

Mezcal Yesterday And Today

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Maguie hearts ready to be cut up and cooked.

For a long time it was thought that the only alcoholic beverage the pre-Hispanic peoples of Mesoamerica knew was *pulque*, made from fermented maguie sap. However, data found at the Nativitas digs, located in one of the Xochitécatl and Cacaxtla monumental zones in Tlaxcala state, seems to indicate that they distilled mezcal in this area before the arrival of the Spaniards.

When housing units from the mid- and late Formative Period (400 B.C. to A.D. 200) and from the Epiclassical Period (A.D. 650-950) were excavated, archaeologists found earthen and stone ovens next to several houses. Based on laboratory studies, we know that these ovens were used for cooking and also for physically and chemically transforming the heart of the maguie.

An analysis of the excavated ovens and the context in which they were found suggests that we are dealing with a complex of artifacts possibly created to produce mezcal. In addition to telling us that they were used for cooking maguie, a chemical analysis of the ovens' content indicates that the inhabitants burned pine as fuel.

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Photos: "The Road of Mezcal" project archive.

In order to prove the validity of this idea, four lines of research were opened up, among which was the ethno-archaeological project called “The Road of Mezcal”. Combining procedures from ethnology (the study of human cultural variability) and archaeology, several dozen units of mezcal production have been studied and registered in the states of Oaxaca, Tlaxcala and many other parts of the country. The aim has been to establish the similarities and differences between current implements and forms of production and the ancient ovens and to recognize the social relations involved in producing this beverage.

THE INDIGENOUS AND MEZCAL

Preliminary results of the ethno-archaeological studies indicate that almost everywhere in the country the maguey plant has been widely used to produce different items, including two kinds of distilled beverages: tequila and the even purer mezcal. These results point to the idea that distilling mezcal, long considered a technique imported from Europe during the colonial period, may have been known in the pre-Hispanic world.

One of the main objectives of “The Road of Mezcal” project has been to see how many indigenous communities still produce this beverage. Our study reveals that many societies with pre-Hispanic origins produce mezcal not only in a very craft-based way, but very primitively.

Steer hide used to ferment the cooked maguey in the Huichol community of Guadalupe Ocotlán, Nayarit.



Distilling mezcal, long considered a technique imported from Europe during the colonial period, may have been known in the pre-Hispanic world.



Oven with stone walls at the Nativitas, Tlaxcala archaeological site.



Huichol still covered with mud, ready to produce mezcal.

For example, in the Pai Pai community in the northern part of Baja California, ovens are made for producing the fermented beverage *tepache* and from time immemorial, since the period when the Pai Pai were hunter-gatherers, they made use of maguey hearts, known locally as *lechuguilla*. In agriculture-based pre-Hispanic tribal and class societies, mezcal was produced locally, but the varieties of agave and the tools differed from one place to another. This is also the case today in the Nahuatl community of Zitlala, Guerrero, among some Zapotecs in Oaxaca and Huichols from the Guadalupe Ocotlán, Nayarit, community.

In the specific case of the Huichol of Guadalupe Ocotlán, we have been surprised not only by the production techniques used, but also by the reasons they have for producing it and their tools, particularly the ones used for distilling. Their still, made out of tree bark and *zacate* fiber, consists of a series of 40-centimeter rings placed on top of each other to a height of 80 centimeters, which is then covered with mud. On the inside, they place a small wooden conduit that drains the alcohol produced from the condensation of the fermented maguey sap into a recipient at the bottom of the still. The drain is also connected to a reed perforating the wall of the still through which the mezcal flows and is collected in a pot or gourd.



[1]



[2]

VARIETIES OF MEZCAL

With very few exceptions, such as Aguascalientes and Hidalgo (a major *pulque* producer), we have found that the vast majority of the states produce mezcal, including the states in the peninsulas of Yucatán and Baja California. We have also discovered the existence of an important variety of mezcals, which are given local names, like *bacanora*, produced in Sonora.

Almost all the mezcals are pure (that is, no artificial chemicals or yeasts are added) and have a high alcohol content. However, most continue to be produced mainly for consumption during each community's festivities.

Without a doubt, the great variety in flavor is linked to the tools used to produce the mezcal and, above all, the different species of agave that grow throughout Mexico. Some of the plants used are the *angustifolia*, *salmiana*, *maximiliano*, *tequilana*, *cupreata*, *potatorum*, *karwinskii* and the American agave. In several states, mezcal is allowed to age and it therefore acquires the flavors and aromas of the different woods used to make the casks where it is stored.

The best known mezcal in the country comes from Oaxaca and is made by craftsmen in places called *palenques*. Oaxaca's mezcal producers make four main varieties: breast mezcal (during distillation, they put several chicken breasts in the still so their juices mix with the agave-based alcohol); fruit mezcal; *benevía*, made with wild agave; and pot mezcal, made with either wild or cultivated agaves distilled in pots. The latter procedure, although disappearing, is fundamental for our research because there seems to be a direct association between it and its tools and the pots and ovens found in the archaeological digs at the Nativitas site.

It should be reiterated that mezcal does not come exclusively from Oaxaca, but that there are many other varieties produced in the North and Southeast of Mexico.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The know-how for producing this beverage has been passed down from generation to generation empirically, and many pieces of evidence lead us to believe that distillation was a technique known to the pre-Hispanic world. Ethno-archaeological research continues and its results will be added to that of ethno-historical, archaeological and chemical research in order to deter-

- ◀ [1] Still made of clay pots. The reed allows the condensed alcohol to escape. San Juan Bautista Sola de Vega.
- ◀ [2] Mezcal production site or *palenque* at Santa Catarina Minas, Oaxaca. In the foreground is an earth-lined oven.
- [3] Huichol still made from rings of *zacate* fiber and tree bark. ▶



[3]

mine with certainty whether mezcal was produced at the Nativitas site during the mid-Formative Period (400 B.C.), many centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards. **MM**

FURTHER READING

- Conabio, "Agave, mezcales y diversidad. Mapa sobre la diversidad de las plantas de agaves y mezcal en México," Jorge Larson, comp., *Mezcales y diversidad biológica* (Mexico City: Conabio, 2005).
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