron, Tapatio, Siete Leguas). Richer soils purportedly produce tequilas that are sweeter and fruitier.

LOWLANDS (TEQUILA VALLEY)

Tequilas from the valley. Town of Tequila is located at 3,870 ft above sea level.

Tequilas from lowlands are said to be more earthy (Casa Noble, Fortaleza, Partida).

LILY

The flower family of agaves. (Not to be confused with cactus flowers, cacti produce no mezcal.) A common misconception remains that tequila and mezcals come from cactus plants. The vegetal genus origin is in asparagus family.

MAESTRO MEZCALERO

Mezcal producer. Or, more humbly, a palenquero.

MAGUEY

Common term for the agave plant.

MAYAHUEL

The goddess of Agave.



MEZCAL

Spirit distilled from the fermented sugars derived exclusively from a variety of agave plants. From Nahuatl words 'mexcalli' or 'metl', meaning 'cooked agave.' As cognac is to brandy, tequila is to mezcal.

MIAHUATLAN

Village south of Oaxaca (100 km) which produces special local mezcal.

MICHOACAN

A Mexican state near Oaxaca where both tequila and mezcal can be produced.

MINERO/SANTA CATERINA MINAS

An espadin mezcal from the town of Santa Caterina Minas, which produces some great mezcals.

MIXTO

One of the two official variations on tequila. Not an official term in the NORMA. "Mixed" tequilas are made with only 51% agave sugars (minimum). If the label doesn't say "100% de agave," or "cien de cientos de agave," then the product is a mixto tequila. Corn or sugarcane are the other two most common sugars used to create the alcohol during fermentation.

MOSTO

Must, or wort. The juices (aguamiel) and solids of the agave after the grinding or milling stage. This will be fermented to produce alcohol. Also called 'tepache.'

NORMA/NOM

Norma Oficial Mexicana, AKA Norma or NOM, are regulated government standards covering a number of industries including tequila and mezcal production. The NOMs specify and regulate standards of production and also signify tequila distilleries and centers of mezcal production. NOM 006 for tequila production was last revised in 2012. NOM 070 for mezcal was just revised February 2017 with a number of critical changes.



NAHUATL

Native language and peoples. Also referred as Aztec or Zapotec in Oaxaca area.

O

ORDINARIO

Also Primero. The first distillation of the mezcal or tequila.

P

PALENQUE

Small mezcal distilleries. Run by palenquero, the mezcatero or producer.

PENCA

Fibrous leaves of the agave plants. Sharply tipped, strong arms.

PECHUGA

Breast. A rarer and expensive celebratory mezcal which uses chicken, rabbit, turkey or even fruits and vegetables in a third distillation. Drunk locally in Oaxaca to celebrate special occasions.

PERLAS

The bubbles which form on mezcal distillate when shaken. "The Pearls."

Mezcaleros can measure alcohol by volume (ABV) from las perlas. (It's also the name of a great agave bar in Los Angeles.)

PINA

Literally means 'pineapple.' The bulbous center of the agave, composed of the complex carbohydrate inulin, used for the production of tequila. The piña is cooked and mashed. This releases the juices (aguamiel) for fermentation and later, distillation. The center resembles a pineapple. It is also called cabeza (head), bola (ball) and corazon (heart).

PINE WOOD

Madera de pino. Typical fermentation vats for mezcal are made of pine. Tequila, often stainless steel.

PULQUE

The aguamiel of the agave fermented into a beverage. The local brew and quaff.

PUNTAS

The heads or first alcohol of distillation. Funky, not chic. *See Corazon

Q

QUIOTE

Stem or flower stalk (inflorescence) that extends from the top of the maguey. It is cut to allow the pina to fatten and ripen. The quiote is sweet and can be boiled or roasted, and eaten. Also called quixotl. To remove the stalk (castrate) is called desquiotte. In botanical terms, the quiote is called a peduncle.

QUISHE

*See Karwinskii

R

RAICILLA

'Mezcal' made in Jalisco. Seven municipalities. Close to Puerto Vallarta. Close to Tequila. Primarily Agave lechugilla (inaequidens) Agave Maximiliana, but there are others. Non-certified. Outside of the NOM. Cannot be called mezcal. Usually cooked in above-ground ovens with no smoke.

REGIONS Y ESTADOS

*See map illustration

REPOSADO

'Rested' tequila or mezcal aged at least two to 12 months in oak barrels. The "resting" mellows and refines the spirit. Official type according to the NORMA.



S

SAL DE GUSANO

'Worm salt.' Salt mixed with spices and chopped larvae. Usually accompanies an orange slice in traditional mezcal drinking.

SOTOL

Regional spirit made in Chihuahua and parts of Durango, made from a different plant, not an agave: the Dasylirion, which belongs to the family Nolinaceae.

SILVESTRE

A wild Agave varietal. Literally 'wild.'

SUSTAINABILITY

Replanting and only harvesting what is needed according to nature's schedule. Seeing agave and mezcal through long term.

SANTIAGO MATATLAN

The Heart of mezcal production. A gateway village to mezcal in Oaxaca. El Buho, Nahueles/Danzantes, Amaras, Fidencio and other mezcal brands are produced at palenques here.

SANGRITA

Spicy mix of tomato juice, orange juice, chile powder and other ingredients, used as a chaser or co-sip with tequila or mezcal.

SMOKE

Scents and flavors that come from the wood used to heat the stones in underground pits.



TAHONA

The traditional, large wood or stone wheel turned by donkeys, oxen or tractors. It pivots in a circular space (often a cement well) to mash the pulp of the agave into a coarse paste and extract the juice (aguamiel). This is diluted with water to give it the necessary consistency for fermentation.

TAMAULIPAS

A state neighboring Jalisco where Tequila can be produced from Agave Azul/Weber Blue Agave.
*See REGIONS map.

TEQUILA

A liquor made by distilling the fermented sugars of the aguamiel (sap) of the blue agave plant. It originated around the town of Tequila, in Jalisco state, hence the name. The word has several meanings, including: "wild herb place" (lugar de hierbas silvestres), "Place where people cut" (lugar donde se corta), or "place where people work" (lugar donde se trabaja). Tequila is a Mexican product with Denomination of Origin, which means that no other country is allowed to produce it. Made five states: Jalisco, Michoacan, Guanajuato, Nayarit, Tamaulipas. D.O. 1978.

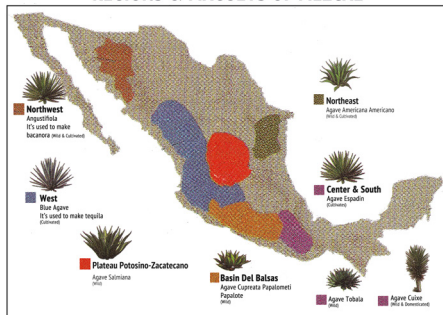
MEZCAL DE TEQUILA

Traditional Jose Cuervo bottles used to state such. All tequilas are mezcals.

TEPACHE

Fermented beverage made from the peel and rind of the pineapple.

REGIONS & Magueys of MEZCAL



TEPEZTATE

A wild agave varietal. Grows big and up to 25 years. A prized mezcal (and expensive).

TERROIR

A sense of place. Particular features developed as a result of geography, geology and climate.

TOBAZICHE

Another agave varietal. *See Karwinski

TOBALA

A rarer, wild agave form with broader leaves, takes 15 to 20 years to mature generally. Can be cultivated. Agave Potatorum.

UNITED STATES

Largest export and consumer country of tequila in the world.

VON HUMBOLDT

Prussian Traveler and botanist who mentions Mezcal in his Treatise on the Kingdom of New Spain (1803). Mistakenly called mezcal 'distilled pulque.'

WEBER BLUE AGAVE

Agave tequilana Weber. Agave Azul The type of agave from which tequila must be made.

WOOD

Locally sourced wood (usually Encino or oak) used for the firing of the mezcal oven (hornos) and often used for the firing of the stills.

X/EX

All my exes live in Tejas.

YEAST — LAVADURA

Single cell microorganisms that convert sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Most mezcals use natural airborne yeasts in fermentation. Can vary even within villages. A mystery of the mezcal process.

YEGOLE

3600 ft., arid, not many producers. Zoquitlan. Many wild varietals.

ZOQUITLAN

A village southeast of Oaxaca City. Nuestra Soledad, Vago Espadin and La Nina de Mezcal have agave spirits produced in this farming village.

ZAPOTEC

Indigenous, pre-Columbian civilization in the valley of Oaxaca. Native peoples of area. "Cloud People."

HELP SPREAD THE GOOD WORD ON OUR AGAVE A TO Z GUIDE!
PLEASE CONTACT US WITH COMMENTS, EDITS AND IMAGES.

CON GRACIAS,
ADAM (aschuman@skurnikwines.com)
JOHN (john@elbuhomezcal.com)
JOSH (jrwortman@gmail.com)

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

JOHN MCEVOY "THE DOCTOR," MEZCALPHD.COM, SUSAN COSS
AND MAX GARRONE, MEZCALISTAS.COM, IANCHADWICK.COM,
EMILY BRAUN

FOR A GREAT GUIDE IN SPANISH, SEE TODOMEZCAL.COM.

