

# The Myriad Makes of Mezcal

I dropped my keys when I pulled them from the door, then nearly fell on my face trying to pick them up. It was almost eleven. I had spent almost four hours at a friend's place, sitting at his kitchen table and trading belts of El Toro Tequila. El Toro is a thick, brown-orange, and so nasty that your face furrows and your head snaps side to side uncontrollably with each quaff. You can make a passable Tequila Sunrise with it, but straight up it is just dreadful. We drank it quite frankly, because neither of us felt like spending money and it had been collecting dust on his dresser for months. Thank God he had salt and lemons.

There was a message on my answering machine. "Hello, my dear, it's me. I'm terribly ill and am coming home tonight. I'll be there by midnight. I may need to go to the hospital. Fetch some soup, some seltzer, and whatever else you can think immediately. I'm terribly dehydrated."

She was supposed to be in Oaxaca until Monday. Hammered, I played the message once more to confirm I had heard what I heard. Yes, she was returning home four days early.

The next hour was a blur. I recall knocking a few things off the shelf at the corner boutique, eliciting a shake of the head from Rahiem. I remember crashing about the apartment, cleaning up the bottles and piling and rinning a couple weeks' worth of newspapers. Tidying, tidying...

Then the doorbell rang. Zeldah was pale and wobbly, weakened from the travel and the inability to eat without violent results. She tossed and turned all night and we had to keep a pail next to the bed. The poor girl, Montezuma was wreaking hell upon her.

A few days later she recovered and unpacked her bags. "For you, love," she smiled, dangling a plastic bag filled with small bottles. Having an El Toro flashback, I reached then recoiled from the bag, only to take it from her hand and offer a kiss of thanks.

There were four bottles of Mezcal. Thank God it wasn't tequila. No matter how good, there was no way I cared to taste it—not for a few weeks at least.

The two are not to be confused. Tequila is made from the distilled fermented sap of the agave tequilhana succulent and is named after a town. Mezcal comes from the Blue Maizey

cactus, not to be confused with the mezcac cactus, whence friends derive mescaline. That said, distillers do use 100% agave and still call it mezcal. I can only guess that they do this in order to make it more easily to sell to tourists, who have dark, grim memories of tequila but little if any knowledge of mezcal.

At its best, tequila tends to be light yellow to white in color, is smooth, but tingles the tip of the tongue before washing the nose with almost orange (not orange juice) scent. Mezcal, as Zeldah's little plastic bag demonstrated, can be any color and taste. It's a blank canvas in which the distiller may paint nearly anything he pleases.

First I sampled Mezcal Anejo, *Legenda del Milagro*, which is as clear as water yet packs a thick pear flavor that's lighter but quite similar to that of flsday single malt scotch like Bowmore's Mariner.

El Mayordomo, *Crema de Mezcal y Menta*, on the other hand, is a light green mezcal that is perfect for drinkers who are trying to hide their problem. It's 40% alcohol and tastes of mint, cool, with no hint of the booze within it. Breathe it on your boss and the worst you'll hear is "My, how thoroughly you rnsed your mouth."

Then there's *Pensamiento*, *Mezcal Repasado*, *Cafe*. It looks like Coca-Cola that has been heavily watered down. As its name implies, it tastes of coffee, and is quite sugary. It can be imbibed straight up, but it is much better to dump a shot of it in your coffee and top it with whipped creme.

The last bottle in the bag was *Mezcal con Zazamora*, a dessert mezcal. It's only 19% alcohol, and its deep orange color masks its magic. It is an extraordinary liquor, for it manages to take two apparently antithetical tastes, blackberry and smoke, and deliver them to the palate one after the other with delightful effect. First the mouth is warmed by the thick blackberry flavor, and then follows a light pear smokiness. If only Zeldah had lugged an entire crate of it back.

I find mezcal charming, for I never can be sure what might come from the bottle. That said, I warn readers against dropping cash on mezcal one hasn't tried. Mezcal is pricey in America, going for \$4 a shot and up and rarely under \$20 a bottle. Ask your favorite barkeep for a tiny sample of what's on the shelf or even to sniff the bottle.

—F. Scot Fitzgerald

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