

WRITTEN BY ALEX MENNIE

What lies beneath

Understanding the philosophy behind the production of mezcal, including the interplay between tradition and terroir on the resulting spirit

It may have taken French wine producers some 500 years to distinguish Château Haut-Brion from generic Claret, and it has certainly taken even longer for English consumers to be able to converse confidently about the differences between left and right bank Bordeaux. For Eduardo “Lalo” Angeles, the question is whether there is a shortcut for mezcal.

Angeles is the maestro mezcalero at Lalocura in Santa Catarina Minas. A ‘living

legend’ of mezcal production, he spent years working as the fourth-generation master distiller at his family’s brand whilst earning a degree in agricultural engineering, before setting out on his own in 2014.

No visit to his Lalocura palenque – less than an hour’s drive south of the city of Oaxaca – is complete without a full immersion in Lalo’s philosophy of production. With tradition, terroir, and the sustainable use of natural resources central >>





OPENING PAGES: Maximizing the flavor
THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
Agave fields; Making unexpected
friends; Fermenting

"No visit to his Lalocura palenque...
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wishes to protect, as well as the bounteous variety of agave available across Oaxaca. While Lalo only uses local plants, and knows his land and his crop by heart, he is also producing a vast array of different spirits. A 'simple' tasting at his palenque can run to a minimum of 18 different expressions. Some names are familiar - Espadín and Tobalá, perhaps - but the subdivisions of the latter into Tobalá Orejon (grown in the shade) and Tobalá Chino (grown in the sun) may not be, and that's before you start on the many blends or mixtos that Lalo produces in his living room - tasting each morning before

brushing his teeth to ensure his palate is at its sharpest. This variety is Lalo's passion, but it's causing a headache for him and for others when it comes to helping mezcal reach a wider audience. The product is, by its nature, quite complicated. With expressions categorized by type of agave, region, production process, or even age, navigating the range of products available can be challenging for new or inexperienced consumers.

Naturally the brands have almost complete freedom when deciding how to label their products, meaning that some choose to give the most prominence to the plant used while others prioritise the name of the village or the mezcalero. To many consumers, however, this is just an array of Spanish names, much like to the uninitiated a Bordeaux bottle may just be a baffling number of French names. Amongst this plethora of Spanish, some brands are rising to the challenge of educating the consumer. Deano Moncrieffe, co-owner of the Hacha agaverias in London, is quick to praise those he thinks are going above and beyond. As he points out, when faced with a row of bottles distinguishable only by a series of Spanish names which



to his approach, he is a proud spokesperson for the sheer variety of spirit that can be produced from the 50 or so species of agave that can be used for mezcal. He even goes beyond this to laud the distinct differences between distillates from cultivated plants and those grown wild on the mountain, or those planted in the sun versus the shade. However, at the heart of this passion for the sense of place in agave cultivation lies a threat. As the popularity of mezcal continues to rise, more and more producers are moving in on what is now seen as somewhat of a cash crop. With agave growing wild all over the state of Oaxaca, the sustainability, and even the existence, of some varietals is under threat. "The quality of the wild maguey plants in the mountains is not high enough to produce very big volumes," Lalo explains.

"It is possible that in a few years we won't have these wilder types of mezcal." His approach, therefore, has been to turn to the greenhouse and the principles of permaculture to do what he can to ensure these plants remain for future generations to enjoy. These holistic methods may be relatively new to Western farmers, but for Lalo, it is simply a return to the traditional agriculture of Oaxaca, where every crop is grown in the same field to bring nutrients, security, and humidity for the others. Most importantly, he is also sanguine about allowing selected plants to go to seed - a significant concession when agave can take between seven and 30 years to reach maturity. The seeds produced, however, have their own value, and the nursery at Lalocura can attest to the sustainable future its mezcalero

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could be that of the plant, a town, or the producer, potential purchasers will need to rely on bartenders to guide them.

Naturally, he's keen to single out The Lost Explorer, where he works as a brand ambassador, but it's not simply self-promotion - their bottles provide all the information a consumer needs to understand the product. As well as this, they give prominence to the age of the agave used, a figure that is becoming more and more important to consumer understanding of the sustainability challenges for the category. Finally, The Lost Explorer uses three distinct label colours to prompt consumers to ask 'what's the difference?' and spark that conversation of discovery.

Elsewhere, Moncrieffe praises the approach of Del Maguey, whose range promotes single village mezcal and uses striking labels designed by inventive shapeshifter Ken Price to prompt the same bartender-to-consumer conversations that are key to understanding the variety this spirit can offer. Of course, it's relatively easy to strike up this discussion in a bar such as Hacha, where consumers are looking for that agave deep dive, and the back bar is lined with intriguing-looking bottles, each with a story to tell. The trick, as Moncrieffe is quick to point out, is to allow the same conversations to develop wherever mezcal is served, which puts the pressure of consumer education onto the cocktail bartender as well.

If drinkers are going to learn to navigate mezcal as they've learnt to navigate wine,



it's this level of discussion that is going to be important. Moncrieffe explains, "if you have a Margarita made with Tobalá instead of Espadín on your menu, that needs to be communicated to the consumer. It can't just be 'here's your Mezcal Margarita', it's got to be 'here's your Tobalá Margarita, you might pick up some different flavours'" Presumably these were the conversations that the English wine drinkers of the 17th century were having about red wine when Samuel Pepys recorded his first single estate Bordeaux. Fortunately for mezcal, the conversations will be happening in the most social bars across the planet, and not just in wingback chairs in the clubland of London.

Whether we can move from Claret equals Mezcal to Château Haut-Brion equals Lalocura Rainy Season Tobasiche-Espadín in fewer than 500 years remains to be seen. However, at least the move will be a classless and democratised one, with the power in the hands of the ultimate educator, the bartender. 



THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
Behind the scenes of the early stages
of production



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