

# SPIRITS News

*A detailed look into the connoisseurship and the complexities of Mexico's finest liquors.*



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## Agave Spirits: A 2015 Report from Mexico

By David Driscoll

Ever since the great whiskey boom of 2009, we've been bringing you in-depth reports on the happenings in Scotland, Kentucky, and the rest of the American craft whiskey scene, as well as a number of single cask offerings exclusive to K&L. We've also branched out into brandies, making annual visits to both Cognac and Armagnac, while working closely with local producers to secure stocks of interesting and value-priced spirits to help supplement the new excitement surrounding aged spirits. Yet, for all the hoopla over barrel-aged booze, there's talk of a growing movement south of the border. Sure, whiskey is still the hottest drink around, but the world's largest drink companies are hedging their bets on one of the fastest-growing categories of the last 10 years here in the States—the great agave spirit of Jalisco: tequila.

Just like American drinkers once graduated from boxed wine to Bordeaux, those same college kids who once suffered the worst hangover of their life after a late night in Tijuana are discovering the reason for their ills: quality makes a big difference. Most of the tequila we once swilled on the dance floor at Papas & Beer was not made from 100% agave. It had all kinds of low-grade distillate mixed into it, which is what made us sick after drinking too much of it. Today's aficionado, however, has learned that tequila made from 100% agave (without the cheap neutral stuff) is as clean, complex, and satisfying as a gin martini or a glass of Scotch whisky—plus, as you'll read later in my interview with Rande Gerber, those awful hangovers are far less likely when you drink the pure stuff. The more that we learn about high-quality tequila, the more Americans are crossing over to the expanding number of premium options in the market today.

Then you have *mezcal*, the backwoods brother to tequila, and maybe the most complex distilled spirit of any kind. Long shunned as the harsher, smokier substance with the worm in the bottle, mezcal (also spelled as mescal) and the region of Mexico where it is primarily distilled, Oaxaca, are beginning to create a new wave of foodie tourism from around the globe.

Not only is Oaxaca the culinary center of the country, but mezcal is beginning to be understood as the wine equivalent of the spirits world—a product that showcases terroir and the inherent flavors of more than thirty different species of agave, over the softer, smoother flavors of barrel maturation. Mezcal producers talk about their spirits like vintners. They stress the importance of quality fruit, clean harvesting conditions, and the mineral contents of the earth where the agave was grown. Restaurateurs in Oaxaca talk about mezcal like sommeliers in San Francisco: “This one has more minerality, and this one more of a floral bouquet.” Unlike tequila, which is always made from one type of agave, mezcal is not so much about being “smooth” as it is about being the purest possible expression of that particular harvest.

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I've gone to both Jalisco and Oaxaca multiple times over the past few years, and I've met with a number of different producers in the process. In my travels, I've become a serious believer in the potential of agave spirits to captivate and to inspire, but I've realized recently that tequila and mezcal are two very different things. They are far more apart from each other than Armagnac is to Cognac, and completely less comparable than, say, Scotch to bourbon. I see them as two unique spirits being made the same way, with the same

process, but for entirely different reasons. Because of this, they will appeal to an entirely different set of drinkers. But how do you know which one of these spirits is ultimately for you? That's what I'm here to help you figure out.

In understanding a bit more about both tequila and mezcal, how they're made, who they're made by, and what they taste like, you can ultimately decide if this diverse new market of agave spirits is for you. And if you decide that it is, then I've got all the info you'll need to navigate its many selections like a pro.

## Tequila and Mezcal: Quick Reference Guide

Tequila and mezcal are made with similar processes and distilled in similar ways, but let's quickly break down what exactly those processes are. The agave plants are harvested, the leaves hacked off, and the *piñas* then cooked. In Oaxaca, the *piñas* are generally roasted in earthen pits, whereas in Jalisco they are generally baked or steamed in an oven. From there, the *piñas* must be broken down into a fermentable fiber (think of this as crushing the grapes), so the general practice has always been a giant stone wheel drawn by a horse or donkey. The *piñas* are crushed into a pulp, then transferred into wooden vats for fermentation. After five to eight days of contact with water and yeast, the agave liquid has an alcohol content of 5-8% and is ready to be distilled. Generally with tequila, only the liquid from the fermentation is put into the pot still, whereas with mezcal the solids usually go into the still as well. The liquid is distilled to about 35% ABV, then put back into the still for a second distillation, resulting in the final product.

Tequila, much like whiskey or brandy, is generally categorized by age. Blanco, or silver tequilas, are completely unaged. Reposado means the tequila has been "rested," having spent two to eleven months in wood. Añejo refers to a tequila with at least one year of age. Extra añejo means the tequila has spent more than three years in wood. Seeing that all tequila is made from the same species of agave—*agave azul* or blue agave—the only distinctions that usually adorn the label refer to maturity. Mezcal, on the other hand, is an entirely different ball game. Everything you know about wine classification comes into play when trying to find your way around the mezcal category. Let's check out the options:

### Mezcal Classifications

**By varietal:** Just like some wines are labeled as Cabernet Sauvignon, and others as Merlot, there are *mezcales* that are labeled by the species of agave used to produce that particular spirit. Sometimes this can be a simple espadin distinction (a species that can be cultivated and farmed in the region), while at other times it might be something like madre cuixe or tepextate—rare and wild species of agave that must be foraged by hand. The rarer and more exotic the species of agave, the more expensive the mezcal (it's like truffles).

**By village:** Just like the French label their most famous Bordeaux and Burgundy wines by commune or village, some producers of mezcal choose to label their spirits as San Juan del Rio or San Baltazar. It's assumed that certain regions have traditional ways of making their spirits, so by marketing the name of a specific village, the consumer can come to expect a certain style or level of quality in the product.

**As an Ensemble:** Just like we have claret or "Super Tuscans" in the wine world, which refer to specific types of blended varietals in the *cépage*, many producers like to create marriages of different agave distillates. These are usually labeled as "Ensemble" and often will include the specific species of agave used in the recipe. Unlike whiskey, these are not individually distilled spirits being blended together, but rather various species of agave being co-fermented and co-distilled.

**Like tequila:** If it ain't broke, don't try and fix it. Since most customers are used to silver or blanco, reposado, and añejo tequila, why not use the same distinctions for mezcal? Many producers found it easier to mimic tequila in order to gain a foothold in the market.

**By speciality:** You know how your family has that old secret recipe for a punch bowl or for your grandmother's spaghetti sauce? Many Mexican distillers have similar traditions for creating specific specialities of mezcal. You'll often see the word *pechuga* (which means "breast" in Spanish) on a mezcal label, meaning the mezcal was macerated with a raw chicken or turkey breast before bottling (it's actually delicious). In the case of Mezcal Vago, they have an expression called *elote* (corn) that was macerated with toasted corn for a richer and creamier flavor. Other mezcales might be flavored with fruits, nuts, or other forms of roasted animal.

**Simply by producer:** What about the old-fashioned way? The name of a brand, pure and simple. Nothing more than a catchy name.

As you can see, the categorization of mezcal follows many of the same organizational strategies used for wine, because in both cases, age isn't the primary focus. So, now that you're up to speed on how agave spirits are made and how they're classified, it's time to introduce you to some of our favorite producers.



*The revered pot stills of Feliciano Vivancos distillery in Arandas.*

## Tequila: A World-Class Sipping Spirit

By David Driscoll

**Unlike mezcal, which in my opinion is more for the adventurous wine drinker than the after-dinner spirits sipper, tequila has never been softer, smoother, and more delicious than it is today.**

As I mentioned in the introduction to this newsletter, we've come a long way since the days of Jose Cuervo and that four-day hangover you couldn't shake back in 1987. Most of what's available on the super premium market today is made from 100% agave spirit (rather than a mix of some agave with cheap grain distillate), and enters the market without coloring or added caramel. There's a sense of pride today in drinking tequila straight up, or at the very least on the rocks. Margaritas no longer require gobs of sweet and sour to mask the harsher flavor of the tequila itself—just a bit of simple syrup with fresh-squeezed lime juice is all it takes. Not only is tequila being appreciated for its approachable and versatile flavors, it's being matured for longer lengths of time, a process that is coaxing out new flavors of spice and richness, and is putting the spirit right next to Scotch and Cognac in terms of delicacy and elegance.

Whereas Oaxaca is like the Wild West with its country moonshine and renegade philosophy, Jalisco is becoming more focused on acceptance in the greater marketplace. With better harvesting practices, cleaner distillation, and top-quality barrel programs, tequila producers are slowly beginning to adopt world-wide standards of quality spirits production and to utilize these practices for the creation of top-quality distillates—and the market is reacting. However, much like Scotland used to be, Jalisco is a state full of producers for hire. Few brands are even Mexican-owned, let alone

operate their own distillery in Mexico. You simply create a label, find a producer willing to sell you some juice, and hire a truck to drive all that hooch over the border. For that reason, it's important to know which distilleries are behind which products, and that's why knowing your NOM numbers can be a help.

What's a NOM? It's a *Norma Oficial Mexicana*, a four digit number given to each distillery by the Tequila Regulatory Council that identifies the producer behind the brand on each bottle. If you're curious to know who's making the tequila in your bottle at home, there are a number of NOM database search engines online that will allow you to plug in the number and see the result. You might be surprised by what you find. For example, we carry three different brands at K&L made at NOM 1414—Felicianos Vivancos y Asociados in Arandas, Jalisco. There's a reason for that, of course. The Vivancos family is known for producing some of the softest and most delicate tequilas in all of Jalisco, so it's only natural that so many different brands want to work directly with them. Because we do so much work with the distillery, I figured it was important to get down to Arandas and see a world-class tequila operation with my own eyes.

You can see the red soils of Los Altos stretching down into Arandas as you drive up to the distillery gates—a mecca for Highland agave distillation. Besides their mineral-rich agave, part of what makes the Vivanco tequilas so special is their yeast production and fermentation process. They actually plant citrus trees alongside their agave fields so that the pollen will drop down and spread onto the agave leaves, encouraging the cultivation of natural airborne yeast in the *campos*.

When the agave is harvested, they scrape the leaves and collect the residue in a petri dish where they then begin a strain for fermentation. In talking with Sergio Vivanco about this process, I was curious as to if this was something his family had always done, or if it was a relatively new discovery that resulted in better-tasting tequila.

“At the beginning we did the same as every other distiller,” he told me. “We used to use a bunch of commercial yeast to turn the *mieles* into alcohol. At that time, twenty years ago, we didn’t know that the yeast was a very, very important step for the profile of the final product. We eventually went to the university to get more knowledge about this subject to improve what we do. Did I tell you how we do the fermentation?”

“Yes,” I responded, “you cultivate a natural yeast strain from the agave and then play classical music loudly to help stimulate it, right? It’s a great story.”

“That’s right,” he laughed. “When you start with a small amount of yeast—for instance, if you start with Champagne yeast—you can switch it to produce a different profile. You can start with Champagne yeast to get the fermentation going, but then switch to a natural yeast strain for a totally different result. We put a small amount into a small bucket to get it started, but then we switch it over to a bigger container—about 10,000 liters. Then we introduce the natural yeast. Once the natural yeast gets going in there we transfer that over to the larger tanks and it really gets working. The beginning, however, starts with a fistful of Champagne yeast.”

Vivanco distillery ages most of their spirit in used Jack Daniels barrels, adding a soft and subtly sweet touch to their wonderfully delicate reposado expressions. Three of our best tequilas are all made at Feliciano Vivanco distillery in Arandas: ArteNOM reposado, Siembra Azul, and Gran Dovejo. All three brands subscribe to the new wave of tequila philosophy: creating unadulterated spirits, stressing the importance of the agave itself, and educating consumers about the difference these factors can make in the ultimate flavor of the tequila. It is therefore quite telling that all three brands have turned to Sergio and his brother Jose Manuel for help in this quest for tequila purity.

**Gran Dovejo K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Añejo Tequila (\$59.99)** Our single barrel offers a flurry of black pepper, sage, savory herbs, and a faint whisper of baking spices, yet the palate is never hot, spicy, or fiery in any way. The texture is delicate, the alcohol completely tamed by more than a year in oak. The wood acts more like a modifier in this tequila, rather than the focus. It’s an añejo expression that bridges the gap between pure agave flavor and top-shelf luxury.

**Gran Dovejo Reposado Tequila (\$39.99)** The reposado is the most understated of the bunch—mild mannered, hinting at greatness, but never unleashing its full fury. I enjoyed it and found it to be quite tasty on the finish, long and gentle.

**Gran Dovejo Blanco Tequila (\$34.99)** The blanco is outstanding—vibrant, expressive, bursting with citrus, flowers and spices, but finishing cleanly. This is easily the most exciting blanco I’ve had in over a year and it will speak to any true tequila sipper out there. A benchmark for white spirits.

**ArteNOM Seleccion 1414 Reposado Tequila (\$44.99)** This is an incredibly understated reposado that absolutely blew me away with its uniqueness and mild-mannered profile. Nutty, bready, with cinnamon bursts and spicy cloves on the palate.

**Siembra Azul 10th Anniversary Reposado Tequila (\$49.99)** Already one of the best tequilas we sell, David Suro’s Siembra Azul decided to dial things up a notch in celebrating 10 years of business. The 10th Anniversary Reposado combines a standard reposado batch of Vivanco’s tequila with older barrels of 3-plus year old extra añejo juice, to create the richest and most rounded reposado you’ve ever tasted. The nose is a haunting bouquet of baking spice, butterscotch, and pepper, with hints of toasted oak lingering in the background. The palate is a delicate wave of subtle spice, black pepper, and roasted agave notes, with a finish that’s both robust and clean. There’s never a trace of sweetness or vanilla, as the palate is dominated by a dry and dusty spice that teases decadence, but restrains itself in favor of elegance and balance. It’s a monumental tequila, truly worth of celebrating a decade in the business.



*Eating birria for breakfast in Atotonilco.*

### Enrique Fonseca and Cimarron

While the Vivancos have a distillery right in the middle of Arandas—next to their Highland agave fields—other producers may be located in one region of Jalisco, yet source their agave from a completely different area. Enrique Fonseca and his NOM 1146 La Tequileña distillery would be one such example. Enrique Fonseca’s family has been growing agave in Jalisco since the 1880s, each new generation learning how to cultivate the plant in the fertile soils of the Highland region. Today Enrique, from the fourth generation of Fonseca farmers, is the largest private owner of agave in Jalisco. However, while most of his holdings lie near his amazing hacienda near the town of Atotonilco, his distillery is on the complete opposite side of Guadalajara in the town of Tequila, a three-hour drive from where he lives. Purchased from Bacardi in the late 1980s, La Tequileña Distillery isn’t the most romantic-looking distillery, but it is one of the best-equipped. With five pot stills and even a large column still (on which he does distill tequila, making him the only producer I know of to use one for quality spirits), Enrique is cranking out high-quality distillates using many strategies that set him apart from other *tequileros*.

While there are plenty of other tequila distilleries with column stills, very few of them (if any) use the still for anything beyond neutralizing their agave spirits at super-high proofs. A column still is a great way to make green, unripe agave taste like flavorless, odorless, burn-free “tequila.” Enrique, on the other hand, uses only one or two plates in the column and makes delicious, peppery, and slightly vegetal expressions with the equipment left by Bacardi. The still itself is an experimental model that allows him to play around with different proofs. Until visiting this distillery, I had no idea that column stills were even allowed in tequila production. The main requirement is that it be double-distilled.

Getting to sample the different distillates right off the stills was one of the most amazing parts of the tour. The high-proof pot still tequila was almost like white whiskey—fruity and expressive, yet entirely tangy in a way. The column still tequila was intensely spicy. Neither tasted like I expected them to. “These are the spirits that go into the incredible Purasangre and Cimarron tequilas,” I asked, completely shocked. “They’re still very tender, as we just distilled them,” he told me. “We need to wait a few more weeks for them to settle.” I also learned that, much like most rums are created, most of Enrique’s expressions are marriages of both pot and column still, which prompted me to mix both together and sample the result. “Ah,” I exclaimed, “that tastes right.” It’s amazing to think that the recent Fuenteseca we mixed up likely has both distillates within it.

What else sets Tequileña apart from other distilleries? How about the fact that Enrique uses autoclaves for ovens? “That’s kind of controversial,” I said, “because people see the idea of pressure cookers as accelerators, a way to get more in less time.” To which Enrique smiled and said, “Yes, David, but we only use it on the lowest level (under 1.0 atmospheres), to create the longest possible cook.” It was never Enrique’s idea to use these steel containers, but much like with the column still, if they came with the distillery and they work, why not use them? As long as you’re making tequila the right way, who cares what the equipment looks like?

And what does that statement even mean—to make tequila the right way? It’s tough to know unless you’re aware of what many other distilleries are doing that, to me, constitute the wrong way: adding glycerol to the final product, creating an artificially-smooth mouthfeel; adding urea into the fermenting wash, accelerating the yeast to convert the sugars at a more rapid pace; and the now commonly-practiced technique called diffusing, a process introduced by the big boys that moves the agave along a conveyor belt while hot water is sprayed along the top, basically liquifying the important contents of the agave and eliminating the need for roasting or steaming. The liquids are simply collected, cooked, fermented, and distilled without all that chopping, shredding, or baking. You can make a lot more tequila that way, but of course it will taste like...well....

Enrique uses a patented, self-engineered screw press (which I cannot show here as Enrique is protective about this proprietary technique) to essentially squeeze the juice out of the agave without the need for shredding or mashing—processes that can easily strip essential sugars from the juice. What that means is that while other tequila distilleries



Life on the ranch at Enrique Fonseca’s tequila compound.

are getting 6-8% ABV out of their *fermento* (or wash, or *mosto*), Enrique is putting his into the still at 15% ABV due to the extra sugar. He ferments only in large stainless steel tanks, allowing him to control the temperature and create a long, slow process to obtain that extraordinary percentage. Yet another aspect that separates Tequileña from the pack is Enrique’s various maturation vessels. He uses large foudre-like, wooden vats to age some of his reposado expressions, and he loves to experiment with different wood types. Legend has it that he created a special, limited-edition tequila for William Grant back in the day that used Oloroso sherry butts.

We have a number of different tequilas from Enrique, including the Fuenteseca, a private marriage of older, incredibly mature tequilas that we blended ourselves—exclusively for K&L.

**Fuenteseca Ensamble “2014 Edition” K&L Exclusive Extra Añejo Tequila (\$99.99)** This edition of Fuenteseca is an explosion of intensity. It begins with a blast of black pepper, lime, salt, and clean agave flavor (like chewing on the sweet, cooked fibers) and quickly moves into a flurry of clove and cinnamon. The finish, however, is where the magic happens: holiday spice cake, cocoa and cinnamon warm the minute-long finale. It’s the best of youth and age in one tequila.

**ArteNOM Seleccion 1146 Añejo Tequila (\$49.99)** This añejo is made to showcase the oak without overshadowing the agave. The nose is amazing! Again, subdued and needing to be coaxed, but incredible when it finally arrives. Nutty aromas with toasted vanilla, but neither rich nor oaky. Warm baking spices on the palate, which is incredibly lean for an añejo. Black pepper and fruit on the finish with more roasted nuts. Divine!

**Cimarron Reposado Tequila (1L \$21.99)** The reposado is mellow and soft on the palate, offering a much lighter and less rich flavor profile than some of Enrique’s woodier expressions under the Pura Sangre and ArteNOM labels. It’s almost too seamless.

**Cimarron Blanco Tequila 1L (\$15.99)** This blanco is cleaner and lighter than the Pura Sangre blanco (also from Enrique) and mixes into Palomas like a breeze.



*Rande Gerber and George Clooney love to drink Casamigos tequila.*

## Drinking to Drink: Tequila with Rande Gerber

By David Driscoll

When I started doing a series of “Drinking to Drink” interviews earlier this year, the goal was to talk with interesting people from all walks of life who truly enjoy the act of drinking—not just the bling, or the brand names, or the rarity of something collectable and cool. You may not be as aware of it as I am, but a good many people in this modern world are not drinking alcohol because they like it. I talk with people every day who buy expensive bottles of alcohol as investments, with no intention of actually drinking the highly-collectable liquid they purchase. Others get caught up in the specifics. They enjoy drinking numbers, statistics, and scores, but I’m not sure how much they actually enjoy sitting down with old friends and tossing a few back. That’s fine, of course. Everyone has their own reasons for bringing home a bottle. I’m just constantly worried that we’re going to lose focus of why we drink alcohol in the first place: to have fun.

I’m always asking D2D participants if they can recommend someone else for the series. Is there someone interesting out there who truly loves to imbibe for the sheer joy of it? Two of my previous interviewees told me straight up: “No one likes drinking more than George Clooney.” Somehow that didn’t surprise me. “You get him and Rande Gerber together,” one person told me, “and you’ll never see two guys enjoying their alcohol more than this pair.” I always figured that Clooney would be how I ended the D2D series: bagging the ultimate white whale, unlike Ahab, and finishing this whole drinking adventure on a grand note. I would have to save George for another time. Rande Gerber is actually more intriguing to me at this time, because he had just started a new tequila project (with George), and

I had begun to see him and his famous wife Cindy Crawford all over the news, always wearing a Casamigos T-shirt to support the up-and-coming brand.

Rande Gerber also has experience in the liquor business. He made his start in South Beach with a number of renowned bars and restaurants famous for their atmosphere and mood. The guy has been incredibly successful over the past twenty years in encouraging other people to drink, and to focus on the enjoyment of alcohol over everything else. I knew he was the guy I wanted to talk to. When I sat down for a phone conversation with him last month, I was quite taken aback by how easygoing and humble he was. His new brand Casamigos may seem like another celebrity endorsement, but it’s really just a drinking project he started with his pal George Clooney that was forced into legitimacy. They’re not joking when they say it’s a tequila “brought to you by those who drink it.” Rande Gerber drinks so much tequila that he was actually given an ultimatum: start your own brand, or say bye-bye to your favorite liquid. I know what I would have done, and that’s what Rande did, too. He forged on, in the name of good booze and good times, making him the perfect candidate for a little Drinking to Drink interview.

In this edition of Drinking to Drink, we talk about Rande’s love of good atmosphere, how his quest for the best tequila turned into quite a production (literally), and how Cindy Crawford never thought she’d be drinking glasses of straight liquor until she tasted Casamigos. Previous editions of the **D2D series** can be found by clicking [here](#).

**Rande Gerber**

**David:** You're a celebrity with actual experience working in the alcohol industry. You opened a number of trendsetting bars in your day, known specifically for their creative atmospheres. Can you talk about how your previous position compares to owning your own brand today?

**Rande:** It's funny, because people thought that it was only natural for me to get into the liquor industry simply because I used to own a number of restaurants, bars, and clubs, but this is a very different business. When I first got into the bar business over twenty years ago, I wanted to create a place that felt like my apartment in New York—like my living room, or a place where I would want to go, or typically entertain. When I entertain at home, I light some candles, burn incense and play some good music. The only thing missing from my place were the waitresses waiting on us. We had to get the drinks ourselves!

**David:** But you were comfortable, at least. Mood is important when enjoying a good drink.

**Rande:** Yes, and I wanted to create this rock and roll lounge atmosphere that really started out of my desire to have a place where I could just entertain my friends. That's when I opened the first Whisky Bar at the Paramount Hotel in NYC. It was a very small space—only about 1,000 square feet—and I truly designed it like my apartment in New York. It had these comfortable couches and club chairs, dark wood, it was very dimly lit with candles everywhere. I burnt some incense, made playlists, and had a very friendly staff. It was all about creating an atmosphere conducive for people to socialize. From then on I just kept opening these bars and lounges in hotels, and what I loved about that was creating an atmosphere that really felt like your local bar. It was nice for the people staying in the hotel, whether a tourist or someone there on a business trip, because you didn't really have to go far to get the local vibe of the city. These bars attracted people from around the city and the locals from the neighborhood would come there.

**David:** Because everyone's attracted to a great drinking space...

**Rande:** Yes, and it was nice because it wouldn't be the same people every night. You never knew who you were going to meet, or who was staying in the hotel. Plus, the guests really got the energy of the city, right downstairs in the lobby at the bar. To me, that was a fun aspect of it. I never worked with promoters. It could be Monday, or a Wednesday, and there were always good people there. It was nice to have a place where seven nights a week you never knew really what you were going to get or who you might run into.

**David:** So your affinity for celebrating the social side of drinking has brought you over into the actual drinks business.

**Rande:** I wouldn't say it brought me here. George and I created this out of sheer necessity and desire to drink the best tequila. We like to drink—it's no secret. We really like to drink, and we're fortunate enough to be able to afford some of the finer things in life. And that

includes liquor. For us, it wasn't about starting a business. In fact, the furthest thing from our mind was getting into the liquor business. At the time—a little over seven years ago—George and I were building homes in Mexico and spending a lot of time there. And, as you do when you spend a lot of time in Mexico, we were drinking a lot of tequila, and we were searching for the right one—the one we thought could be our house Tequila. We would stay in different hotels and different bartenders would recommend their favorite tequila. Some of were good, some not so good, some very expensive, some not so expensive. There came a point when we said to ourselves, "Why don't



we just make our own? We've been drinking so much tequila, we haven't found the perfect one, and we have tried many. Why not do our own?" So I thought that was a great idea, but it's probably not as easy as it sounds.

**David:** Right, and where do you even start?

**Rande:** We were fortunate that our friend Mike Meldman, who is also a partner in Casamigos, had friends and partners in Mexico who could introduce us to different distilleries. So we looked at the different options and we found one that we really liked. These guys were truly passionate about tequila-making and sticking to the old-fashioned methods. We met with them, we told them what we were looking for, and we knew what we wanted. We knew our flavor

profile. We wanted the best tasting, smoothest tequila and we wanted it exclusively for us—as in, for our own personal consumption. It was never intended to be sold.

**David:** So you were just buying it in bulk for George and yourself? That’s crazy! You knew you could handle that much tequila and you had faith in their production?

**Rande:** Well, because we weren’t making it to sell, we could take our time. We had the patience—and fortunately the money—to get it just right. The process took us two years to perfect, and 700 bottles of samples later we poured a glass, looked at each other, and said, “Wow! This is it.” Everything was right about it. So they would put it in these plastic bottles for us with a sticker that said “Exclusive RG GC MM”—and we would just drink it that way. We started turning our friends on to it and people were so excited about it and the fact that it was so good, they just wanted to sip it straight. It didn’t remind them of the typical tequila from back in the college days—when you’re hungover from doing shots of it.

**David:** I love it when people drink a great glass of tequila and have that a-ha moment.

**Rande:** Right, and besides it being so smooth and pure, our friends found that even after drinking it day and night, straight up or on the rocks, they weren’t hungover the next morning. For us, that was important.

**David:** Of course! When you drink the way we do—I’m assuming we’re on similar levels of consumption—you want the purest possible stuff. It makes a huge difference.

**Rande:** Exactly. For us, we don’t like mixing it with juices or anything else, we wanted the purity of the agave. So we were drinking it for years, and our friends began turning their friends onto it, until we got a call one day from the distillery, and they said, “Listen, you guys are either selling this stuff on the side, or you’re drinking way too much of it. We’ve been through 1,000 bottles a year for the last two years.” We were like “Wow!” (laughs). We hadn’t been paying too much attention, actually. So they said, “The only way to keep doing this is to start a company because we can’t keep sending you tequila and calling it ‘samples’ anymore.”

**David:** I was wondering how this was getting done logistically. They were passing all those bottles through as samples! That’s hilarious!

**Rande:** That’s when George and I said to each other, “What do we do? Do we really want to start a company?” What we definitely did not want to do was stop drinking our own tequila. We wanted to keep making it. So we said, “Why not?” If we sell a bottle, great. If we don’t, who cares? As long as we get to keep drinking it, that’s the important thing. So we started a company and brought it to Southern Wine & Spirits. We sat with about ten executives at a large round table and they all poured a glass, tasted it, and they were blown away. They said to us, “Here’s the deal: with or without your names attached to this, we love this tequila and we want to be your distributor. We are on board.” That was exciting for us. Now we had SWS, the country’s biggest distributor excited about it.

**David:** I’m sure they appreciated the story as well.

**Rande:** We told them the story of why we did it, which is where the name came from. Casamigos is the name of our homes in Mexico, and loosely translated, means “house of friends.” And that’s really what the whole project was about—a bunch of friends getting together, good times, creating memories over a bottle of Casamigos. So we launched it and it pretty much took off immediately. Word got out that you have to try this, and I think people appreciated the fact that it was not a celebrity endorsed product. Casamigos is made by us, for us, made by friends to share with friends. It’s our money behind it, it’s the name of our homes, it’s our lifestyle, and I think people liked the authenticity of our story. We’re not hired to put our name on a brand. Of course, our name is on the brand because we taste, sign and number every batch before it goes into the bottle.

**David:** You’re basically saying: “Hey, we’re the ones drinking it.”



**Rande:** Right. “It’s brought to you by those who drink it,” is our tagline, and, since people know George and I like to drink, it’s the truth. Two years after we launched, we had people entering us in these competitions, and we began winning them all. So, once these contest awards were announced, giving us top honors, and the tequila aficionados began giving it their stamp of approval—saying, “Hey, this is the real deal”—that really took us to a whole new level, because it legitimized us. We always knew the tequila was great. We knew we loved it. But getting the stamp of approval from the experts was what ultimately had more people trying Casamigos and loving it.

**David:** As someone who’s famous, do you think it’s difficult for a celebrity to do something outside the realm of what he or she is



usually known for and be taken seriously? Do you think there's a hump they have to get over in terms of legitimacy or credibility?

**Rande:** I think it depends. Consumers are very smart: you can't fool them with a fancy bottle and an ad campaign made up by some big marketing agency. You're not going to fool the consumer. They want quality in a product, which is why our money went into what's inside our bottle. I think if you're a celebrity and you're putting your name on something to make money, there may be some who believe that you're actually excited about that product, but I think most consumers don't really care. They don't really care about your name, they want what's inside the bottle to be the best. Having a celebrity name attached may help get your product out there, and it may get people to try it once, but only a quality product will keep them coming back.

**David:** What I really like about your brand is that—in this new era of boutique spirits where everyone's an expert, and consumers actively search out information so as not to be fooled or taken advantage of by these big brands—you're not marketing Casamigos with the same tired buzzwords to prove your authenticity. You're marketing what you think is a really good tequila, but you're also saying that you like it because it's smooth, it doesn't give you a hangover, and you have a really good time drinking it. These are qualities that I think most consumers, and therefore brands, are afraid to talk about anymore because they think talking about alcohol in this way displays a lack of connoisseurship.

**Rande:** I think that's to our benefit.

**David:** Me, too! I think it's utterly refreshing. It's not just a bunch of technical stuff that most people don't understand anyway. It's based purely on enjoyment.

**Rande:** We're just a couple of friends who love tequila and want to share it. We know what we like—and we drink it. Many of these bigger companies have these huge budgets and hire these big marketing teams, to come up with a story to convince people that they have something great. We didn't have to make up a story. Even our bottle design we have is just the same label that the distillery was sending us our samples in—it was just plastic when we were getting it. We turned the plastic bottle into glass and put a cork in it. There is nothing made up about Casamigos. It's our brand, we run the company, we didn't hire consultants or experts to tell us what to do. We're doing this our own way, and I'm sure we'll make mistakes along the way, but they'll be our mistakes. We don't have to put our decisions in front of a board, we don't have to put budgets together. It's our money in the brand, so we can make our own decisions and then immediately go with them.

**David:** Organic growth of this type is the best possible kind in this business because it means you're not a flash in the pan, it means people are slowly coming around to your product through word of mouth and solid recommendations. Have you noticed steady upward growth since you launched?

**Rande:** We're the fastest growing ultra-premium tequila in the country, and it's not because of George and me. People try it once and switch from whatever they were drinking to Casamigos.

**David:** Yes, letting your own passion for something inspire others

around you—naturally and organically—is an incredibly powerful process. It's the model that I've used here on the blog. You just tell people what honestly excites you as a person, and you just kind of let it spread to those who feel like listening.

**Rande:** That's the exciting part about all of this: the fact that we truly do live our brand. We wear our Casamigos shirts, custom made for us to be comfortable and to fit just right (laughs). Everything that we're doing here we're doing for ourselves. We're extremely fortunate and happy, however, that other people also appreciate our dedication, what we have, and what we're doing with our brand—and we're excited to share it. Casamigos is the house of friends; we're not exclusive. We're all-inclusive. We want everyone enjoying it and creating new memories over a bottle. That's ultimately what got us started.

**David:** How do you drink your tequila versus Cindy? I'm guessing she's on board?

**Rande:** We drink it mostly the same way. I drink it either straight up or on the rocks, and she drinks it on the rocks. She never mixes it. No lime, no salt. She loves the fact that she can go out and drink Casamigos, and then work the next morning, so she doesn't drink anything else at this point. It's funny because now all of her girlfriends drink it the same way and they say, "I never thought I could drink any liquor just straight on the rocks." Once they started drinking Casamigos, that's all they wanted. Cindy was at Cipriani in New York last night drinking it. She told me, "I walked in and I was so happy when I saw I could order it there." So she had a great time eating great Italian food drinking Casamigos with her girlfriends in New York, which proves that you don't have to be eating Mexican food to enjoy tequila. Whether its Italian at Cipriani, or sushi at Nobu, Casamigos goes with everything. I think people are really beginning to enjoy tequila wherever they are, which makes us feel great. It's nice to see all of the new places carrying Casamigos because customers are asking for it.

**David:** We're at a really interesting place in the spirits industry right now because the last decade has been about getting away from big brands, or going back to old-timey names. Having fun was kind of shunned by the connoisseur crowd because it meant you weren't serious about your booze. Now we're headed towards this combination of both—fun, but with a quality-oriented mind-set. People want to separate themselves from all the stuffiness that's taken over an activity initially rooted in pleasure rather than pedantry. When I look at Casamigos I have to think you guys are at the forefront of this movement. You're basically saying, "We too like to drink the good stuff, but we're not afraid to kick back and have fun while we do it."

**Rande:** Many brands stick to what is safe and they look very similar because of it. Dress up in a tuxedo, hire a DJ, rent out a penthouse, and have a fancy party where you serve whatever brand you're marketing. They think that's what people aspire to do. For us, of course we're fortunate to have access to some of the finer things in life. We get invited to charity functions and support organizations, and we go to Hollywood parties. But we're the kind of guys who would rather be in the back room with the employees drinking Casamigos, rather than out in the front schmoozing with the others (laughs). That's how we live our life, so we took that genuine approach and hoped we could get

that message out there. We're more about jeans and T-shirts, sitting outside by the beach, having a barbecue, and drinking Casamigos. It's the reality of how we entertain and what we actually do.

**David:** I can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear a brand owner talk about consumption and atmosphere rather than the specifics of production. Getting down to the essence of drinking—drinking to drink, and for the purpose of enjoyment—was my goal when I started doing these interviews. What's funny is that when I asked two of my previous participants—Steven Soderburgh and Lorenzo di Bonaventura—which Hollywood star they thought truly appreciated a good drink, they both said Clooney. I think it's great that you and George are known within your own circle as guys who really do like to drink. It's not an act. You're just two dudes who want to open a bottle and start pouring.

**Rande:** (laughs) That is indeed true. We do like to drink, and we also like to laugh and we like to share it. Having fun with old friends and meeting new ones. That's what it's all about.

**David:** It's being with friends in those great moments that ultimately makes booze taste better, in my experience. As someone who works in a retail store, I hear people tell me about some great wine they had while sitting in Tuscany with friends, having an incredible meal while staring out towards the vineyards. In my head I'm thinking: "It wasn't the bottle. It was being in Italy with your friends!"

**Rande:** That's so true.

**David:** If you could have a drink with someone you admire or that you've never met—alive or not—who would it be?

**Rande:** Well, I'm fortunate to have been able to have a drink with a number of people I admire. But, I would have to say my father. He passed away about six years ago before he really got to experience Casamigos, and he is someone who really appreciated family, good friends and great times, and he loved to drink. I would love to have a glass with my dad.

### Casamigos

**Casamigos Blanco Tequila (\$39.99)** What catches you right off the bat with the Casamigos blanco is how round and supple it is. There's a mouthful of sweet roasted agave and a fruitiness that makes the palate creamier than most other blanco tequilas. You can see why people are quite taken with Casamigos after drinking lesser tequilas. It's a shining example of how full and supple a fruitier blanco can taste when it's well-distilled.

**Casamigos Reposado Tequila (\$44.99)** With just a bit of barrel aging come warmer flavors of vanilla and baking spices, but with that same richer, rounder mouthfeel. There's a hint of peppery agave on the forefront, but the finish is more of that toasted oak and vanilla with hints of cinnamon and clove.

**Casamigos Añejo Tequila (\$49.99)** The dark and quite-robust añejo showcases the spice and the savory side of tequila after spending more than a year in oak. There are flavors of dark cocoa and sandalwood, with hints of dried herbs and chocolate. Those looking to have a cigar on the patio at their favorite Cabo San Lucas hotel will be pleased to pair it with this.



*The Highlands of Guadalajara.*



*Driving into the mountains of Oaxaca.*

## Oaxaca: In Search of Terroir

*By David Driscoll*

**I'm not sure what people think about Oaxaca, if they even think anything at all.** But let me clear one thing up for you: Oaxaca is not some little rinky-dink village in rural Mexico where all the houses are humble and the establishments modest and minute. No. Oaxaca functioned as the seat of Cortez during Spanish colonial rule, and the city itself is nothing but immaculate, filled with beautiful architecture and a vibrant local culture. The streets are clean and cobblestoned. The buildings are orderly and in perfect condition. Oaxaca is completely cosmopolitan. It just happens to be in a rather remote area, out of sight from the everyday hustle and bustle. There are little mezcal bars everywhere, just a quick cut away from the main strip, with atmosphere galore, dripping romanticism. People here are drinking mezcal, and they're drinking lots of it.

### Danzantes

I was in town to visit the folks at Los Danzantes, a restaurant group out of Mexico City that ended up buying their own mezcal distillery. It was in Coyoacán, a well-to-do neighborhood of Mexico City, that Jaime and Gustavo Muñoz opened their first Los Danzantes restaurant—not too far from Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul. The two brothers (identical twins) wanted to showcase the quality of fine Mexican cuisine, and that meant sourcing all the best foods along with the best tequilas. The spirits game in Jalisco, however, proved difficult for these two newcomers. In looking to source an exclusive house product, neither brother was able to find a reliable or trustworthy source of tequila of a quality they were happy with. At that time (around 1996), due to a bad burn on a tequila barrel deal, they decided to look towards

Oaxaca instead. It wasn't long before their affection for the region and its potent potion of mezcals took hold. Less than a year later they had purchased a distillery site (a *palenque*) and begun branding their own spirits under the Danzantes name.

About thirty minutes outside of Oaxaca City sits one of the most heralded production centers of mezcal in the region. I don't know that I'd call it a modern distillery, but Los Danzantes has what is by far the most efficient and streamlined operation I've yet to visit in Oaxaca. It's still pretty much a hands-on facility, but everything looks orderly and well-maintained. It's both rustic and highly functional: Three pot stills on the main floor next to the fermentation vats (to make the transfer of fermented agave much easier) and two additional pot stills on the upper level for wild agave distillation and projects that require more attention. I was really, really impressed with their outfit.

Next to the front door sits the office of Karina Abad Rojas, the head of production for Danzantes and one of two main distillers at the facility. This woman is nothing short of amazing. She is without a doubt the most competent distiller I've ever met, in the sense that she not only knows everything about the science and the chemistry of distillation, but also about the agricultural background of the base product itself. Unlike most of the Danzantes management (from Mexico City), Karina is a native Oaxacan who knows the terrain like the back of her hand. She can tell you what the soil looks like in the mountains along the Pacific Coast, how that specific *tierra* affects the sugar in the agave grown there, and what those conditions will ultimately translate to flavor-wise when distilled. Not only can she tell

you all of these things, she can do it calmly and with complete patience. She's not only a great distiller, she's the best educator I've yet to meet in this industry—and I'm communicating with her in a language in which I am far from fluent. She takes the time to speak slowly, in detail, and with a sly smile so that you know she's enjoying herself as she does it. She summarizes concepts clearly and with easy-to-understand analogies. She's humble when she describes her work, with no ego, and no chip on her shoulder whatsoever. She's more interested in listening than talking, but won't hesitate to chime in when something needs to be said. I was glued to her side for 48 hours because I can't get enough of her. This woman is the epitome of talent and grace when it comes to the booze business. If I were going to put the future of mezcal into anyone's hands—as a spokesperson or beacon to lead the industry forward—Karina would be my first choice, by a long shot.

While listening to Karina talk about mezcal and the particulars that impact the flavor of each distillate, it sounds more like she's talking about wine than spirits. She's more concerned with the sugar levels in the agave at harvest time, about the soil types in the mountains versus the valley floor, and how the rainy weather may have affected ripeness, than she is with the shape of the still or the proof of the mezcal as it slowly pours out of it. While talking to her about a special blend of mezcal she was working on, she mentioned that it was partially made from an agave called *sierrudo*. I asked her how she came upon this particular type and she told me the story of a farmer in Matatlan who had planted *espadín*, but somehow wound up with a bunch of *sierrudo*. "He found these gigantic *piñas* in his field years later—twice the size of his normal *espadín*—and wasn't sure what had happened," she said, "so I decided to buy some to see what a mezcal made from this agave would taste like."

You hear stories like this in the wine industry: about growers who plant a varietal in their vineyards, but end up with a bunch of Pinot Blanc, or some other varietal that somehow managed to sneak its way into the field. There have been plenty of growers who thought they were planting Chardonnay, but actually ended up with Pinot Blanc because the vines, leaves, and clusters look so similar to one another.



*The triple pot stills at Los Danzantes distillery.*

On top of that, I've spoken with a number of wine producers who label their wines as single varietal, but will tell you off the record that there's a bunch of other grapes blended in, because in reality they're making what's called a "field blend"—a marriage of whatever happens to be growing on their property. When you're dealing with agriculture it's hard to be 100% black and white. Nature usually has its way of throwing you a curve ball, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's about working with what the earth gives you. With both wine and mezcal, the attention is primarily on the growing conditions and the flavors of the base materials themselves, whereas with whiskey the distillers are normally much more focused on the production methods and the maturation process.

The other species of agave Karina used in her special recipe was called *cuishe*—a long, thinner, wild agave that's part of a larger family of *Agaves silvestres*. Going back to wine as an analogy, this would be consistent with grape varieties that are often part of larger families of similar types. Muscat, for example, has many different versions and relatives in the wine world—more than 200, actually: Black Muscat, Muscat de Alexandria, etc. In addition to *cuishe*, there's also *madrecuishe*, *bicuishe*—each a little different than its close relative. The wild *cuishe* that Karina used for her distillate was

harvested from the mountains just south of the distillery.

Much like with grapes, there's a huge difference in the flavors of mountain agave versus flatland, valley floor agave. Napa, for example, has a region called Howell Mountain, an AVA known for producing powerful and long-lived Cabernets like Dunn. There's also Spring Mountain, where Keenan Winery makes incredible, structured wines with balance and delicacy. There's a number of reasons for the supremacy of mountain fruit, but much of it has to do with climate, drainage, and sun. When you grow crops on the side of a mountain slope, you don't have to worry about flooding because the excess water runs downhill. The grapes don't get too much sun because at some point during the day it will be on either side of the hill. Higher elevations also tend to be cooler, which allows for a longer and slower ripening process (you don't make a flavorful soup by boiling your vegetables in water for five minutes). The same is apparently true for mountain agave.



*Crushing agave with the stone tahona at the palenque in Santa Ana.*

Take everything you know about making a great wine from the best possible grapes, and it all applies to the production of mezcal: the various varietals that impart a variety of flavors, the co-fermenting of various types to create a more balanced cépage, and the desire, in most cases, to minimize the impact of wood on the ultimate flavor of the product (or add it in, depending on the producer's stylistic preference). The way that these mezcal producers talk about their mezcales is identical to how a winemaker talks about his or her wines. They're both stressing the same agricultural fundamentals and the same details of importance when referencing the quality of their products. Maybe that's how we should start talking about mezcal in the United States—like we do with wine. Maybe producers should start marketing more of their products to the sommelier crowd, rather than the cocktail culture.

So if we're going to talk about mezcal like we do wine, how does the vintage come into play? When you look at batch numbers of the Danzantes mezcales (called "Los Nahuales" in the U.S. due to trademark issues), you're pretty much looking at a different vintage with each new batch. Because Danzantes does not blend their spirits to create consistency from batch to batch, every time you get a new bottle of Danzantes it's likely from a completely different crop of espadin agave, harvested from an entirely different spot in Oaxaca, fermented and distilled at a different time of the year, under different conditions. Each run of agave is bottled as its own unique batch, which means there are multiple "vintages" of Danzantes every single year, even though the label itself never changes! Imagine if you had thirty different batches of Mouton-Rothschild or Mondavi Cabernet each year! Much like Bordeaux or California Cabernet, with their vintage variation, you have to have faith in your winemaker—or in the case of mezcal, your *mezcalero*. You have to trust that they're going to do their very best with the produce they're being given.

In the case of Karina Abad Rojas, you can definitely trust in her ability. She's incredible—just see for yourself with these selections below:

**Los Danzantes "Los Nahuales" Blanco Mezcal (\$49.99)** If you need a whisky comparison, think about Clynelish in comparison to Laphroaig. Far more whisky drinkers appreciate the latter distillery, but most experts I know admire the former for its delicacy and grace. Karina's mezcales are the Clynelish of the agave spirits world. She's too talented of a distiller for her own good because far more consumers appreciate intensity over balance. The blanco is difficult to summarize flavor-wise because it's always being made from a different batch of agave. The flavors range from citrus and pepper to pine needles and smoked earth.

**Los Danzantes "Los Nahuales" Reposado Mezcal (\$59.99)** Aged in oak for six months, the repo is softer and more mild.

**Los Danzantes "Los Nahuales" Añejo Mezcal (\$99.99)** The añejo is very woody, with more flavors of bitter herbs and dried brush.



## Alipús

In addition to the standard Danzantes *mezcales*, the company has a side label called Alipús—a series made from contracted *mezcales*, purchased and marketed by the Danzantes group in Oaxaca, and imported into California by Craft Distillers. Each label corresponds to a specific village where the producer is located. All of them are made entirely from espadin agave (with the exception of the San Andres that has a smidge of something else thrown in during fermentation). The point is to show the geographical differences that terroir, fermentation, and water ultimately play in the flavor of each spirit. Other than the three main factors I just mentioned, they're all basically produced the same way—made from espadin agave roasted in an open pit, fermented in used wood, and double-distilled in a wood-fired pot



*Karina Abad Rojas tastes the newest batch of Tobala distillate.*

still. I got to ride with Karina out to the village of Santa Ana on my second morning there.

Santa Ana is about three hours south of Oaxaca City and is situated deep within the mountains surrounding the valley. By the time you reach the turnoff that says "Santa Ana - 26," you think to yourself: "Oh, we're only twenty-six miles from Santa Ana!" But you're really still a good hour's drive from the village. Those twenty-six miles are pure dirt and gravel, with everyone in the car bracing themselves for the next big dip in the road. Snapping photos through the window is possible, but every third photo ends up being a jittery shot of the handle over the window because your lens ends up getting tossed upward from the turbulence. In a way, visiting the mountains of Oaxaca is like visiting the mountains around the Napa Valley—it's a bunch of wilderness with a few crops growing sporadically on specifically chosen hillsides. Of all the various spirits, mezcal is really the most like wine. There are so many similarities. In between the rows of espadin, you'll come across the occasional wild agave growing amidst the pack. We saw various examples of tobalá, tepextate, and madrecoixe along the way.

After a good hour of bumping and grinding you finally come to the river, or the rio in the name Santa Ana del Rio. It's the same river that passes by other fairly well-known mezcal-producing pueblos like San Juan del Rio and San Luis del Rio (also villages featured in the Alipús portfolio). It flows somewhat red like the earth underneath

it and splits the village from the distillery itself. You have to actually drive (or walk) across the river to reach the mezcal-producing area. And suddenly you can smell the roasted agave in the air. You pull into the stony driveway and there in front of you is the agave pit and the huge *tahona* used to mash the piñas into a mass of fermentable pulp. You just need to give each agave a few whacks with a machete first. Then you're in business.

We were greeted on our arrival by Meleton Contreras and the rest of his family: his son Lucio, along with cousin Eduardo Hernandez, his sister Minerva, and her husband Enrique (and their kid, little Luis!). The mezcal bottled under the Alipús Santa Ana del Rio label is truly a family affair. The contract with Alipús has allowed all members of the family a change to work full time and helped to support life in the nearby village. I asked Lucio what made the agave near Santa Ana so special, and he said the sugar levels. There's always an extreme ripeness to the piñas, he said, which makes fermentation a breeze.

There are currently four single village mezcals in stock from Alipús (labeled by village name, just like the most famous of French wines). They're all made with espadin agave and they're all produced the exact same way. The only difference between them is the inherent flavors of terroir in the regionally-grown agave, and the local water used during fermentation. Tasting them side-by-side is a true education.

**Alipús San Andres Mezcal (\$39.99)** The producers in San Andres actually blend in a little wild cuishe agave during fermentation to add more fruit and floral spice to the flavor. The result is a high-toned floral note followed by roasted agave notes and a bit of fleshy fruit on the finish. This is a total crowd-pleaser.



*A farmer near Santa Ana readies his harvest for transport.*

**Alipús San Juan Del Rio Mezcal (\$39.99)** The San Juan is one of the most classic mezcals available in terms of representing the most definitive version of the spirit. There's spice, pepper, salt, smoke, and a clean finish that marries all four flavors in a harmony of expressiveness. This is a good place to start if you're interested in getting down to basics.

**Alipús San Luis Del Rio Mezcal (\$39.99)** Much like the San Juan, this is a prototypical mezcal with all the delicacy of a fine tequila, but with that core of smoky agave flavor that clearly separates it from the standard Jalisco fare. There's a note of black pepper on the finish, with campfire notes that remind me a bit of Islay single malt whisky.

**Alipús Santa Ana Del Rio Mezcal (\$39.99)** This is of course the village I visited in the previous article, so I have a soft spot for this mezcal. It's a bit more rustic, more rough around the edges, but it's still wonderfully clean and fresh. There's more of tangy roasted agave flavor that takes over the palate and drives the flavor all the way through the finish.

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