

Info 101: What is mezcal?

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L.A. Cocktails Examiner

Aaron Vanek

The mezcal revolución starts here and now.

You may have heard the whispering campaign aligning mezcal with mescaline, hallucinations, vision quests or aphrodisiac bottle worms. All bunk. Here's the truth.

Mezcal (or mescal) is a very old type of alcohol, going back to the Aztecs in Central America. It originated with the consumption of *pulque*, a milky liquid derived from the fermented sap of the agave plant, which is native to Mexico and has been used by native peoples for a millennium or more. The beverage has mystical origins and was usually drunk by priests or possibly their sacrificial victims.

The Aztec goddess of the maguey (agave) plant is **Mayahuel (pictured below)**, who is associated with mother's milk and nourishment. Mayahuel's children are collectively called *Centzon Totochtin*, which translates into "400 Rabbits", and they were believed to have frequent parties and cause drunkenness—a New World version of Bacchus or Dionysus.

Currently it is debated whether the Spaniards brought the distillation process to Mexico or if the Aztecs, a well-developed civilization, already had it before the conquistadors settled. Regardless, mezcal is, roughly speaking, distilled *pulque*. Instead of fermenting maguey sap, mezcal is produced by days of slow-cooking the heart of the agave plant in an underground pit lined with volcanic rocks, a similar process to *barbacoa* meat. The pulp is traditionally crushed by a large stone wheel pulled by a horse or donkey, and fermented in oak vats. The liquid is distilled in alembic-style copper or sometimes clay pots. Most commercial mezcals today are twice distilled. Mezcal can be bottled directly from the still (called blanco or plato), or aged in casks for a month to years. It's called *reposado* if aged less than a year, *anejo* if more than a year.

Mezcal was made across central Mexico, wherever agave grew. Many small villages and families had their own production and still do. Their history is analogous to single malt Scotch whisky distilleries. This process lasted hundreds of years. In the late 1700's, a man named Jose Cuervo petitioned the Spanish government for a license on a very specific type of liquor, which he called "Mezcal de Tequila," or mezcal from the town of Tequila, in the state of Jalisco. Thus, tequila was born. Besides region exclusivity (only a few regions around and including Jalisco), tequila solely uses the Blue Weber agave plant, whereas mezcal can use more than 25 strains, and be crafted in many provinces.



Outside patio of Las Perlas, the headquarters for the mezcal revolution

Tequila is usually steamed above ground and at least twice distilled (sometimes thrice), but mezcal is still cooked underground. This gives it a smoky flavor, sometimes light, sometimes strong, akin to peaty Scotches. Tequilas usually have a much cleaner taste that's simpler and more direct. Mezcals, like Scotch, vary widely depending on age, area, the type of agave, or even batch to batch. In my experience, even young (*joven* or *plato*) mezcals can taste like *reposado* (rested) tequilas; there's always a complex flavor profile to them that tequilas don't usually get until they've reached the *anejo* stage.

Finally, all tequilas are mezcal, but not all mezcals are tequilas.

Illegal Mezcal, a company who acknowledges they're barely a step up from Mexican moonshine, held a tasting at LA's premiere mezcal bar, Las Perlas, on Monday. Each of the three ages we tried were barely similar, with the *reposado* having the strongest and smokiest taste to it.

Illegal was founded by John Rexer, who fell in love with the spirit while touring the Oaxacan region of Mexico. He would smuggle tiny batches of mezcal from villages in empty soda bottles across the border to his speakeasy in Guatemala, called Café No Se (“I don’t know”). He has since gone legit, the company name a wink to the bootlegging days. The incorrect spelling derives from the fact that the U.S. Tax and Tariff Board (TTB), wouldn’t allow a liquor to be sold bearing the word “Illegal” because shoppers might think it’s illegal (although some American consumers are idiots, they have smart lawyers).

This was the first official tasting at Las Perlas (see bar review in next article), hopefully igniting a fire in Angeleno’s palates for something similar yet different. As Rexer says, “Mezcal is not a product. It is a culture. It is as nuanced as the hands that made it.”

There are mezcal cocktails, and a quick n’ dirty use is to substitute a young mezcal for any tequila recipe. For more fun, try using it in lieu of Scotch in, say, an Old Fashioned or a Blood and Sand.

I welcome your comments on any mezcal you sample (skip Monte Alban). This is uncharted booze territory, folks. Let’s party like 400 rabbits.

PS-Mescaline derives from peyote, not agave. Like absinthe, you won’t hallucinate from drinking mezcal (you might pass out drunk). The worm is a marketing gimmick—eating it won’t do anything but leave a bad taste in your mouth.

EDIT: Tequila Examiner Ryan Kelly informed me that some mezcals, such as El Zacatecano, are using more modern tequila processes, i.e., only blue weber agave, baked ins tone ovens, double distilled.

A downtown Los Angeles pearl in the rough: Las Perlas tequila and mescal bar

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Las Perlas

107 East Sixth Street, Downtown Los Angeles; 213-988-8355

The newest gem in the 213 group's crown of downtown LA cocktail bars is Las Perlas, which means "the pearls" in Spanish. The name originates from the tiny bubbles of foam that appear when quality mezcal is shaken slightly. President of the 213 group Cedd Moses and his business partner Mark Verge anointed Raul Yrastorza (El Carmen) as their officiant at this temple to the "mystical" maguey (agave) plant and its products, tequila and mezcal.

Las Perlas is located off the sidewalk in the nationally registered historic Beaux Arts-style Sante Fe Building. Built in 1907 by UCLA benefactor W.G. Kerckhoff, the most famous tenant was the Santa Fe Railroad, which occupied several floors. Today, Las Perlas faces Cole's (and Varnish, but they can't see each other), and the Association. I can affirm with certitude that those four venues make for a sick bar crawl.

The logo of Las Perlas is the rabbit, 400 rabbits to be exact. This is homage to the Aztec god Centzon Totochtin, son of Mayahuel, the goddess of agave. Centzon was the deity of drunkenness and revelry.

Ricki Kline designed Las Perlas to resemble an Oaxacan cantina, receiving an AIA nomination for it. The L-shaped area has a smoking patio that overlooks the Sixth Street sidewalk, where the barest crack of billiards breaks are audible through the wrought iron doors.

Hundreds of tequilas and mezcals are available, but only a few names and pedigrees are listed on the intentionally crude signage: busy chalkboards near the ceiling and hand-drawn cardboard menus reminiscent of "Will Work for food" homeless resumes. There was one ingredient to the "400 Rabbits" cocktail that I couldn't read from penmanship, but that attracted, not scared me.

The cocktails designed by Raul and Julian Cox (Rivera) include house-made syrups, bitters, herbs, Mexican sugars and salts, and local seasonal fruits and veggies. The emphasis, however, is on shots of exquisite artisanal tequilas and mezcals, handcrafted in small batches from small villages in Mexico, served in little clay pots with tops. The friendly staff loves to talk about the history of mezcal and tequila, and they will recommend choices for you abased on your tastes. You won't find anything with a worm; only the good stuff is here.

Las Perlas already feels like a secret Mexican dive bar (except cleaner and smells better) after only four months of operation, especially since the phone number listed on their website is disconnected (Edit: the website number was wrong, the one above and on the website is now correct). But it's a club open to anyone who walks in the door with proper ID. If you show up more than once, you may be privy to some of the "behind the bar" bottles that aren't yet listed on the card or chalkboard. It gets loud and crowded after 11pm on weekends.

Las Perlas makes for a great casual hangout where you can either nurse a cerveza on tap or sip some very exclusive, very expensive agave-based spirits.

But if you see a horde of bunnies, stop drinking.

Hours

Monday to Thursday and Saturday – 7pm-2am

Friday 5pm-2am

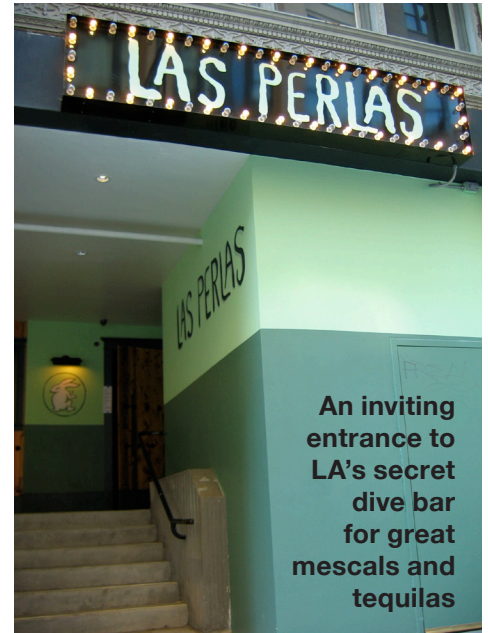
Closed Sunday

Happy Hour

All night Monday

Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, 7pm-8pm

Friday, 5pm-8pm



An inviting
entrance to
LA's secret
dive bar
for great
mezcals and
tequilas