

In Texas, Even Drinks Love Mesquite | PUNCH

punchdrink.com (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/texas-drinks-love-mesquite-cocktail-recipe/>) · by Laurel Miller · July 31, 2019



“Mesquite commands respect,” says Sandeep Gyawali, neuroscientist, baker, cocktail enthusiast and forager. “It fights back and thrives under harsh conditions. The thorns make harvesting difficult, but there’s also heat, scorpions, snakes and cacti.” A spiky, prolific, leguminous tree native to the American Southwest and parts of Mexico, mesquite is perhaps best known in the United States for its relationship to Texas barbecue. But Gyawali has been rekindling the state’s deep connection to the tree as an ingredient, with his Austin-based Texas Mesquite Movement (<http://www.michebread.com/mesquite>), catching the attention of local bartenders, brewers and distillers (not to mention chefs and bakers) who have begun utilizing the sweet earthy pods and their beans into all means of cocktails, spirits and beers.

“When raw, the pods have a faint sweetness and smell of oolong tea. Roasted, they take on chocolate, coconut, coffee and baking-spice flavors and aromas,” says Gyawali, who makes an in-demand mesquite extract. He forages statewide on private lands, but also has partnerships with Austin’s Multicultural Refugee Coalition, which owns a farm in Manor, Texas, and ranchers in McAllen, Rankin and Carrizo Springs, who forage pods for him on their properties. Mesquite pods ripen in midsummer; the most ubiquitous species in Texas is honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), which grows everywhere except the far eastern part of the state. The beans, which have a sugary exterior, have long been a vital food source for indigenous people, while the flour or beans were fermented into a low-alcohol beverage called *atole*, which is more commonly made with corn.

Gyawali soaks the dark-roasted pods (they’re also ground whole, with the beans, into a rich, luxurious flour) in a neutral alcohol base for several months before filtering and bottling the result. In Austin, at The Cavalier, bartender Kevin Rhodes incorporates Gyawali’s extract into his Black Feather Bourbon-based Honey Mesquite Sour along with demerara simple syrup, Amarena cherry syrup, lemon and egg white. Rhodes’s Hill Country Holiday, a sophisticated riff on a White Russian, mixes the extract with TLC vodka, Amontillado sherry, demerara simple syrup and Irish Cream. At Odd Duck, Blackwell Rum is infused with mesquite pods before getting mixed with Bulleit Bourbon, Pierre Ferrand Ambre Cognac. Gyawali says mesquite tannins are well suited to egg- and milk-based drinks, whose creaminess round out any harsh edge.

Fruit and herbs also work well with mesquite: At San Antonio’s Cured, chef-owner Steve McHugh highlights Hill Country stone fruit with Peachy Keen (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/peachy-keen/>), a mesquite flour-infused white rum cobbler. At Treaty Oak Distilling, Gyawali’s extract is added to a gin-based Old-Fashioned (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/antique-old-fashioned/>) sweetened with chamomile-honey syrup, lending warmth and a touch of smoke. The distillery is launching a mesquite gin in the fall of 2020. Even native Texan

Matthew McConaughey has aligned himself with Texas's most beloved flavor, collaborating on Wild Turkey Longbranch, a small-batch mesquite charcoal-infused bourbon made by Wild Turkey master distiller Eddie Russell.

At Driftwood's Desert Door Distillery, mesquite is more than an ingredient—it's become intertwined with the distillery's identity. Currently the nation's only producer of sotol (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/sotol-brands-and-history-mexican-moonshine-flourish-north-of-the-border/>), Desert Door will host its second annual Mesquiteers Fest (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2nd-annual-mesquiteers-fest-tickets-65559489197>) in late August. The brainchild of the "Three Mesquiteers" (Desert Door, Gyawali and Tara Chapman of Two Hives Honey), the festival is a celebration of "the foods from this land, and a way of reintroducing them for modern culinary use," says Bobbi Lee Hitchon, director of field marketing at Desert Door and one of the Mesquiteers cofounders.

"The story of mesquite parallels that of sotol in Texas," says Hitchon, "Both are neglected and maligned wild foods that ranchers have long attempted to eliminate." Prolific, drought-tolerant, water-storing plants, sotol and mesquite are loathed by ranchers and agriculturists who instead need the water for livestock and irrigation. Following the massive cattle drives of the mid-nineteenth century, mesquite spread in range and density, and ranchers began fighting what became known as the "Great Mesquite Wars," which are still waged today.

Despite their reputation as invasive, however, mesquite and sotol's cultural significance remains indisputable amongst Texans. Says Hitchon, "Mesquite and sotol have been used for thousands of years by native peoples for myriad purposes. We're working to continue a story fueled by food and drink applications." The distillery often pairs the two together, as in The Revival, mesquite pod-infused sotol, lemon juice, ginger syrup and agave nectar, shaken and served over ice.

Beyond cocktails and spirits, breweries like Jester King, Cibolo Creek, The Brewer's Table and Armadillo Ale Works have begun producing mesquite-infused saisons, porters and blonde ales, using raw or roasted pods and/or beans. "For our Cerveza de Mesquite, a saison farmhouse ale, we use a mixed culture of wild yeast and bacteria harvested from around the brewery and pulverized raw pods, added during the hot side of the brewing process," says Jester King brewer Sean Spiller. "They have a massive sugar and baking spice aroma, which is why we chose to brew a very basic beer, which allows the mesquite to shine."

For his part, Gyawali attributes Central Texas's mesquite revival to Austin's close-knit food community and enthusiasm for ingredients that champion a distinct sense of place. And while anyone can order mesquite products with a few clicks, he encourages Texans to seek a source closer to home. "My goal is to make it more accessible, but you don't need me. Just look in your backyard."

[punchdrink.com \(https://punchdrink.com/articles/texas-drinks-love-mesquite-cocktail-recipe/\)](https://punchdrink.com/articles/texas-drinks-love-mesquite-cocktail-recipe/) · by Laurel Miller · July 31, 2019