

# Demystify The Oaxacan Spirit Mezcal

**Explore the smoky, nuanced flavors of this Oaxacan spirit.**

By Laurel Miller

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“A really great mezcal is like a good story. It has a beginning, middle, and end,” says Sean Skvarka as he preps for service at Mezcalería Tobalá, a rustic, intimate space located upstairs from Whisler’s on East Sixth Street. He’s slicing oranges, meant to stimulate the salivary glands and cleanse the palate, garnished with sal de gusano—sea salt, toasted and ground maguey worms, and Oaxacan chile costeño.

Skvarka selects a flight of three mezcals for me to taste as part of my crash course on what has become one of Austin’s most sought-after spirits. “The biggest misnomer about mezcal is that it’s just ‘smoky,’” he says. “Done right, it’s a beautiful, nuanced, delicate spirit with diverse flavor profiles.” Tobalá is all about slow service: It’s first-come, first-served, and the room has a 30-person capacity. The mezcalería is curated like a tiny museum, rife with Oaxacan artifacts, vintage photos, and taxidermy.





After starting with Del Maguey Single Village Chichicapa, which has smooth, citrusy notes, I sip El Jolgorio Tepeztate, a mezcal made from a rare, cliffside-dwelling wild agave that takes up to 25 years to reach maturation; it's bright and herbaceous with an earthy, feral finish. Finally, I alternate sips of Gracias A Dios El Petacón with bites of orange sprinkled with sal de habanero. Somewhere—between the confluence of heat, smoke, and honeyed flavors sipped from traditional terra cotta copitas—I became a mezcal acolyte.

My experience at Tobalá leads me to Bar Ilegal, a diminutive stone mezcalería located in the courtyard of Clive Bar on Rainey Street and occupying a late 19th-century well house. Bar Ilegal offers 50 mezcals and other agave spirits, but it's their Anciano cocktail, made with Del Maguey Vida Mezcal, chocolate bitters, and orange bitters, that captivates me. With just one table and candles providing the only light, the vibe is Mexican church-meets-rural cantina.

Rich MacKay is the bar's venue manager. "Our emphasis is on brands using traditional methods, who respect their communities and mezcaleros," he says. "Some modern brands are essentially cash grabs and exploit the people of Oaxaca and other mezcal-producing regions."



Mezcal is made from agave, a succulent more commonly associated with tequila (which is actually a type of mezcal). Agave is native to subtropical and tropical regions of the Americas; the Aztecs and Nahuatl equated the plant with health, longevity, and fertility. It also provided sustenance and fiber for rope and textiles.

In pre-Hispanic times, pulque—the fermented sap of the agave—was a sacred beverage consumed during religious and sacrificial rituals. In the 16th century, conquistadors were enamored of pulque's buzzy effects; craving a



sweeter beverage, they distilled the agave juice to create mezcal (a corruption of mexcalli, meaning “cooked agave” in Nahuatl).

As many as 30 types of agave are used for mezcal, which was designated a Denomination of Origin product in 1994. Mezcal production is overseen by a governing body called Consejo Regulador de Mezcal and must adhere to strict regulations. The majority of producers are rural farms/distilleries called palenques; most are in Oaxaca, but mezcal can also be made in eight other Mexican states.

Because of the diversity of climates, geography, and altitude in which agave can grow, mezcal reflects the terroir of where it was produced. But according to Drew Jerdan, the bar manager of downtown’s Las Perlas Mezcalería, “the legally defined categories of mezcal are based on production method.” Industrially produced mezcals are made with modern, mechanized methods and sometimes chemicals, which can result in harsh flavors. “These are the spirits that give mezcal a bad name,” Jerden says. With artisanal mezcals, the piñas, or agave hearts, are cooked in underground pits called hornos, and the bagaso, or agave fibers, are crushed with a mallet or stone wheel called a tahona (pulled by a draft animal). The agave is then fermented in natural materials such as wood, clay, or stone and distilled in clay or copper pots. Ancestral mezcals are made following a similar process.



**Before you sip, have a bite of orange, meant to stimulate the salivary glands and cleanse the palate.**

The best way to school yourself on mezcal—besides tasting—is by reading labels. Espadin refers to mezcals made from widely grown cultivars that ripen relatively quickly, in approximately eight years (which makes them a more

sustainable choice). Wild agaves yield more complex flavor profiles, but some species take decades to reach maturation and have smaller yields. Joven refers to unaged mezcal; reposado and añejo, like tequila, refer to the length of time the spirit is aged in oak.

At Tobalá, I discovered pechuga, a type of mezcal triple-distilled with fruit and spices. Raw meat (usually a chicken breast) is suspended at the opening of the still, allegedly to capture the vapors emitting from the fruit mixture, resulting in a more balanced final product. “Pechugas are generally reserved for special occasions—weddings, quinceañeras, funerals—and are meant to be shared with family and friends,” says Skvarka, who had me try a Del Maguey Single Village Pechuga. It reminded me of grappa with its grapey notes and smooth, almost syrupy mouthfeel.

Regardless of occasion, all mezcal is meant to be sipped and shared, with or without food. (At Tobalá, three copitas—which serve two to six people—run between \$25 and \$75.)

“Personally, I’d hesitate to drink mezcal or tequila if I don’t know who made it,” Jerdan says. “That way, I know that by purchasing your product, I’m supporting your family, community, and land. But it’s also about giving credit where it’s due and keeping the culture and tradition behind these spirits alive.”

## **Get your agave on**

### **[Mezcalería Tobalá](#)**

Flamenco guitarist Luis Banuelos plays at 9 p.m. every Saturday.  
*1816 E. Sixth St., (512) 480-0781*

### **[Bar Illegal](#)**

A selection of 50 mezcals offered in a late 19th-century well house.  
*609 Davis St., (512) 494-4120,*

### **[Las Perlas Mezcaleria](#)**

The industrial-modern bar has more than 350 agave spirits. Mezcal Collectives tastings are held several times a month.  
*405 E. Seventh St., (512) 906-0143*

### **[Techo Mezcaleria & Agave Bar](#)**

This cozy rooftop spot above Mi Madre’s offers an abbreviated mezcal menu with all the fixings, plus intriguing cocktails.  
*2201 Manor Road, (512) 480-8441*

### **[508 Tequila Bar](#)**

Owned by—and located next door to—Pelon’s Tex-Mex Restaurant, this spot serves up some well-crafted cocktails.  
*508 E. Eighth St., (512) 243-7874*

### **[La Holly](#)**

This East Side cantina specializes in agave spirits, including bacanora and sotol.  
*2500 E. Sixth St., (512) 215-9949*

### **[El Naranjo](#)**

Chef/owner Iliana de la Vega is a native of Oaxaca; the bar pays tribute with a diverse selection of mezcals.  
*85 Rainey St., (512) 474-2776*