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MEZCAL *Mystique*

Tequila's bolder
cousin moves to
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Let's talk MEZCAL



Tequila's bolder cousin has evolved from curiosity to "it."

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN



Jay Schroeder, Beverage Director and Partner of Chicago destination restaurant Quiote, has seen spirits trends come and go. However, he's confident that mezcal is not going anywhere. His passion for the intense and savory agave spirit—and increased public interest in it—manifested itself in Quiote's subterranean mezcaleria Todos Santos and his penning and releasing *Understanding Mezcal*.

"Mezcal's story is one about diversity within a spirits category as well as Mexico's many regional styles of food and beverage," he says.

If your establishment is dedicated to mezcal like Todos Santos, deciding

what to put on your bar will be easier as you've gotten to know the landscape and a variety of mezcal producers. If your bar serves many different spirits, however, Schroeder says the easiest way to get the knowledge needed to select the best mezcals is to visit a nearby bar dedicated to them. Sit, enjoy yourself, and talk to the people who work there. He warns that if you rely on the first sales rep who comes through your door, what you end up with may not be a fit for your customers or food offerings.

"If a beverage manager from an Italian restaurant asked me to suggest six really cool bottles of mezcal, I would suggest he look at my back bar, see what gets his

Photo: Diez y Seis

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attention, and then have him ask questions," he says. "If I get excited about a given mezcal, that's usually a good way for him to tell if it will be an ideal choice. I can cherry pick a few mezcals and have [the manager] taste them until he finds those that work best for his needs. Bear in mind that although your bar may only allow for a small collection, you can cover a whole lot of ground in terms of styles."

"Mezcal has been the 'cool' thing to drink for a while now, especially come summer," says Josh Cameron, Head Bartender at Boulton & Watt in New York City, noting it started appearing in bars about seven years ago, with customers asking, "Do you carry that smoky tequila?"

"It's a relatively recent entry to the US market, despite being as old, if not older, than tequila historically. This spiked excitement and allure," he says. "I think people wanted something new, and many had exhausted their tequila phase."

According to José María Dondé, Beverage Director of Bakan, Miami, mezcal has been growing for the past 10 years thanks to interest in organic and artisanal food and spirits. "Mezcal has received a great response from consumers who care about how and what their spirits are made of," he says.

"As a Mexican restaurant, you can use mezcal to show how the roots and tradition of Mexican culture are important and can be used in gastronomy as well."

Like Todos Santos and Bakan in Miami, Los Altos (also in Miami) was a response to the public's curiosity and embrace of the spirit, according to bar Operations Manager Erin Davey. "For the opening of Los Altos, we did a mezcal negroni candy," she says. "I've also seen it in salad dressings, salsas, and so on. The Smokeout is a good representation of this, blending Union Mezcal, lemongrass-infused coconut milk, lime, ginger, and cilantro. It could very easily translate to an Asian restaurant. On a previous menu, we updated the classic Italian Negroni with pasilla chili-infused vermouth and mezcal substituting for gin in addition to the Campari."

Where There's Smoke...

...there is bound to be a lot of inspiration, regardless of whether a venue has any thematic ties to Mexican food or culture. Jake Larowe, Bar Manager at Birds & Bees, says the Downtown Los Angeles "mid-century modern cocktail bar" has stocked mezcal since its opening two and a half years ago, and it has been a crowd pleaser ever since. However, he's observed that his experienced customers have been aware of its mystical power for some time, though others may need to be brought up to speed.

"I first started noticing mezcal appearing in bar programs about seven or eight years ago," he says. "Before that, it was around but mostly unknown and not really understood. Today, it is in high demand, and any [craft cocktail bar] worth its salt will carry at least two or three different styles to cater to its clientele. At Birds and Bees, we carry several brands and styles that cover everything from [the growing region's] lowlands to highlands as well different subtypes of agave such as Espadín, Tobala, and Madre Cuixe."

Jose Gill, Beverage Manager at American Social Bar & Kitchen in Miami, says mezcal was added about five years ago after he and his colleagues noticed customers were leaning towards smokier cocktails during the tequila boom.

"Mezcal brought that kind of flavor profile that we could see was going to be the next upcoming trend," he says. "It has lots of full roasted flavors [that work well] in smoky dishes, but there is so much more going on with mezcal flavors that it can work in most unexpected food and beverage recipes, from marinating shrimp and chicken to making dishes that have chocolate notes, which will enhance the flavors."

The beverage program at Honeybee's, a vegan BBQ restaurant in New York's East Village, concentrates on bourbon, rye, tequila, and mezcal as drinks need to stand up to the food menu's hearty sauces and seasonings. While many of the customers are cocktail savvy, Beverage Director Sother Teague says experimentation

BEHIND THE BAR: MEZCAL

Geodesic Domes

$\frac{1}{4}$ oz Fresh lemon juice
 $\frac{2}{3}$ oz Domes mix*
1 oz Pierre Ferrand 1840
1 oz Mezcal Banhez

Domes mix:
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz pineapple puree
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz cardamom clove syrup**
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz Cinzano bianco vermouth
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz Fernet Branca

Cardamom Clove Syrup:
2 quart water
2 quart granulated sugar
5 oz green cardamom
3½ oz whole cloves

To make the Domes mix, start by making the cardamom clove syrup. Place cardamom in a dry vitaprep and crush. Combine with cloves, sugar, and water and heat over medium heat. Simmer for 10 minutes, remove from heat, and strain through a chinois. Allow to cool and place in quart delis, label, and date. Make the Domes mix. To make the cocktail, combine all ingredients and shake over ice. Strain into a wood tumbler over fresh cobble ice.

Jay Schroeder, Todos Santos/Quiote, Chicago, IL

Waterproof Watch

$\frac{1}{4}$ oz Vida Mezcal
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz Altos Blanco Tequila
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz Amaro Montenegro
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz Aperol
2 dash Dale's Bitters
Orange twist

Combine ingredients in a shaker. Stir thoroughly and pour into a rocks glass with ice. Add bitters and finish with an orange twist.

Sother Teague, Honeybee's, New York, NY

Mezcal Margarita

1 oz Vida
1 oz Blanco tequila
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz Agave syrup
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz Lime juice

Shake and strain onto fresh ice. Half chill salted rim (1:1: $\frac{1}{2}$: sugar, kosher salt, paprika, cayenne).

Sother Teague, Honeybee's, New York, NY

Smokin' Maid

- 5-6 Mint leaves
- ½ oz Cucumber juice
- 1 Lime
- ½ oz Agave
- ¼ oz Mezcal
- ¼ oz Jalapeño tequila

Shake and strain into highball glass half-rimmed with salt and pepper. Garnish with mint sprig and cucumber.

Jim Kearns, Tijuana Picnic, New York, NY



Verde Que Te Quiero Verde

- 2 oz Pelotón de la Muerte Mezcal
- ½ oz Lemon juice
- ½ oz Triple Sec
- ½ oz House-made simple syrup
- 1 oz Cilantro puree

Line the rim of the glass with a slice of lemon and salt. Shake and strain over ice. Garnish with lemon wheel.

Jose Maria Dondé, Bakan, Miami, FL

Chapulin Colorado

- 1 oz Volcán Tequila
- 1 oz Montelobos Mezcal
- ½ oz Agave
- 1 oz Watermelon juice
- ½ oz Lime juice
- 2 dashes Habanero tincture

Habanero tincture: Place 10 cut habanero chiles into a bottle of Sableski vodka. Cocktail: Shake and strain into rocks or Collins glass with cubed ice. Garnish with double lime wheel dipped in chapulin salt.

Guil Jarosch, Diez y Seis, Miami, FL

Smokonut

- 1½ oz Mezcal Union
- 2 oz Lemongrass/ginger coconut milk
- ½ oz Lime juice
- ½ oz Simple syrup
- 1 barspoon of Velvet Falernum

Coconut milk: Add one-inch piece of lemongrass and one-inch piece of ginger to quart of coconut milk. Bring to boil and simmer for 15-20 minutes. Remove from heat and strain solids. Cocktail: Whip shake with crushed ice. Pour into 16-oz glass with crushed ice. Top with cilantro.

Erin Davey, Los Altos, Miami, FL



Chapulin Colorado

conversations not only with its selection of expressions but also Mexican-inspired graffiti style artwork and candles.

"We carry several brands because it's a unique part of Mexican culture," affirms Gui Jarosch, Director of Beverage Program and Development for parent company SBE. "There are more approachable mezcals these days than ever before, which can be a good thing and a bad thing. Traditional mezcals have strong character and are high in alcohol, while modern mezcals are served at 40% ABV and meant for cocktails. In addition to the cart, we serve the Chapulin Colorado that will convert any non-mezcal believer or appeal to hardcore fans."

Jim Kearns, Corporate Beverage Director at Golden Age Hospitality in New York City, says he began stocking mezcal in the company's bars a dozen years ago before it registered as a trend. However, he does acknowledge that there will always be some customers hesitant to try the spirit even if a good cocktail recipe (such as the "Smokin' Maid" for Tijuana Picnic, *recipe left*) provides a nice framework for it.

"It's generally a good idea to determine what concerns them about the flavor of any spirit before trying to steer them in a particular direction," says Kearns. "If a guest has never had mezcal neat, something a little richer in tropical flavors, like Del Maguey Minero – Santa Catarina Minas or Del Maguey Santo Domingo Albarradas could be a good place to start. Generally, the best way to get into

"It can take the place of, or share the spotlight with, tequila in the usual tequila-based suspects like the margarita or paloma, serve as a worthy yet surprising substitute in classics such as negronis, mules, and mezcal penicillin," he says. "One of my favorite modern classics featuring mezcal is the 'Naked and Famous,' with mezcal, yellow chartreuse, Aperol, and lime."

The Perfect Introduction

South Beach-based Diez y Seis puts it all out there—literally—with its signature mezcal cart designed to start

BEHIND THE BAR: MEZCAL

mezcal is just to dive in head-first."

Eric Hobbie, Mixologist at San Diego's Serea, suggests introducing customers to mezcal through cocktails that balance bright, fresh flavors with a strong mezcal back bone. Serea's Ocean Breeze (*recipe, right*), for example, pairs mezcal with fresh honey dew, Meyer lemon, and a house-made melon liqueur. For beginner mezcal drinkers, he recommends Casamigos' recently released expression and El Silencio, both of which are mild enough to work in a variety of recipes.

Gill has a similar approach and will introduce guests to a lighter mezcal cocktail, "You start them with a joven (young mezcal) as a shooter or in a sweeter cocktail such as our Smoked Pineapple Cocktail."

Cameron, meanwhile, a fan of Ilegal Mezcal and Mezcal Papá Rey for "genre introduction to new customers," likes building cocktails around it with earthy shrubs and root vegetables.



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When introducing mezcal, a bit of background doesn't hurt, either.

"What most people don't realize is that mezcal is the original tequila," says Hobbie. "This was the old way tequila was made before the high demand and commercialization came into play. The slight smokiness came from roasting the agave in the ground for several days with hot coals."

"Agave is a plant in the asparagus family, and not a cactus," adds Jose Maria Dondé, Beverage Director of Bakan in Miami. "They have green vegetable, botanical, and fruit flavors that you can easily work with. That is why it is important to tell customers about the layers and the flavors that you get from each of the different species of agaves used to make mezcal, the hand of the producer, the terroir, and other aspects that make each brand special."

Larowe acknowledges that some people will never like mezcal, but he likes taking open-minded new mezcal drinkers on a flight to get them excited about the category.

"I like to start with three next to each other and let [a customer] sip each one while talking about the differences. It's a short journey to find similar mezcals, and from there, branch out to the more esoteric and complex flavors. Have customers smell it, sip it, and think about flavors. Point out that the more mezcal they drink, the more subtle flavor notes they will begin to pick out. Have them think about where the spirit is from, what grows around there, and what's in the local food. Next, move around the world. Pair it with flavors from other parts of the world, such as basil, yuzu, and caraway."

Gibson also likes the mezcal flight approach based on agaves, brands, or regions. He adds details about the impact on climate and soil type on the final product, how the Mescalero ("master distiller" equivalent) approaches making it, and details about how the agave plant was cooked.

"That's when the real adventure begins," says Gibson. "While I think mezcal cocktails can be wonderful, it wasn't until I began sipping mezcal neat that I truly began to appreciate it."

Ocean Breeze

2 oz El Silencio Mezcal
1 oz Fresh-squeezed honeydew melon juice
1 oz Fresh-squeezed Meyer lemon juice
½ oz Midori melon liqueur

Shake with ice. Strain into coupe glass. Garnish with dehydrated blood orange wheel and lemon rose.

Eric Hobbie, Serea, San Diego, CA

Pride on Pikoh

2 oz Mandarin-infused mezcal**
1 oz Passionfruit syrup*
¾ oz Lemon juice
¾ oz Egg white
Dash simple syrup
2 dashes Orange bitters
Droplets of raspberry purée, blueberry purée, blue curaçao, and kiwi/midori purée

Passionfruit syrup: Combine equal parts of 1L simple syrup with les vergers Boiron passionfruit purée. Mandarin-infused mezcal: Peel four mandarins, gently press, and let sit in one liter of mezcal in a dark storage area for two-three days. Strain with chinois. Cocktail: Dry shake for 10-20 seconds. Add ice and shake again. Double strain into coupe glass. Garnish with fruit droplets; use a cocktail pick to create hearts.

Pikoh, West Los Angeles

Gregory Peck

2 oz Peck "Cheater":
¾ oz Mt. Gay Rum
¾ oz Plantation Pineapple
½ oz Mezcal
½ oz Yellow Chartreuse/Citrus Oleo
4 drops White Peppercorn Tincture

Stir, strain, double rocks glass, big cube. Garnish with candied lemon half-moon.

Jake Larowe, Birds and Bees, Los Angeles

Ilegal Tonic

2 oz Ilegal Mezcal Joven
5 oz Tonic

Build in Collins glass. Garnish with cucumber and grapefruit peel.

Ilegal Mezcal