



Spirit Guide

Mexico's extremely rich cultural and biological diversity make it one of the world's premier beverage cultures. The birthplace and global epicenter of the genus of succulent plants called "agave," Mexico has been distilling spirits since just after the Spanish conquest of 1521, and possibly for much longer. While sugar cane is widely distilled throughout Mexico, it is the agave spirits that are truly unique in the world, and they take center stage at IWSC Group North America's Spirits of Mexico competition. The world outside of Mexico's traditional villages continues to slowly learn about Mexico's scores of regional distilling traditions, and we offer this brief summary of the categories that are currently imported into the United States.

Mezcal

The term "mezcal" derives from the Aztec words for "cooked agave" (*metl ixcalli*). The vast majority of Mexican spirits would traditionally be classified as mezcals, since the historical definition includes all Mexican agave spirits. These spirits are produced from at least 50 different species of agave in at least 26 Mexican states. Production methods and agave varieties vary by region.

In 1997, a Denomination of Origin (DO) region for mezcal was created. As of 2016, the DO is limited to all or parts of nine Mexican states: Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Puebla, Durango, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, and Tamaulipas. To be sold legally as mezcal, a product must come from within this DO region, and be certified by the Mezcal Regulatory Council (CRM). Many people feel that this regimen is unfairly narrow, as it excludes several states that have produced mezcal for centuries.

The Official Mexican Norm (NOM) for mezcal is currently (2016) undergoing significant revisions, and it is likely that henceforth all certified mezcal will be 100% agave, and categorized as "mezcal," "artisanal mezcal," or "ancestral mezcal," according to production methods.

The majority of mezcal brands found in the United States would be classified as "artisanal:" the agave is cooked in earthen pits, the juice is extracted with a large stone mill pulled by livestock, then fermented in open wooden vats, and double distilled in copper alembics. "Ancestral" mezcal is made by even more traditional methods, and "mezcal" in general can be made in more industrial processes. The vast majority of mezcal is consumed *blanco* or *joven* (without aging), though it can be aged in wood, flavored with herbs, fruit, or larvae after distillation, or

made with the *pechuga* process, in which fruits, botanicals, and/or meat are present in the distillation process.

Tequila

Historically speaking, Tequila is the regional mezcal that originated in the Valley of Tequila of western Jalisco state. After achieving Denomination of Origin (DO) status in 1974, Tequila and mezcal became mutually exclusive categories, in a legal sense. The DO territory has been expanded several times, and now is comprised of the entire state of Jalisco, and parts of Michoacán, Guanajuato, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas.

Under the Official Mexican Norm (NOM) for Tequila, the only varietal of agave that can be used is the blue agave (*Agave tequilana Weber, blue variety*). The spirit requires a minimum of 51% of its alcohol to be derived from this agave, and the other 49% can be derived from any non-agave sugar source. The Norm also establishes the 100% Agave Tequila category, for which only blue agave sugars may be used. All Tequilas in the Spirits of Mexico competition are 100% Agave Tequilas.

100% Agave Tequila is further broken down into 5 classes: *blanco* or *plata* may be in contact with oak for up to two months, though is traditionally and generally un-aged. *Reposado* must be in contact with oak for more than two months. *Añejos* and *Extra-añejos* must be aged in oak vessels of no larger than 600 liters. *Añejo* is aged a minimum of one year, and *Extra-añejo* for a minimum of three years. *Joven* or “gold” Tequila, in the 100% Agave category, is a blend of *blanco* and one or more of the other classes.

Tequila comes from one of the earliest regions in Mexico to industrialize, and consequently the Tequila industry adopted brick ovens for cooking agave with steam in the mid 19th-century. Today, the agave for Tequila can be cooked in brick ovens, in high-pressure autoclaves (also with steam), or cooking can be foregone altogether, with large industrial producers opting for chemical extraction of the sugars via diffusors. Most producers extract the cooked agave juice with a chain of roller mills, and both alembic and column distillation are common.

Bacanora

Bacanora is a regional mezcal from the northwestern state of Sonora, protected by Denomination of Origin status since the year 2000. Only eight years prior, Bacanora production had finally been made legal.

Bacanora is made from a regional varietal of the *Agave Angustifolia Haw*, variously called *Agave pacifica*, *Agave yaquiana*, or *Agave Bacanora*, locally. Production methods can be extremely rustic, though in the current period, most Bacanora is made with the artisanal mezcal process described above.

Raicilla

Raicilla is a regional mezcal of western Jalisco state. The term itself is collectively owned by raicilla producers, organized as the Raicilla Promotional Council. The Council has established “rules of use,” that limit to the production of raicilla to traditional methods, generally similar to those described for artisanal mezcal, above.

There are two primary raicilla regions, each with a slightly different culture, methods of production, and agave varietals. The northern sierra of Jalisco, centered around the village of Mascota, primarily utilizes *Agave Maximiliana*, *Agave Inaequidens* and *Agave Rhodacantha*. Many producers cook their agave in above-ground clay and brick ovens, similar to a bread oven. In the coast range, mostly in municipality of Cabo Corrientes, the *raicilleros* utilize several subvarietals of *Agave Angustifolia*, and an as-yet unclassified agave known locally as *cenizo*, which are generally cooked in earthen pits.

Sotol

Sotol is the traditional spirit of the state of Chihuahua, as well as the common name for the plant from which it is made. Sotol plants (sometimes called “desert spoon” in English) belong to the *Dasylirion* genus, and the most commonly used species is *Dasylirion Wheeleri*. They are desert succulents classified in the *Agavaceae* family, but not in the genus *Agave*. To the layperson, they could easily be confused with an agave. As distinct from agaves, however, sotol plants can flower multiple times in their life cycle, and if harvested just right, the remains of the stem can sprout another plant.

Sotol is typically produced in an artisanal mezcal-like process, although Tequila-style steam ovens and a column still are used by at least one large producer.

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