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Voice of Mezcal, Voice of Mexico

We often interpret “voice” as a means of communication. By extension, we can also consider food and drink as possessing their own voice, as they express our deeply held beliefs about our identities. Having the ability to speak is about having power, and the voices of food and beverages are particularly notable for their capacity to unveil the complexities of race, class, gender, and various other social categories that shape human experience. Alcohol as an intoxicant is particularly rich with social significance, as evidenced by the historical necessity to regulate its consumption across societies. Food scholar Diana Pittet discusses the concept of “beverage voice,” stating, “Wherever there’s drinking, there’s an institution—governmental, religious, cultural, social—

that dictates who gets to drink what, where, and when. Additionally, wherever there’s a power dynamic, there are voices that are disproportionately loud, others that are expressed subversively, and some that remain silenced.” Oaxacan mezcal, the distilled spirit made from agave that has experienced a surge in popularity in recent years also embodies a powerful voice, at times elevating itself as the voice of Mexico. By engaging with it, we can gain insight into the shifting attitudes and socioeconomic divides prevalent in Mexico’s history and those emerging within the contemporary global market.

From pre-Hispanic times to the present, alcohol has played a significant role in establishing and maintaining social boundaries in Mexico. Among the ancient Aztecs, pulque—a mildly alcoholic beverage derived from the sap of agave plants—was highly esteemed. It was deeply woven into their religious cosmology and primarily reserved for priests, nobles, and warriors. However, following the Spanish invasion, pulque’s status suffered a notable

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decline; it transformed from a prestigious drink that separated ancient elites from commoners into one primarily associated with Indigenous peoples and other lower-status groups within colonial society. As Mexico progressed toward nationhood, pulque became stigmatized as a beverage of the rural and urban underclasses. It hasn't been until the past decade or so that pulque regained popularity, embraced by young urban hipsters in places like Mexico City, who have begun frequenting pulquerías alongside traditional working-class male patrons.

Mezcal, rather than being a pre-Hispanic beverage, is a product of colonialism. Distillation was a technology brought to the New World and utilized endemic agave species to produce a new drink. Its development mirrors certain aspects of pulque's history. Mezcal was similarly regarded as a lower-status alcohol within the colonial hierarchy. Peninsular Spaniards and New World-born criollos (mostly men) demonstrated their elite status by favoring imported European alcoholic beverages over agave-based drinks whenever possible. The stigma surrounding mezcal persisted even after Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821 and continued well into the twentieth century.

Until the late 1990s, mezcal was primarily recognized as a regional beverage, usually associated with the southern state of Oaxaca. It was produced on a relatively small scale, mainly for local consumption, and remained largely unfamiliar beyond Mexico's borders. Notably, middle- and upper-class Mexicans shunned mezcal, perceiving it as a low-status drink linked predominantly to Indigenous, rural, or working-class communities. Today, however, mezcal is undergoing a remarkable transformation into a prestigious commodity that is produced for export around the world. This burgeoning market is founded on the perception of mezcal as a traditional, artisanal spirit, crafted under specific geographic, geological, and climatic conditions—concepts referred to as *terroir* in French and *terruño* in Spanish.

It is essential to clarify that “mezcal” refers to any beverage distilled from agave, as well as a category of alcoholic spirits that are institutionally protected. Within this broader definition, Mexican tequila represents a specific type of mezcal, produced on an industrial scale and widely available in North American markets since the twentieth century. Furthermore, tequila holds a Denomination of Origin, a protected legal status that dictates the conditions under which it can be produced, which was established in 1974. Accordingly, tequila may only be made from a particular variety of agave (*agave tequilana*) within designated geographic regions—primarily, though not exclusively, in the state of Jalisco. In a sense, tequila became the first voice of Mexico, rising to prominence as its national drink. At the same time, Oaxacan mezcal languished as a low-status regional beverage, voiceless on the stage whereby foods and drinks become symbols of nations. Mezcal has its own Denomination of Origin, established in 1994, defining specific production criteria, such as permitted regions and agave varieties, which are distinct from those applicable to tequila. Unlike tequila, mezcal has not been widely industrialized and commercialized until recently, making it especially attractive to global consumers who are interested in unique and specialized food and beverage experiences. Today, approximately 90% of mezcal is produced in Oaxaca, where it has always played a significant role in community life. This traditional spirit is integral to ritual events such as baptisms, weddings, and Catholic feast days, and fields are often blessed with drops of mezcal before plantings and harvests. However, mezcal's centrality to social life has not been universally embraced across all social classes in Oaxaca. Even as recently as the early 2000s, many city elites tended to shun mezcal, instead favoring other alcoholic spirits like rum, whiskey, brandy, and tequila. Until the mezcal boom that took place around 2010, establishments dedicated to serving mezcal—including upscale restaurants with multi-course tasting menus and trendy *mezcalerías*—were nearly nonexistent in Oaxaca City, or elsewhere for that matter. When I first started researching mezcal in 2011, most of my colleagues in the U.S. were either unfamiliar with mezcal or had a negative impression of the drink—one referred to it as unflatteringly as “gut rot”. The prevalence of unfamiliarity or disdain in the not-so-distant past raises an important question. What has led to the transformation of mezcal's image, turning it into a prestige drink

not only in Oaxaca but in Mexico City as well as cosmopolitan locations all over the world?

To address this question, it is essential to acknowledge Mexico's diverse geographic, economic, and social conditions that contributed to tequila and mezcal's divergent paths. The region where much of tequila is produced benefits from its proximity to the economically important city of Guadalajara, which has facilitated a steady influx of interest and capital investment into the state of Jalisco. Additionally, Jalisco's extensive hacienda system historically provided tight control over local labor and land rights, fostering stable conditions and infrastructure that supported modern, efficient alcohol production and distribution. In the 1870s, Cenobio Sauza became the first producer to export his product to the United States and Europe. Sauza, an ambitious entrepreneur from Jalisco who would later be known as the "father of tequila," aimed not only to expand his market but also to appeal to a sense of sophistication among his fellow Mexicans. At that time, the Mexican elite differentiated themselves from the masses by adopting foreign tastes in everything from music to fashion. Sauza recognized that his compatriots would be more inclined to drink tequila if it had the endorsement of European and American consumers, a colonial mentality that equated foreign products with superiority. His intuition paid off.

In contrast, Oaxaca, the other primary state for mezcal production, is geographically isolated and centered around a small provincial capital whose economic relevance has diminished since colonial times. Additionally, Oaxaca's substantial Indigenous population has historically owned and controlled a significant portion of the region's land, enabling them to regulate crucial sectors of the internal market. Consequently, the large-scale commercial agriculture and industrial production model characteristic of tequila never fully materialized in Oaxaca. Instead, the mezcal produced in rural Oaxacan communities since colonial times has primarily catered to local markets and has relied on traditional technologies and methods. It is precisely these qualities that made mezcal poised to enter the market as an "artisanal" spirit.

The rebranding of mezcal as a "heritage" product—something that all Oaxacans, regardless of their social standing, can now take pride in—has been heavily influenced by its recognition and appreciation among a specific class of Mexican consumers and foreign buyers.

Fast forward to the 1990s, when mezcal was still often perceived by many middle- and upper-class Mexicans as a low-quality, low-status beverage. However, this perception began to shift. A pivotal moment for mezcal occurred in 1995 with the founding of Del Maguey Mezcal by Ron Cooper, an American artist residing in Taos, New Mexico. In 2017, Cooper received the prestigious James Beard Award for Outstanding Wine, Beer, or Spirits Professional and is recognized for introducing the first "artisanal" mezcal to the U.S. market. He played a significant role in creating a new spirits category—non-tequila agave distillates—where none had previously existed. Del Maguey established a fresh narrative and aesthetic framework for consumers to appreciate mezcal. Featuring easily recognizable green bottles, attention-grabbing artist-designed labels, and the now trademarked "single-village mezcal" slogan, Del Maguey successfully brought mezcal into the



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awareness of spirits enthusiasts for the first time. To this day, the brand actively markets its products as locally sourced, traditional artisanal spirits crafted in small batches by Indigenous producers.

The ascent of Del Maguey mezcal coincided with and was actively supported by the resurgence of cocktail culture that began in the late 1990s. One of Del Maguey's signature mezcals is produced in substantial quantities and at a price point that has made it a popular base for a continuously evolving array of high-end cocktail creations. Perhaps most significantly, over the past two decades, Cooper and his business partners have nurtured a network of mezcal advocates among top industry professionals across the country. Those who have elevated cocktail-making to an art form are regularly invited by Del Maguey to partake in exclusive tours of its producer facilities.

In conjunction with the advancements in the spirits industry, a parallel phenomenon emerged that helped enhance mezcal's global reputation. The 1990s marked the onset of the foodie culture, characterized by the refined tastes of the global elite, which increasingly favored craft products, farm-to-table dining, farmers markets, and specific ethnic cuisines. Simultaneously, a group of renowned chefs and influential food writers, including Enrique Olvera, Diana Kennedy, and Anthony Bourdain, introduced regional Mexican food and beverage—often highlighting fare from Oaxaca—to wider audiences through restaurants, cookbooks, and television programs, making them more accessible and appreciated.

Oaxaca's long-standing poverty and indigenous heritage, factors that once relegated it to Mexico's economic and social margins are today seen as part of the region's "folkloric" allure and serve as the foundation of a massive state-sponsored arts and cultural tourism industry. This initiative caters primarily to a niche market of middle- and upper-class Mexicans as well as travelers and others with social influence in the marketplace that set the tone for what voices gain the most attention. Unsurprisingly, the region's rich gastronomic heritage stands as a central attraction. Both the federal and state governments have meticulously analyzed tourism trends related to Oaxacan cuisine, resulting in numerous festivals, events, and culinary routes that showcase its unique offerings. And mezcal is instrumental in this effort. For example, in 2015, a mezcal tourist route known as "Los Caminos del Mezcal" was established, and each July, the city of Oaxaca hosts

an expansive mezcal fair that spans several city blocks and draws thousands of visitors. At the heart of the mezcal rebranding initiative lies the recognition of the drink as an integral component of Oaxaca's rich cultural and culinary heritage. It is increasingly common to encounter the term *patrimonio* (patrimony), which is used not only to describe the final product but also the agaves from which it is derived.

What stands out is the significant increase in mezcal's social and economic value, largely linked to its transnational circulation and the emergence of Oaxaca's boutique tourism industry that attracts visitors worldwide. The rebranding of mezcal as a "heritage" product—something that all Oaxacans, regardless of their social standing, can now take pride in—has been heavily influenced by its recognition and appreciation among a specific class of Mexican consumers and foreign buyers. One Oaxacan friend expressed a touch of bitterness when noting, "Mezcal had to cross the border and back for us to even notice and appreciate it." The details outlined here only begin to scratch the surface of mezcal's invariably more complicated history. Nevertheless, if we revisit the initial assertion that food and beverage serve as significant barometers of social and economic conditions, what insights might be gleaned by listening to the mezcal voice? Why did mezcal require such a stage or platform to be heard in the first place?

In today's marketplace, mezcal is frequently hailed as a craft spirit with an array of unique expressions. The distinctiveness of each mezcal stems from a multitude of factors—ranging from soil minerality to the naturally occurring yeast specific to a particular micro-distillery—which ensures that no two mezcals are exactly alike. While the flavor profile of mezcal may be distinctive, its narrative is not unique. Similar trends can be observed when other highly localized or Indigenous products enter the twenty-first-century capitalist market, which values artisanal and handmade goods while simultaneously striving to scale production for broader consumption. The rise of Oaxaca as a popular destination mirrors these processes; in this case, it is not just specific food or drink but the entire region, along with its culture, that has been reimagined and rebranded for global consumers. By paying close attention to the voice of mezcal, we are reminded that such transformations are rarely, if ever, equitable, prompting us to question who stands to gain and in what ways from these changes. ■■■