

WRITTEN BY ALEX MENNIE

A league of their own

Meet the three mezcaleras that showcase skill and passion in the production of their beloved products

There are few genuine Oaxacan celebrities in the league of Berta Vasquez. Perhaps only Mayahuel, the Aztec goddess of maguey (and allegedly the mother of four hundred drunken rabbits) is more revered in Ocotlán and the Central Valleys. For example, if you're lucky enough to visit the El Torito palenque in San Baltazar Chichicápam and snap a photo of the Maestra for social media, you'll get comments. Plenty of comments. Mezcal fans who know Berta is an icon in the industry and has been now for more than three decades.

Long before her time as Maestra, her family had already worked in production for three generations. Hard-working men committed to providing for their families have cultivated maguey on these hillsides for centuries, with a traditional approach dictating that the knowledge and expertise of coaxing crisp clear spirit from the clay pot stills be passed from father to son. Of course, this being a family business, the daughters spent time on the palenque as well. As an inquisitive seven-year-old, Berta remembers it as a fun place to be. She would accompany her father and enjoy crushing the piña and eating the sweet maguey. She knew mezcal would have a place in her life, but it was always expected that it would be her husband who took on the bulk of the responsibility, while she

“She knew mezcal would have a place in her life...”

would work in the background to support him. Providing meals for the men working the fields and stills, keeping the house, and raising the next generation to take over in due course.

But that's not how it worked out. While Berta's husband did work in mezcal production, he died tragically young, leaving her with four children to support. At the time, the idea of a woman making mezcal was unheard of in the macho environment of the Central Valley. The women would help where they could, but the majority of the back-breaking work was done by the men. That was just the way it was. But with the family's maguey just drying in the field, and years of work alongside the male production team behind her, Berta was



OPENING PAGES: Roasted piñas at Macurichos
THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Xitlali Ramos of The Lost Explorer at the palenque; Angelica Garcia Vasquez with a bottle of Mezcal Artesanal Tobalá; Xitlali and her father, Fortino Ramos; Angelica Garcia Vasquez



El Torito Palenque, San Baltazar Chichicápam, Oaxaca @eltoritopalenque	
Mezcal Artesenal – made in a copper still.	Berta Vasquez Maestra Mezcalera since 1991 3rd generation (first female)
Varieties Produced	Angelica Garcia Vazquez Maestra Mezcalera since 2009 3rd generation (first female)
• Espadín • Arroqueño • Tobalá • Mexicano • Cuish • Ensemble • Tepeztate • Pechuga • Jabalí • Espacial	

determined that there must be another way.

However, her first attempt at distillation was not successful – renting time to use a man's vats and stills in exchange for the first five litres of mezcal she produced, she mistimed the cut points. “We got two litres of mezcal, and we owed five and we didn't have money,” she recalls. Her plan to provide for her family had just left her in a further position of debt.

Her fortunes were to change, however, when the community came together to help her fund her own palenque. She raised half the money by selling some land the family owned, the remainder came from some local partners who, it transpired, had no interest in actually running a distillery. They >>



THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Xitlali Ramos among the agaves; Berta Vasquez; Emptying the still of agave fibers; Fortino and Xitlali Ramos

structured a deal which meant she could pay them back and keep the site, trading mezcal for beans, tomatoes and chilli peppers before the market matured enough to allow for sale to the on-trade. Although that also did not always run smoothly, with tales of trips, falls and spilt mezcal before finding a willing stockist in the Cuish mezcateria in Oaxaca.

Angelica Garcia Vazquez, Berta's daughter-in-law, remembers her early days on the palenque with less fondness: "It was hard to work with the men – they didn't like women being here. But little by little they adjusted. As did we," she explains. Both women remember the men criticizing them, wondering why they were so keen on doing 'men's work'. For Berta, the response was simple: "I would say, 'My son owns the

palenque. I helped him build it. I need to be here.'" But still she suffered their disdain.

When Angelica's husband died in an accident, she had to take on a greater role. "Nobody wanted to work for me," she explains. "It was my children – who were little – who helped me with what they could". In the low times, she sought solace from the community of Women of Mezcal and Maguey of Mexico. The group helps female producers to promote their distillates and enhance their brands beyond their villages. There is the opportunity for training and the group serves as a sounding board – "we can solve our doubts with the support they give us," Angelica explains.

With this support and the guiding hand of Berta alongside her, Angelica has stuck it out. Her motivation is clear – the need to

provide for her family – but she is grateful to see that times are changing with wives and girlfriends more regularly seen around the production process. In this, she issues a call to other women beginning their journey in distillation: "Stay in the market with your product, because the participation of the men is still greater."

For Xitlali Ramos from The Lost Explorer Mezcal, the inspiration was similar, even if the wider story is not. Like Berta, the earliest memories she has of the palenque are of the maguey cooking. Unlike Berta, however, she always believed that one day she would have her own distillery. From an early age, she felt the drive to get involved: "Some days I used to wake up in the mornings to accompany [my father] to cut maguey. My mother would put my

boots and my hat on and pack some fruit for the road. After much insisting, my father eventually bought me a small shovel and let me remove a little bit of earth from the ground."

Her father, Maestro Mezcalero Fortino Ramos, is an inspiring role model. Having worked in mezcal production for 40 years, he founded his palenque when Xitlali was two years old, and now produces exclusively for The Lost Explorer brand. His daughter speaks proudly of how he has supported and encouraged her to be the best version of herself in her personal and professional life: "In mezcal, knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation; Grandpa or Dad explains, teaches you, and you learn by seeing what they do and how they do it. In my case, my father continues to teach me."

With female access to education rapidly improving in Central Mexico, Xitlali returned to The Lost Explorer after graduating from university and joined a team of women already working on the palenque. While their roles mainly focused on bottling and packaging as well as continuing their work in the kitchen to cater

for the whole team, Xitlali has her eyes on completing her training as a mezcalera. She praises the many strong female characters around her: "All the women directly and indirectly involved in the industry are my role models. Each one of them is unique and brings great advances, qualities, activities and information to their work".

Even with the generational shift, she has faced similar challenges to Berta and Angelica – again stemming from an assumption that women would not be interested in mezcal or be able to do the work. "It has been difficult to show that women are capable of leading a work team of men. But this is beginning to change and will continue to do so step by step," she explains with optimism.

In her opinion, the biggest challenge to female producers is to avoid the often-automatic atmosphere of competition that seems to arise between men and women in the industry. Her drive is to establish a community that shares and unifies efforts to preserve and improve artisanal production methods regardless of whether a brand is produced by men or women.

PRODUCERS The Mezcaleras

For Xitlali, however, the barriers do not just exist between men and women.

"We must also get rid of our own: such as 'I can't', 'I was not born for this', 'I am a woman and this is men's work', 'what are people going to say about me?' and 'what if I fail?'" She maintains a firm belief in the wonders that women are capable of, saying that "each of us is different and we can contribute new visions to the industry" regardless of gender.

While the technical skills of all three mezcaleras are beyond doubt, the one element that propels all to greater heights is what Xitlali describes as the "love and passion for the production of mezcal", and it is these qualities in combination that she believes allows all of them to find success in the market.

United by their passion and determination – whether driven by a simple need to put food on the table, or to show that they can do the same work as the men – these three daughters of Mayahuel will ensure that those unruly rabbits will continue to be drunk for many years to come. 



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The Lost Explorer, San Pablo Huixtepec, Oaxaca @thelostexplorermezcal	
Mezcal Artesenal – made in a copper still.	Xitlali Ramos Maestra Mezcalera in training 2nd generation (first female)
Varieties Produced	Don Fortino Ramos Mezcalero for 40 years 1st generation
• Espadín • Tobalá • Salmiana	