

## Worms, Cactus And High Prices!

These three things usually produce a story from someone's youth that led to a horrible morning after. Tequila is surrounded by myth and legend which is why so few people truly understand this incredible spirit.

Mezcal is commonly mistaken for being the true Mexican version of Tequila. These two products are very similar and mescal production led to the drink called tequila but they are considered to be completely exclusive of each other with regards to spirit classification because of the differences in the distillation process between the two.

The Government of Mexico defined the areas and products that can be used to create tequila in 1994. They outlined how production and distillation is to be executed and which regions can be said to produce mescal and which can produce tequila. Both products use the agave plant but it is the way the plant is processed and the spirit is produced that changes the flavour profile and purity ranking.

All "Tequila" is produced in Jalisco state whereas mescal is made in various states. Therefore the relationship between the two spirits is analogous to that of Brandy and Cognac. Simply put all Tequila are Mezcal but not all Mezcal are Tequila!

Tequila is made from the agave/maguey plant not a cactus. Cactus, while used in traditional Mexican cooking is not used to make alcoholic drinks. The Agave plant is actually related to the Lilly. The Agave has a huge "heart" in the center of the plant which can weigh anywhere from 60-400 lbs each. Before the sap is harvested the hearts are baked or steamed in ovens above the ground. Similarly mezcal is made from agave that is charred on palm mats in open pit underground ovens.

Once distilled usually 3 times some are aged in oak barrels which provide a stronger flavour and colouring and are called añejo. The tannins from the barrels colour the tequila while flavouring it at the same time. Añejo are usually the more expensive tequilas but prices for all varieties have increased over the last 5 years. The reason for this is the declining number of agave plants due to various fungal infections and other environmental factors. The price of tequila is reflective of the limited amount of product for consumption around the world.

There is no worm in a tequila bottle! The worm is a marketing ploy initiated by American bottlers with hopes of increasing sales in the 1940's and is not a traditional garnish! This "worm" also does not have any psychotropic effects nor is it really a worm. The bug in the bottom is a butterfly caterpillar and can be found in some mezcal bottles but not usually in tequila bottles. Some mezcal

bottles have a bag tied to the neck. This bag contains dried and pulverized butterfly worm (gusano), salt and chili powder used for a rim for shots.

Next time you are looking to purchase a tequila try to do a little research on the distillery before you go to the store and pick one that will provide you with the flavour you are looking for.

Jeremy's Picks: Sauza Hornitos, Tequila Lapis Añejo, Cuervo Tradicional Resposado

Notes: Tequila Blanco (white, little or no aging), Resposado (straw coloured, mild aging sweeter taste), Añejo (gold colouring, aged 4 years or more, smooth full flavour)