The Making of Mezcal
By Karen Catchpole - January 23, 2013

Mezcal, like tequila before it, has been given a makeover as it takes off as the newest hip drink from Mexico. By now, your local bar is probably at least considering adding a few varieties of mezcal to its shelves. Most will come with fancy names, high-design labels, and bottles so elegant you may not be able to bear to throw them away once they’re empty. But the stuff inside—while sophisticated on the palette—is made in a series of age-old processes which involve little more than Mother Nature, a sweat lodge, some copper stills and patience.

Here, the low tech process of making high class mezcal.
“Tequila was good when it was still mezcal,” celebrated Oaxacan Chef Alejandro Ruiz (Casa Oaxaca Cafe, Casa Oaxaca Restaurant, and Casa Oaxaca boutique hotel), says archly as we drive to the town of Santa Catarina Mineros about 30 minutes outside of Oaxaca city. We are headed to Real Minero, one of Chef Ruiz’s three favorite mezcal makers. Real Minero is run by the Mendoza family including daughter Graciela Angeles Carreño and her father Lorenzo Angeles Mendoza. First stop: the fields where Graciela explains that mezcal is made by blending different types of agave (also called maguey). The rarest type of agave used to make mezcal is called tobalá and, incredibly, it is only found in the wild. All attempts to farm it have failed.
Some types of agave can take up to eight years to mature. Once mature, the plants are harvested which kills the plant and the slow growing process starts all over again. Once the agave plants are harvested, the super-sharp leaves are carefully removed to expose huge cores called *piñas* (because the denuded cores look a bit like pineapples). The extremely heavy and dense *piñas* are hard, stringy and uninspiring. To soften the fibers and bring out their sweet, spicy, smoky flavors you have to bake them. The traditional way is to do this in pit ovens in the earth.
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In preparation for the oven the largest of the fresh agave piña have to be hacked in half. This is done by workers young and old, called mezcaleros, who also prepare and construct the intricate in-ground oven using tools and techniques that haven’t changed in generations.
The first step in preparing an agave oven is to dig a big hole in the ground. Then workers light a fire in the hole and cover the fire with stones. Once the stones are super heated it’s time to add the piñas in a complicated patchwork that fits together like a jigsaw puzzle and is meant to seal in as much heat and moisture as possible.
Workers spend hours mixing and matching the piñas, which can weigh more than 100 pounds each, to find the combinations that fit together tightly to create the best heat and moisture seal. Wet agave pulp, reserved from the waste of previous mezcal batches, and more hot stones are used to close any gaps between the piñas. Next, the whole pile is covered with wet tarps, burlap and plastic.
Finally, the tightly packed and sealed mound of agave is covered in dirt which is packed down again and again to create an air-tight seal. A small opening is made at the summit of the mound and water is poured in to create as much steamy heat inside the mound as possible since that’s what transforms the piñas. It’s like a sweat lodge for booze. No agave oven is complete until a rustic metal cross has been driven into the summit of the heap—part shepherd, part talisman. In the end, this pyre contained nearly two tons (1,800 kg) of piñas which is enough for about 40 gallons (150 liters) of mezcal.
Once the agave oven is packed the piñas are left to steam for three to five days. Cooked agave is caramel colored, soft and candy-sweet and bears no resemblance to pale, dense, stringy, bitter raw agave. Once the cooked piñas have cooled enough to handle they’re cut up and the soft chunks are moved into a traditional mule-powered grinding stone where the softened fibers are ground into a mash, ready for fermentation.

The ground agave mash is transferred from the grinding stone to huge wooden distilling vats like those used in wineries or at commercial operations like the Makers Mark distillery. Fifteen to 20 days later the juice, called tepache, is drained from these barrels. Some hardy souls drink this potent brown liquid but most people prefer it distilled.
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Real Minero is one of the few *palenqas* (mezcal distilleries) which still distills using the traditional so-called Filipino method which involves a clay pot above a wood-burning brick oven. It's old-school, though the sawed off top of a two liter coke bottle serving as a funnel to transport each delicious drop from the still into a huge plastic water bottle is a totally modern addition. Most mezcal is double-distilled over a period of about 35 hours. Mezcal makers like Real Minero owner Lorenzo Angeles Mendoza, above, can choose to blend different types of agave to achieve the desired flavor—like blending different varietals of grapes to make a distinctive bottle of wine. The different agaves each have different flavors (woody, sweet, spicy, citrusy, etc.) and blending them is an art form. Oh, and that business about a worm in the bottom of the mezcal bottle? That’s purely for tourists and other amateurs and is in no way hallucinogenic.