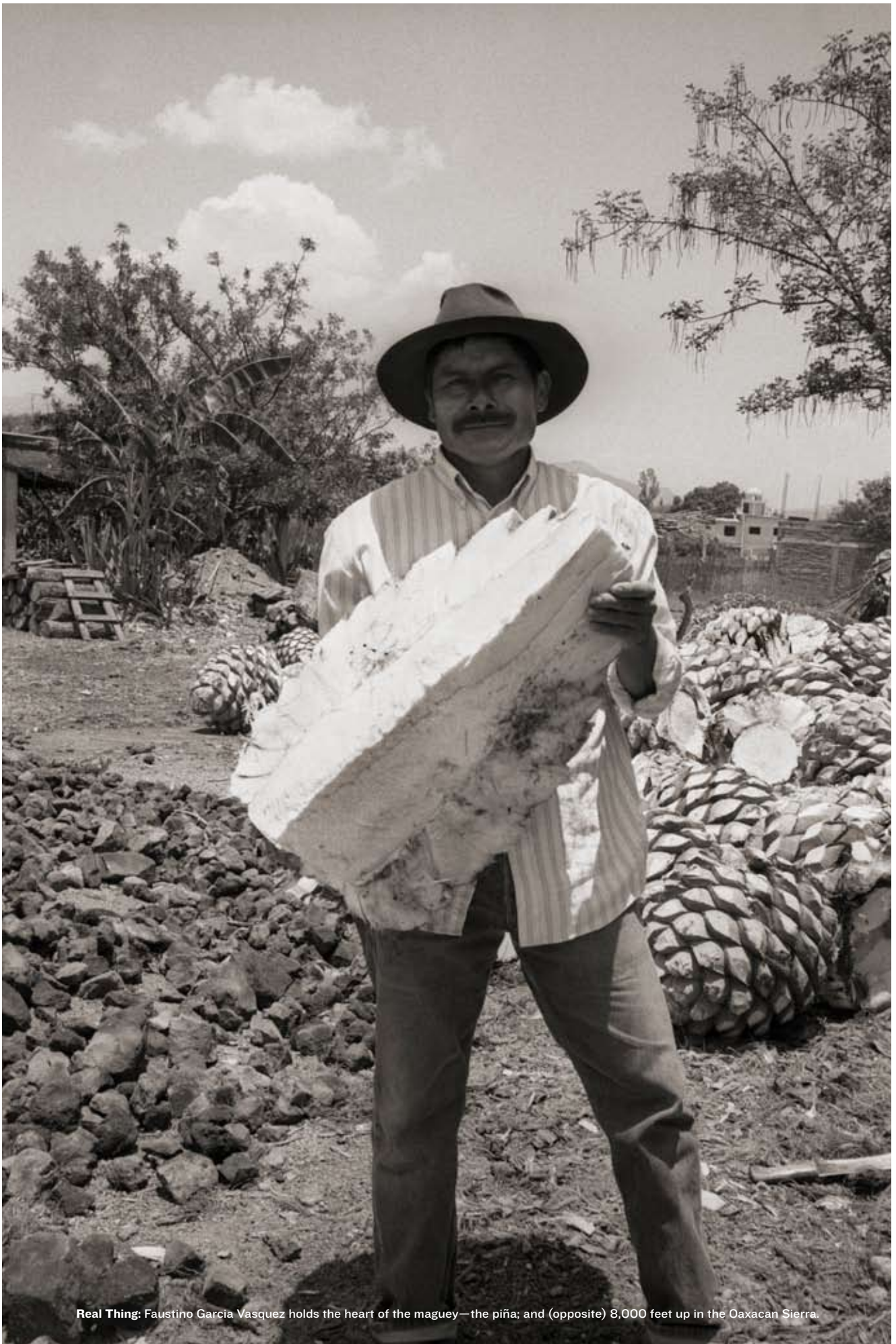


MEZCAL

by WYATT PEABODY / *photographs by* LLOYD ZIFF

produced by JENNIFER STOCKLEY





Real Thing: Faustino Garcia Vasquez holds the heart of the maguey—the piña; and (opposite) 8,000 feet up in the Oaxacan Sierra.



Vision Quest: Ron Cooper, the architect of mezcal's resurrection, atop Del Maguey headquarters.

Free Spirit

Artist RON COOPER has made Del Maguey Mezcal his masterwork—and sparked a renaissance of North America’s oldest spirit

You find yourself tearing down a seemingly endless dirt road in Ron Cooper’s Jeep—a rooster tail of dust marking a path as your body jolts in the backseat. The radio signal renders faint traces of a Mexican narco-ballad on the blown-out speakers, punctuating his diatribes on purity.

At this point, you’re living out a scene from *Apocalypse Now*. Then the stark landscape pulls you back: a labyrinth of trails among steep mountains adorned in a sea of maguey plants—the raw material behind mezcal, one of the most complex and misunderstood distillates on Earth. Your destination is a Zapotec village nestled along the Rio Hormiga Colorada, 8,000 feet up in the Oaxacan Sierra, where village elder and master mezcal distiller Paciano Cruz Nolasco awaits.

Hunched over the wheel is Cooper, the architect of mezcal’s resurrection, who has single-handedly revitalized the misunderstood Mexican spirit. His eyes gauge your awareness in the rearview mirror, and with a 500-foot drop a hair to your right, you realize you’re in the hands of a crusader and that his sense of danger is different from yours. They might someday write *corridos* about Cooper, chronicling his odyssey battling corrupt government regulators, multinational thugs and cutthroat rivals. But mostly they would speak of his drive.

Long before his tangles with mezcal, Cooper was looking for trouble. In his hometown of Ojai, he was surrounded by the likes of Jiddu Krishnamurti, Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts. That was before the demons were born, those that would forge his reputation as a “radical” at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, which he attended from 1963 to ’65, before leaving for “political reasons.” Lifelong collaborations were shaped there—Ken Price, Larry Bell, Terry Allen and Ed Ruscha among them. When pressed about his premature departure, he will only say, “I didn’t like the direction the school was heading.” Integrity is everything to Cooper.

His journey from artist to mezcal producer started with a single question on a summer night in 1970: “Do you think the Pan-American Highway really exists?” It was at Riko Mizuno’s gallery on La Cienega, after a group-show opening that included Cooper. Hopped up on Herradura and hubris, he—along with buddies Jim Ganzer and Robbie Dick—hastily piled surfboards atop a VW van and headed south. Four months later, they hit Panama. En route, the fabled highway led them to the village that Cooper and his company, Del Maguey Mezcal, now call home: Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca.

For Cooper, formative thoughts of Del Maguey began in 1990, and he started following rumors down dirt roads. But it was his art that inadvertently began his fascination with the spirit. Among his works—which have been featured at the Whitney, Guggenheim, LACMA and in a recent show curated by Dennis Hopper at Taos’ Harwood Museum—was the production of a

sculptural limited-edition of 50 hand-blown blue glass bottles bearing the Aztec god of intoxication, Ometochtli, meant to be filled with mezcal, the likes of which few foreigners had tasted.

When his zeal led him to try to cross the border with a five-gallon jug of sacred wedding mezcal—gifted by Zapotec farmers after an eight-day celebration—the Texas border patrol forced him to dump his beloved distillate. He obliged but says, “I decided right then and there I would go into the liquor business. Mezcal like this didn’t exist in the U.S.—nothing even close.”

Mezcal, one of Mexico’s national treasures and the mother of tequila, had long been forsaken for its corrupted daughter. Any time an agave-based distillate is made, it is called mezcal; thus, all tequilas qualify. Tequila is a region, like Champagne or Cognac. It was once called *vino de mezcal de la region de Tequila*. The clichéd notion of *gusanos* (worms) has no place in a serious conversation about mezcal. Since the 1950s, the entire category of mezcal had been hijacked by Mexico City marketers, who used lurid gimmicks to sell inferior spirits. The only notion of it in the United States was through false, adulterated products.

Of late, there has been an explosion of mezcal in the press—whispered about as the *next* spirits category. After years of the overmarketed artifice of big brands, the artisan cocktail movement raised the bar for quality along with its demand for authenticity. The purity of true mezcal took the industry by storm—its distinctive earthiness, herbaceous undertones and elegant smoky qualities taste unlike any other spirit. Bar chefs the world over are enthralled by it, and the reverberations have made their way down to the back roads of Oaxaca, where factories are sprouting up like golf courses in a desert.

Cooper is the least likely person to call this a *sudden* transformation, as he conceived of the metamorphosis more than two decades ago. Del Maguey calls its incarnation “single-village” mezcal. In essence, his methodology gives *palenqueros* (mezcal producers) the freedom to produce their libation using methods the indigenous people of Oaxaca have been employing for more than four centuries.

While mezcal is made in other parts of Mexico, Oaxaca has historically produced the most sought after renditions. The result is a distinct character and purity from village to village. The Zapotec people are up against multinational might and multimillion-dollar facilities—like those found in the state of Jalisco, where tequila is made—complete with laboratories and plush tasting rooms, and with minimal resources, they still produce a better product.

Unlike the nearest competition, these unblended spirits are made by family producers in remote villages with varying microclimates. Like their ancestors, they still make offerings to deities, in exchange for permission and blessings, before harvesting for the revered spirit, which they regard as a spiritual entity.

While Del Maguey distillates have always been organic, they are also approved by OCIA, making them one of the first mezcals in the world with organic certification. There are just two ingredients: water and piñas—aka the heart of the maguey—which are roasted over hot stones, covered with earth and eventually mashed in either horse-drawn stone mills or by men with mallets, depending on the village. After completely natural fermentation in wooden vats, the liquid is distilled in wood-fired clay or copper stills, true to its 16th-century roots and, as Cooper





Same As It Ever Was (opposite): *Palenquero* Nolasco harvests maguay in the village of San Luis del Rio. **Means to a Magical End (from top left):** Mezcal comes to fruition, as maguay plants are grown and harvested; chopped piñas are placed in pits atop heated rocks, covered with earth and maguay leaves and left to caramelize; baked piñas are crushed, fermented and distilled; and, finally, Cooper and Marquez reflect on the virtues of the roast.



Home Brew: Historically, mezcals are stored in 25-liter black clay *cántaros*.



Good to Go: Clay sipping cups filled with Cooper's elixir sit in the shadow of Del Maguey bottles.

says, “leaving room for the will of God and maguey in the bottle.”

Steven Olson, renowned wine and spirits expert, has exalted the virtues of Cooper’s Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal for more than a decade, calling it “the most complex, versatile and rarefied distillate on earth.” Internationally celebrated gastronomic innovator José Andrés—of the Bazaar at the SLS Hotel in Beverly Hills—says Cooper’s creation is “the best thing a man can put in his mouth.” They share an affinity for his Pechuga mezcal, from the village of Santa Catarina Minas—among the most scarce and coveted bottling on earth. But for Cooper, it’s really about his passion for preserving a culture.

Cooper was green and organic long before such concepts were popularized. Del Maguey pays fair-trade premiums over and above local industry standards and encourages educational programs to achieve sustainable production. Among the locals who are directly impacted by the efforts of Del Maguey are 150 women from two villages who weave traditional palm-fiber bottle covers, a family of ceramicists who make the company’s signature sipping cups and employees of the bottling facility. Each bottle’s top is hand-dipped in organic beeswax recycled from the local church’s offering candles, bringing yet another spiritual layer to the process.

Del Maguey has worked to expand the consciousness surrounding the native cultures of Oaxaca and mezcal as a spirits category. Cooper has taken ambassador *palenqueros* to the United States to be celebrated as true artisans, and hundreds have in turn visited the *palenques* of Del Maguey. It has become a right of passage among international libation cognoscenti. And it is within this group that Cooper has found a sense of community and vitality he hasn’t experienced since the art scene of L.A. and New York in the 1960s.

“But they better enjoy that sense of communality now,” Cooper cautions, “because the zeitgeist won’t last long with commercialism chipping away at its soul.” And while he has benefited from the artisan cocktail movement and a demand for higher quality spirits, in the absence of this culinary craze, he’d still be living in a Zapotec village among these people.

The sacred nature of Del Maguey is a natural outgrowth of Cooper’s unbending ethos and residual principles from the hippie era. “When it was just me, Pancho and the Indians, we were living in paradise, surrounded by the most gracious, beautiful people on earth,” he says nostalgically. Pancho Martinez, the oldest of four brothers, who has been Cooper’s right hand for nearly two decades, is a master Zapotec weaver and the stubborn keeper of customs for his bloodline.

Things changed, seemingly for the better, in February 2005, with the coming of NOM (Norma Oficial Mexicana) federal production regulations—think FDA for spirits—which Cooper welcomed in his quest to eliminate adulterated mezcal from the marketplace. However, with the Mexican government’s push for purity came a thirst for increased tax revenues. “You can’t have a verifier looking over your shoulder all the time when you’re making art or mezcal—it spoils the heavenly transcendence you feel when you’re right on,” Cooper says.

As Hopper, his friend for more than four decades, explains, “Ron’s art was always forward thinking. He created work using minimal materials before others even thought about doing it.” The same sentiment could obviously be applied to Cooper’s focus on mezcal—in terms of both vision and materials.

Does Cooper still find time for artwork? To those who would unwittingly pose the question, he might just look at you—fire in his eyes—and say, “What the f--k do you think this is, man?” ♦

MEZCAL Cocktails

photograph by BRIAN LEATART

Currently managing Cole's Red Car Bar, **Raul Yrastorza** will be opening Las Perlas—a "shrine to mezcal"—in early 2010, with owners Mark Verge and Cedd Moses. The creations on this page are a few of the planned libations. He attributes his inspiration to "having walked the *palenques* with Cooper and met the amazing people who make these rare spirits." For recipes and cocktail videos, go to latimesmagazine.com. —WP

PALOMA DE CEREZA

LA TIERRA Y LAS FLORES

JUQUILA

FIZCAL DEL MAGUEY

