Mezcal at the Crossroads

by KENT PATERSON 4/4/16
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Standing tall with a relaxed poise, Itzel Coria did a steady business selling her family's mezcal, *Ojo de Vibora* (Eye of the Snake), at a recent edition of Zihuatanejo's Saturday Ecotinaguis Sanka.

"This is the only mezcal for which there are local producers," Coria told *Frontera NorteSur* in between transactions with customers scooping up bottles of tequila's agave cousin. "We can consider it the mezcal of Zihuatanejo."

Coria is from a fifth generation of mezcaleros who distill the alcoholic beverage from a wild maguey plant, or agave, Agave cupereata, that flourishes in the Sierra Madres of Vallecitos above the small Pacific port and tourist destination of Zihuatanejo, Guerrero.

The young mezcalera stressed how the no-preservatives, naturally-produced drink provides a good-paying-and legal- income to mountain dwellers who live in isolated communities where the lack of employment opportunities tempt some to turn to the fast but dangerous cash of opium poppy cultivation.

"During production time (mezcal) gives employment to a lot of people," Coria said about her family's operation alone. "There are eight families benefiting from mezcal."

Although not as well known as the legendary mezcaleros of Oaxaca, the producers of Vallecitos whip out their stiff version of a quality and trendy

product that is in increasing demand in Mexico, especially among the hip youth of the big cities where bars and nightclubs frequently promote mezcal specials. Across the country, bars specializing in the agave spirit called mezcalerias are open for business.

“Mexico has a great opportunity with mezcal, which has become a motor of economic development, especially in marginal zones, where the mostly small producers are obtaining direct benefits,” Miguel Angel Margain, director general of the Mexican Institute of Industrial Property (IMIP), said during a ceremony held late last year to celebrate the inclusion of the municipality of San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato, into the official Denomination of Origin (DOM) for mezcal.

According to the IMIP, more than 300 mezcal brands are produced in Mexico. Producing regions in nine states currently enjoy DOM status for mezcal, including Durango, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Michoacan, Guerrero, Puebla, and Oaxaca.

Mezcal production still pales in comparison to tequila, but the drink is clearly on the upswing. From 2012 to 2013 alone, production shot up 140 percent according to figures from Mexico’s Mezcal Regulatory Council cited by *La Jornada* daily. A good chunk of that growth could be attributed to enhanced foreign tastes.
A December 2015 article in Fortune magazine reported that Mexico’s mezcal exports jumped from 647,989 liters in 2011 to 1.2 million in 2014. Tequila exports, meanwhile, soared from 65 million liters in 1995 to 172.5 million in 2014, according to Forbes.

But as mezcal booms in popularity at home and begins making a splash abroad, critical questions about the nature of the product and its future are coming to a head. Is a fundamentally artisanal drink on the verge of losing its product quality and cultural integrity in a mass market? Is the production

environmentally sustainable? Who stands to benefit from an expanded market?

Next door to Guerrero in the state of Michoacan, where mezcal is also a centuries old tradition, many want to preserve the local flavor of the beverage. Partners in a small creative design and business consulting firm, Sara de la Luz and Leonardo Palafox started a project in 2013 called Senor Maguey. “It was a project going against the fad of mezcal,” Palafox said in an interview earlier this year. “We did a project to identify the producers and take it to the level of art.”

The young couple created a pricey but informative and smartly-designed consumer package that includes four bottles of different Michoacan mezcals, original prints by local artists and a booklet that profiles several mezcaleros, or “artists,” like Jorge Perez of Rio de Parras, Querendero, who together with his family forms a third generation of small producers.

In the words of Senor Maguey, the Perez family carries on a tradition that gives life to a “transparent liquid” which trickles out of the countryside as “the most pure spirited drink that we can find in our country today.”

De la Luz and Palafox are advocates of keeping Michoacan mezcal in the hands of home-grown distillers and away from the clutches of big corporations. “When that happens it’s all over,” Palafox warned about corporate encroachment. De la Luz is also concerned about respecting the taste of mezcal and its place in traditional, regional gastronomy. Some mix masters have gone too far with the agave beverage in their concoction of drinks like mezcal mojitos, de la Luz insisted.

“I’ve been angry about this, because mezcal is not for everyone,” she declared with a purist’s passion. “If you like sweet drinks, drink those-drink a rum.”

Ignacio Torres might be called Dr. Maguey. A biologist by trade, Dr. Torres spends his days poking around mezcal country, investigating the health of agaves in Michoacan, Guerrero, Puebla and wherever the spiny plant might lure him. Torres, who recently completed his doctorate at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, has documented some worrisome developments.

“There is an important issue that’s not known. Mezcal is one of the few distilled drinks in the world that is made from wild plants,” Torres said during a phone interview with *Frontera NorteSur*. “One of the big dangers is that great demand puts traditional production at risk. Producers can overexploit these species.”
For instance, Torres found that one formerly common agave in Puebla’s Tehuacan Valley has now disappeared. “It was extracted at a faster rate than it regenerates,” he explained. “One of the greatest dangers is that (agave) populations could be finished off.”

Despite the mezcal boom, Torres found in his research that there had been no evaluation of the impact of harvesting on the conservation of agaves. He discovered that locals perceived a significant decline in both the quantity and quality of wild agave populations during a 30-year period.

Illustrating the fragile distribution of agaves, the researcher said some species are only found in parts of certain states or even confined to a single mountain. According to Torres, of the 53 agave species used in making mezcal, 37 of them are wild. Sustainability is a pressing issue, he continued, since an agave plant is used once for production purposes and only when it is mature.

Along with the surge in demand, Torres has noticed that some producers have substituted native magueys with plants imported from outside a home

region. “The people go and get other species so they could continue producing, but it’s not the same tradition,” he added.

The good news is that many mezcaleros are aware of the demand-supply conundrum, and some are engaging in sustainable harvesting practices like replanting agaves in the forest. Torres further cited a project initiated by the Environmental Studies Group (GEA) near Chilapa, Guerrero, which carefully monitors the agave population in the forest.

“People were empowered with annual monitoring so they could decide how many magueys could be used without affecting the population,” he said.

As a way of pricing the true value of mezcal, the GEA is working toward obtaining national legal recognition or international certification for sustainably-produced mezcal that would carry a green seal on the bottle, Torres added.

Like all other plants in the world, agaves now confront a changing climate. With this in mind, Torres’ doctoral dissertation on the sustainable management of the species begins with an overview of human-caused environmental alterations and climate change. According to the agave expert, warming temperatures could mean a change in the ideal elevations where the plants grow.

On the flip side of the coin, Torres said he received reports from some producers that the unusual hail and freezes which slammed patches of mezcal country last month resulted in some plant loss.

Besides the environmental question, a huge controversy on the economic and cultural fronts is bubbling up in the land of mezcal. A proposed rule by Mexico’s Economy Secretariat, (NOM) 199, has regional mezcalero

associations and agave advocates writing protest letters and posting petitions on the web.

Essentially, the rule would force producers outside the DOM zones to stop using the words mezcal and agave for their distillations and substitute the Nahuatl word “kolima” instead. If approved, the new rule would apply to traditionally distilled mezcal as well as other drinks made from agaves. Among other criticisms, opponents of a rule change say “kolima” is a word that isn’t even used in Mezcal Land.

“It’s like stopping to call the product that comes from cows milk,” Rigoberto Acosta Gonzalez, director of the Guerrero Maguey and Mezcal Producers Council, was quoted in La Jornada. Mexico’s Economy Secretariat defends the proposed regulation as a legal tool to uphold national and international standards, including World Trade Organization recognition of Mexico’s DOM for mezcal, and to protect consumers from hucksters peddling a mezcal that is not a true mezcal.

But critics contend (NOM) 199 will cut out thousands of small producers and work to the ultimate benefit of larger producers and big beverage companies, increasingly transnational corporations, while establishing a precedent for other plants.

“They want to appropriate a collective word. This is a robbery of cultural and historic patrimony, material and non-material, of Mexico..,” reads one petition posted on Change.org. “They begin with the word agave and this becomes the platform to continue with and appropriate vanilla, amaranth and all other products of Mexico. Besides, the authorities confuse adulterated drinks with those that have been produced in an artisanal manner for centuries, and the limitations they propose to impose do not guarantee that they are going to combat pirate or adulterated drinks.” (NOM) 199 “strongly attacks the whole history of Mexico for commercial

reasons," Dr. Torres added. "This is a travesty, and another ridicule of the Mexican people."

The controversy is prodding national sensibilities and stoking popular fears that mezcal will wind up like tequila, a highly commercialized commodity which is more and more the property of big, foreign corporations like Diageo (Tequila Don Julio). Like "Mexican" beer (now largely owned by Heineken and In-Bev), tequila is not so Mexican anymore.

For Itzel Coria, Mexico's small mezcal producers need more consideration. A lack of communication with government agencies, expensive and complicated business permitting processes, and insecurity in mountain zones where wild agaves grow are among the main problems mezcaleros encounter, Coria said.

"There needs to be more of a push so producers can sell their mezcal with greater ease, and flexibility for permits and taxes, which are also high," she added.

Sara de La Luz also supports nurturing the small producer. "Everything begins in the countryside. You have to support it there," she said. "If you don't begin there the primary resource will be finished off. Like everything else in Mexico, it's a question of education."