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Jeffrey M. Pilcher*

Pulque, Beer, and Gender in Mexico

In 2020, forty women craft brewers (cerveceras artesanales) gathered in the city of Colima to brew a beer called Impetuosa. A *hoppy lager* flavored with aromatic New Zealand hops, Impetuosa raised $136,000 pesos for civil associations dedicated to supporting women. The project proved so successful at creating solidarity among women in the decidedly masculine world of craft beer that it became an annual event featuring a different beer style each year. By 2023, it attracted more than 200 women from craft breweries and brewing collectives with names like *Adelitas, Pintas Poblanas*, and *La Perruchona*. This female craft movement sought to reclaim a tradition of brewing cacao beer and pulque in Mexico that existed for thousands of years before the commercialization of indigenous beverages by Spaniards and the arrival of industrial beers from Europe.

Mildly alcoholic beverages similar to European beer have a long history in Mesoamerica. By 1000 BCE, people living what is now in northwestern Honduras brewed a beer from the pulp of cacao fruit, as opposed to the seeds used to make chocolate. The ancient Maya fermented honey into a mead called *balché* for ceremonial purposes. *Pulque*, the most common alcoholic beverage in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, was consumed in the great classical-era city of Teotihuacan, and had spread throughout the altiplano by the post-classical era.

Strict social rules governed the production and consumption of pulque. Male *tlachiqueros* (tappers) harvested the sap of the maguey and delivered it to women, often their wives, who fermented the beverage with a cocktail of yeast and bacteria called *madre de pulque*, adding their own personal recipes of roots, herbs, and bark as preservatives and flavorings. When fresh, the beverage has an herbaceous aroma and sweet flavor, although it rapidly turns sour and rancid. The straightlaced Mexica forbade pulque to all but the elite and the elderly, except on ritual occasions. Nevertheless, the ease of making pulque and its dietary importance suggest that the beverage was drunk regularly, if covertly, outside the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán.

Fears of drunkenness persisted under Spanish colonialism but attempts to restrict pulque foundered as nobles

* Jeffrey is a Professor of Food Studies at the University of Toronto; you can contact him at jeffrey.pilcher@utoronto.ca.
Photo courtesy of Cervecería La Perruchona.

and clergy came to profit from commercial sales. While pulque consumption likely increased after the conquest, the Spaniards' primary objection to indigenous drinking was its ecstatic, religious nature, in contrast to the European ideal of self-control. At times, natives snuck into caves to reenact pre-Hispanic rituals, but more often, they drank openly on Catholic saint days. In the mid-seventeenth century, Mexico City licensed a total of thirty-six *pulquerías*, two-thirds for men, the rest for women, although authorities had little success enforcing gender segregation and soon gave up trying. In the 1730s, Jesuit priests first recognized the commercial potential of pulque plantations and began cultivating orderly fields of maguey at the Hacienda of Santa Lucia. Spanish merchant Manuel Rodríguez de Pedroso built his own pulque estates at nearby Zempoala and used the revenue to purchase the title Conde de Jala. At the height of the Bourbon-era silver boom, the number of licensed pulquerías in the capital had grown to nearly fifty; nobles used them as "tied houses" to sell pulque from their estates. While Spanish overseers hired men to replace the traditionally female task of fermenting pulque, unlicensed women from nearby villages sold homebrew from small jugs in the capital's streets and plazas.

The masculinization of pulque production in Mexico paralleled the history of beer brewing in Europe. In premodern times, brewing was a domestic labor carried out by women. The Finnish epic *The Kalevala*, for example, recounted the invention of beer by a woman named Osmotar to serve guests at a wedding feast. In the Middle Ages, women often brewed for charity, to help an indigent neighbor or to pay for improvements on a cathedral, like the Mexican Impetuosa project craft beer. The commercialization of beer began in the thirteenth century, when brewers in the northern German town of Bremen learned to add hops as a preservative. Before then, brewers flavored their beers with an herbal mixture called gruit. Hopped beer could be shipped long distances to markets, encouraging the expansion of large-scale production and the rise of guilds. These male-dominated associations, in turn, sought to limit competition from alewives. The Bavarian brewing regulations now known as the Reinheitsgebot, which decreed that beer could only be made from barley, hops, and water (yeast was poorly understood at the time), has been celebrated as the first food purity law. At the time, however, it served to restrict brewing by female herbalists known as *Kräuterfrauen*.

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European beer arrived in Mexico with the post-independence fashion for British culture. In 1544, Alonso de Herrera had established a brewery in New Spain, inspired by the beers served at the court of Charles V, who had grown up in Flanders, but the beverage did not take root at the time. During the wars of independence, patriots such as José María Fagoaga acquired a taste for beer while in exile in London. Once free from Spanish trade restrictions, Mexicans consumed pale ale and porter, known locally as *blanca* and *colorada*, in cafes and hotels.

Central European immigrants initiated the industrial production of lager beer during the 1890s with financing from local capitalists. The Bavarian, bottom-fermenting lager yeasts worked at cooler temperatures than British top-fermenting ale and therefore posed less risk of spoilage from bacterial contamination. During the Porfiriato, a handful of regional brewers dominated Mexican national production. At the Cuauhtémoc Brewery in Monterrey, the Garza Sada industrial clan partnered with German-American brewer Joseph Schnaider, while the Moctezuma Brewery of Orizaba was associated with Finance Minister José Yves Limantour and Alsatian brewer Philippe Suberbie. Factory labor was largely masculine, although women could find jobs in bottling departments and quality control.

As in Europe and North America, Porfirian beer advertisements projected gendered images of nationalist modernity. Moctezuma's Dos Equis beer, created in 1897 and originally known as Siglo xx, heralded a future of European-style consumption, while the Aztec emperor, staring out between the two "X"s, maintained patriotic ties to the past. Factories and railroads likewise conveyed masculine images of industrial progress. When women did appear in advertisements, they were often either idealized female figures like the French Marianne or chinas poblanas serving beer. The Toluca y México Brewery, whose Victoria was advertised as the preferred beer of the German colony, established a beer garden in Mexico City for the enjoyment of the rich.

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Following the Revolution of 1910, brewers sought to build mass markets and a national reach. The Modelo Brewery of Mexico City advertised its Corona brand with the slogan: "Twenty million Mexicans can't be wrong." (*Veinte millones de Mexicanos no pueden estar equivocados.*) Unlike the cosmopolitan clientele of the nineteenth-century brands Bohemia and High Life, Modelo implied that Corona beer was preferred by every man, woman, and child enumerated in Mexico's 1940 census. Modelo and Cuauhtémoc launched ambitious expansion plans beyond their regional bases. The former acquired Toluca y México, Estrella, Pacífico, and Yucateca, while the later took over the Central Brewery of Mexico City, Tecate, and merged with Moctezuma. Together with new factory construction, the mergers cemented a duopoly in beer by the 1980s. National consolidation standardized regional styles that in some cases dated to the late nineteenth century. After the Modelo buyout, Yucateca's loyal customers complained that their familiar Montejo and Negra León brands did not taste the same.

With national markets approaching saturation, exports to the United States offered a potentially lucrative field for growth. Modelo introduced its Corona brand in southwestern markets, but following North American practices, they used brown bottles instead of the clear glass longnecks familiar in Mexico. As a result, Corona's arrival went largely unnoticed, even by tourists who knew the brand from border-town bars and Baja beach vacations. A 1981 relaunch in Austin, Texas, and San Diego, California, using the traditional bottles sparked a beer guzzling frenzy. Sales rocketed to more than 12 million cases in 1986, largely through word of mouth. During the boom years of 1985 to 1987, Modelo cut its advertising budget in half since the beer was selling itself.

Astonished by the remarkable growth, industry insiders and journalists alike sought to explain the brand's popularity. Modelo's spokespeople repeated platitudes about the high quality of the beer and said nothing about its plebeian reputation in Mexico. Celebrity sightings of Irish rock musician Bono and beach bum minstrel Jimmy Buffett nursing the distinctive longnecks contributed to the buzz around the brand. A shortage of the wildly popular beer in the summer of 1986 added further to the aura of exclusivity as fans vied to score cases. But the larger explanation for Corona's success lies in the ritual behavior of consumers. Bartenders reported young men asked for bottles, rather than mugs, along with a slice of lime. They pushed the lime into the bottle and drank the beer, leaving the lime at the bottom. This performance was inexplicable to outsiders but deeply appealing to initiates of the subculture.

Competitors insisted that the craze would soon pass, given the fickle nature of Corona's young, male customers. To accelerate the brand's decline, they began spreading rumors that it was contaminated with urine. The *Los Angeles Times* reported the story on July 28, 1987, after some thirty-five separate retailers asked about the rumor on the same day. The claims were particularly inflammatory given the nativist outcry over Mexican migrants in the mid-1980s. Investigators traced the rumors back to a Heineken distributor, Luce & Son of Reno, Nevada, and Modelo obtained a settlement that included a written statement attesting to the beer's purity. Mexican executives took the rumors very seriously, but they had inside information that had already been published in local newspapers a year earlier. The company had commissioned a marketing firm to conduct focus groups with Corona's primary demographic, male university students. When asked to explain their preference for the bright yellow beer in the clear glass bottles, large numbers responded, no doubt smirking: "It looks like another liquid." Far from

worrying about contamination, hip consumers laughed at the scatological joke.

Beer offered a rare success story for Mexican agricultural exports under the North American Free Trade Agreement, but national breweries were soon swept up in a wave of international consolidation. Both Modelo and Cuauhtémoc-Moctezuma were forced to offer minority stakes to survive in fiercely competitive global markets. By 2013, they had sold out completely to the transnational giants A-B Inbev and Heineken, respectively.

Even as mass markets became increasingly globalized, consumers began antimodern revolts against the standardization of lager beers such as Corona. In the United Kingdom, a group of beer lovers formed the Campaign for Real Ale in 1971 to revitalize the distinctiveness of local pubs and breweries. In the United States, a microbrewing movement sought to reinvent traditional beers such as India Pale Ales (IPAs) and porters. Mexicans crafted their own versions, known locally as *cerveza artesanal*, beginning with Gustavo González, whose Cosaca brand featured three basic ales: negra, roja, and güera (brunette, red-head, and blonde). Other brewers experimented with adding local ingredients such as agave and nopal, chile, and chocolate. Meanwhile, rustic *pulquerías*, which had seemed on the brink of extinction as their aging and almost exclusively male clientele died off in working class barrios of Mexico City and in the countryside, were revitalized in the trendy

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Mexico City neighborhoods Coyoacán and Colonia Roma. Bearded young Mexican hipsters began experimenting with new ingredients such as coffee, mint, and oats in place of more traditional *curados*—pulques cured with coconut, mango, and pineapple.

Thus, in just a few decades around the turn of the millennium, Mexican brewing was dramatically transformed. The beer industry, a pioneer of national development since the Porfirian era and a seeming champion of global expansion, had fallen into foreign hands. Meanwhile, the easy-drinking taste of lager has become passé, while strongly flavored pulques and craft beers have been revived. Finally, craft brewers have Mexicanized their product with chiles, spices, and tropical fruits, just as New Age pulqueros added exotic touches to the native brew. The gendering of beer and pulque in Mexico was also changing, but perhaps more slowly. Craft beer has become a notoriously masculine community, exemplified by the growing taste for bitterly hopped IPAs. Although young women are increasing consumers of craft beer, the easiest way for a woman to find work in the industry is by opening her own business.

Gender historians around the world have documented a seemingly universal trend for men to take over what had formerly been domestic labor when it moves out of the home and into the marketplace. Twentieth-century Mexican examples of this tendency include the spread of mechanical nixtamal mills and the shift in sex work from women-owned bordellos to male street-corner pimps. Brewing likewise went from being a domestic labor performed by women within the household to a commercial operation carried out by male-dominated guilds and finally industrial corporations. The revival of craft beer has opened a space for women to reclaim this age-old task, and even make money while they are at it. Masculine exclusivity within the craft movement resisted this incursion at every step, but perhaps a nation that has elected a female president will be willing to drink beer brewed by female hands. VM