

# TASTE



A classic margarita gets an infusion of heat thanks to Pink House Alchemy's Mexican Chile syrup. *Courtesy of Pink House Alchemy*

## DRINKS

### Celebrate Cinco de Mayo at home with tequila and mezcal cocktails

Cinco de Mayo falls on the weekend this year, meaning there are more than a few reasons to celebrate the Mexican holiday. It's typical for folks to spend Cinco de Mayo at a bar or restaurant, sipping on margaritas and sharing delicious Mexican dishes. If you don't feel like going out this year, there are plenty of ways to celebrate Cinco de Mayo at home, starting with cocktails. Here are recipes for Cinco de Mayo cocktails that expand far beyond a typical margarita. Whether you prefer drinks fruity or spicy or a little of both, there's a recipe for everyone. But to keep it true to the spirit of Mexico, all drinks are made with an agave spirit of either tequila or mezcal. **SEE CINCO DE MAYO, D2**

#### Mexican Chile Margarita

A classic margarita gets an infusion of heat thanks to Pink House Alchemy's Mexican Chile syrup. The ingredient is infused with chiles, cane sugar, vanilla bean and more for a uniquely spicy flavor profile.

- 1 oz. freshly squeezed lime juice
  - 1 oz. PH Mexican Chile syrup
  - 2 oz. Casamigos Blanco
  - Soda water
1. Combine lime juice, tequila and syrup in a glass with ice. Top with soda water.



Espadin agave being harvested in Oaxaca for mezcal production. Traditional mezcal production starts with agave hearts that are quartered and roasted. They are then pressed for their juices. *Courtesy of Chulele Mezcal*

## DRINK TRENDS

### No, mezcal is not just a 'smokey tequila,' experts say

*"Culturally, they are two very different things. The only overlap is agave."*

Paris Wolfe [pwolfe@cleveland.com](mailto:pwolfe@cleveland.com)

Tequila is running up the popularity charts. And no doubt, it will be hot for Cinco de Mayo drinks.

While everyone is zigging, why not zag? Get into the spirit with mezcal.

Like tequila, mezcal is made in Mexico from native agave. Then the similarity ends.

Mezcal is not "smokey tequila," any more than Moscato wine is a "sweet

Chardonnay." They're different.

Tequila, for example, must be made from blue weber agave and made in Jalisco, Mexico, and nearby states. It's like Champagne only being made from certain grapes grown in the region of Champagne in France.

When it comes to wine and spirits, there are rules. There are international standards. Tequila and mezcal are no exception.

Mezcal, by contrast, can be made from a variety of agave plants or a blend of agave plants, mostly grown in and near Oaxaca, Mexico. The cultivated Espadin agave is most common for mezcal, but many wild varieties are used as well.

**SEE DRINK TRENDS, D3**



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DRINK TRENDS

## No, mezcal is not just a 'smokey tequila,' experts say



Agave hearts are quartered and fire roasted before pressing. *Courtesy of Chulele Mezcal*

Continues from D1

Again, using wine as a comparison, think of the breadth of grape varieties. They're all grapes, but the wines are different. In this case, the mezcals differ from tequila and from each other.

Then there's the smoke. The process of making mezcal infuses the spirit with a smokiness that is part of its very definition. Although some people compare it to the smoky peat of Scotch, others shudder at the comparison. They insist mezcal is unique.

"I get concerned when people call mezcal 'smoky tequila,' because it's not," says Carla Rivera, director of product education for Southern Wine & Spirits in the company's Miami office. "It's a smoky, agave-based spirit made in particular states in Mexico."

"Culturally, they are two very different things. The only overlap is agave," she notes.

Once the agave pinas — the pineapple-looking hearts of the plant — are harvested for mezcal, they are quartered and fire-roasted for four days in large pits lined with volcanic stone. The juice is extracted and transported to wooden vats where wild yeast starts the fermentation. (Tequila agaves are not fire-roasted.)

When the ferment is ready, it goes on to distilling. While it's possible, mezcal does not require barrels or aging.

### EACH BATCH TELLS A STORY

Two U.S. entrepreneurs have recently gone to Mexico and worked with locals to make mezcal, then launch it into the U.S. market.

For Morten Koch, founder of Chulele Artesanal Mezcal, learning about mezcal was transformative. The company is based in Dover, Delaware, with production in Santiago Matatlán, Oaxaca, Mexico.

"I hit a point in my life where nothing seemed to be working," he recalls. He was living in Vancouver, running an e-commerce tire company. So in 2017 he decided to reduce his overhead and seek his purpose. That decision took him to Oaxaca, where it was always sunny and had a lower cost of living.

"I ended up fortunate. I fell in love with a person and the place," he says. "The culture is so much more to life. I fell in love with the beauty of the people, culture, art. Everybody is always creating music, textiles, food, mezcal."

Mezcal caught his attention.

"After growing and learning and experiencing this magic place I want to tell and share that magical story," he says. "The culture is so rich and people, globally, don't really know that story. This culture is so beautiful that everyone should know about it more than doing shots of tequila."

And so, with each small batch of mezcal he produces from Espadín agave, he tells a story.

Chulele Mezcal labels include a QR code that triggers a YouTube documentary about production of that mezcal batch. For example, the Chulele Mezcal Día de los Muertos 2022 single release batch triggers a 13-minute video about Day of the Dead 2022 in Oaxaca.

Chulele Mezcal was just released in the U.S. in 2024. It is made in limited production batches and is only available online.



Roasted agave hearts are crushed to extract juice for fermentation. *Courtesy of Chulele Mezcal*

### GROWTH POTENTIAL

Bosscal Mezcal has a discovery story as well. As owner Nelson Nieves likes to say, "Mezcal finds you, you don't find mezcal."

It found Nieves and his brother after their construction company succumbed to an economic downturn.

"We asked, 'What are we going to do next?'" he says. "It had to be something we're passionate about and recession-proof."

That's when he decided to explore potential in the "vices." But which one?

"We used to have barbecues for our employees (at the construction company)," he recalls. "People would bring mezcal from their villages to say thank you. It would be in a water bottle, a family thing."

In 2014, Nieves realized mezcal was an opportunity. With a small market share and a large interest in Mexican food and tequila, he thought the Mexican spirit had great growth potential.

He appears to be correct. According to Fortune Business Insights, the global mezcal market is projected to grow almost 11% over the next eight years.

In 2016, the Nieves brothers opened their first distillery in the state of Durango. They purposefully avoided the state of Oaxaca, where most Espadín mezcals are produced.

In Durango, they chose to use Cenizo, a type of wild agave common there, for mezcal. Cenizo agave takes nearly twice as long to grow as Espadín. And it's usually found in the wild.

While a sound business decision, it was also a life decision. The magic of mezcal worked on Nelson.

"It was exactly what I needed for my soul," he says. "We got lucky with a young master distiller with four generations of recipes."

Three varieties of the artisanal Bosscal are available in the United States: Joven Mezcal, Pechuga de Conejo Mezcal and Damiana Mezcal. They can be found online and in Ohio liquor stores. They are also served on Carnival Cruises, in Regal Cinemas, in Hooters restaurants and more.



Instead of a margarita, Bosscal Mezcal is used to make a mezcacita. *Courtesy of Bosscal Mezcal*



Clandestina in Ohio City serves mezcal flights in the black clay cups (background) and a variety of mezcal cocktails. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*

### MEXICO TO CLE

Although most bars carry limited mezcal, don't rush to get a passport. Clandestina, a nine-month-old mezcateria on West 25th in Ohio City, carries enough mezcals to keep you busy for weeks. You'll find everything from espadín, the most commonly cultivated mezcal agave, to rare and wild agaves such as arrojuelo, salmiana and tobalá.

And for those who insist on comparing, they have a large tequila list as well.

To help newbies find a favorite, three adjectives describing tasting notes are under each mezcal listed. For example, Mezcales de Leyenda Salmiana is described as aloe vera, citrus, grapefruit; Del Maguey Las Milpas is described as slate, lavender-rose, pea shoots.

Owners Sam McNulty and Ciara Ahern learned about mezcal during trips to Mexico. They decided to spread the fun in Northeast Ohio and opened Clandestina last summer.

Ahern stresses the difference from tequila.

"By nature, mezcal is artisanal," she notes, stressing that production is small batch. "Different producers' products taste so different. It's influenced by the place, people and plants. You can't industrialize that production."

Flights are available and can be customized. The tastings are served in Oaxacan

black clay copitas to keep the experience as authentic as possible. Cocktails are also made with mezcal. And it can be sipped neat or on the rocks.

Clandestina is at 1865 W. 25th St. The bar serves shareable, made-from-scratch Mexican food including snacks, street food, burritos and tamales. For those going authentic, chapulines a la Mexicana or crispy mango-habanero grasshoppers are a great bar snack.

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