

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

## Distillin' SOUTH OF THE BORDER

BY LOGAN WARD

**S**PEND ANY TIME on the outskirts of Oaxaca, Mexico, and you're practically guaranteed to pass a *palenque*—though there's little chance you'll notice. Low-key mom-and-pop distilleries, *palenques* have been a fixture of Oaxacan culture for nearly half a millennium, ever since the Spanish began simmering the sweet

juices of the agave plant to create what was once referred to as *vino de mezcal*. Today, it's called simply mezcal.

In spring, I took a *palenque* tour. Expecting gleaming copper vats, I found instead smoldering pits full of agave, the spiky aloe-like plant that is the sole ingredient (apart from water) in the finest mezcals. A mule pulled an enormous tractor-tire-size millstone around one pit's circular path, urged along its never-ending journey by a hunchbacked man wielding a switch. And our noses encountered a distinctive aroma—a blend of wood smoke and the molasses essence of roasted agave, infused with the odor of a morning's worth of mule droppings.

The rest of the operation was just as primitive—like touring a winery and finding men and women crushing grapes with their feet. If the production of tequila—a variety of

mezcal made mainly in Jalisco state using a particular species of agave—is dominated by a few mass-producing distilleries, most mezcal is still made the old-fashioned way, by more than 350 family-run *palenques*, each producing only 200 or 300 liters per month. "Around Mexico, *mezcal de Oaxaca* is known as *legítimo*, 'the real thing,'" says Jake Lustig, the co-owner of Don Amado Mezcal in the hills of Oaxaca, who sells his liquor in both Mexico and the United States. "Mexicans ball up their fists when they say it: *Legítimo!*"

If you know where to look, some of the *palenques* are not quite so hard to find. You'll need a car—a rental or a hired taxi—and a road map of the Oaxaca Valley. A one-hour drive east of Oaxaca on Highway 190 is the town of Matatlán, home to more than a dozen *palenques*, the best of which is probably that of Enrique Jimenez Monterroza, who calls his brand Mezcal del Maestro. ▲



Reunion Mezcal Distillery, a tiny *palenque* in Santa Catarina Minas, Oaxaca.



### The Tricks

A lot goes into making a good mezcal, beginning with the age of the *piñas* (agave hearts). The sweetest, most nectarous *piñas* are eight or nine years old and the size of small hogs. Also: Many makers use ammonium sulfate to cut fermentation time from 18 to 3 days, but it can ruin the taste, so look around the distillery for the fertilizer-like bags the chemical comes in. Finally: The size of the still fire matters. A rip-roaring sapwood (or propane) blaze beneath the mash produces more mezcal faster. But a slow-burning oak fire evaporates the alcohol gradually, creating a smoother, more refined product.

### El Gusano

The so-called worm (really a caterpillar larva that lives in agave hearts) is neither a mark of authenticity nor a tacky marketing ploy (as the new breed of mezcal importers hoping to appeal to American tastes might lead you to believe). Jacobo Lozano Pérez, the founder of Oaxaca's top-selling export mezcal, Gusano Rojo, launched a lowbrow craze in this country in the 1950s with his grub-in-every-bottle scheme, but the practice has roots in Oaxacan culture. To many Oaxaca Indians, the gusano is an aphrodisiac; to others it's a symbol of the agave's mystical powers. It will not, however, fill your head with visions—that's the mesquite cactus (unrelated), which grows hallucinogenic buttons.

### The Bottle

Most of Oaxaca's *palenqueros* bottle their product only in the literal sense of the word. They pour the smoky elixir into a glass container and that's it. No brand name. No label. No marketing campaign. As soon as a distiller puts an identifiable mark on his bottle, Lustig says, he is susceptible to a storm of government regulations and taxes. The cheap white cap and faintly visible generic crest on the pint bottle I brought back to the States (pictured here) suggests it might have been a recycled booze bottle. Prices at the *palenques* average about 40 pesos (four dollars) per liter—or 20 pesos if you bring your own container.

### The Color

Most mezcal is clear, a sign that it was bottled straight from the still. Mezcal *reposado* (rested)—meaning it has been aged in oak barrels for two to twelve months—is light amber. Mezcal *añejo* (aged), barreled for more than a year, is even darker. Some of the big brands add caramel coloring to make the mezcal look "bourbon-esque," Lustig says. But even the clearest mezcals have a smoky flavor, thanks to the old-fashioned technique of cooking the agave in fire pits rather than steaming or oven-roasting it. This was not the smoothest mezcal I'd ever sipped. It tasted like tequila that had been swished around in a dirty ashtray. Knowing what I know now, I'd choose better.