

Smoke Signals

Move over, tequila! There's another south-of-the-border agave spirit that's finally getting the attention it deserves.

| By Lisa Shames |

While we've got nothing against tequila, it's mezcal—the liquor's smoky, spicy sibling—that we're craving these days. With mezcal-focused bars opening all over the country, we're not the only ones smitten with the rustic, artisanal spirit that hails from Oaxaca in southern Mexico. Here are five you must try now.

Pierde Almas Mezcal de Conejo

This company takes its social, cultural and environmental stances seriously, and that includes the handprinted labels on its bottles, made from paper with fibers indigenous to the region where its mezcals are made. Of the nine it offers, including a cool mezcal-gin blend, we especially like the triple-distilled mezcal *de conejo* with hints of minty tarragon and orchard fruit. Whether or not we taste the *conejo*—or rabbit to you non-Spanish speakers—that's present during the distilling process is another story. \$200, *Andersonville Wine & Spirits*, 5201 N. Clark St., 773.769.0858, andersonvillewineandspirits.com

Montelobos Mezcal Joven

Made with 100 percent organically certified agave *espadin*, this mezcal retains its earthy smokiness both on the nose and tongue. Bold notes of vegetation—sounds weird, tastes great—and vanilla make it a perfect choice as a creative cocktail ingredient, while its balanced finish and intriguing salinity mean it's great on its own too. A slightly higher alcohol content adds a bit of extra kick. \$34, *The Noble Grape*, 802 N. Bishop St., 312.846.1204, noblegrape.net

Del Maguey Minero

In the mezcal world, Del Maguey, founded in 1995 by a visionary Southern California artist, is often credited with raising the profile—and respect—of the spirit outside of Mexico. And it continues to do so with all of its 100 percent-certified organic mezcals—each made by family *palenqueros* (producers) the old-fashioned way. With a floral and lemon nose, Minero offers hints of vanilla, roasted pineapple and leather. Its warm and sweet finish makes it a terrific sipping mezcal. \$75, *Binny's Beverage Depot*, 1720 N. Marcey St., 312.664.4394, binny.com

Creylene Mezcal Joven

There's a lot to be learned from studying the label of this new mezcal. To wit: The jaguar symbolizes its smooth, velvety body; the legs of the antelope correlate its sweet hints of fruit and light herbal notes; and the wings of the golden eagle of Mexico represent the overarching smoky mesquite wood flavor that unifies the flavors in this mezcal. Or, better yet, just drink it. \$50, reservebar.com

Del Maguey Pechuga

To create this unique, hearty spirit, Del Maguey starts with a double distillate of its Minero mezcal, then adds plums, apples, plantains, almonds, pineapple and a handful of rice as the third distillation begins. The final step involves the mezcal's namesake *pechuga* (a chicken breast), which is hung above. The end result? A complex and smoky mezcal with touches of fresh fruit aromas, basil and sea air (no, really). Taking flight indeed. \$155, *Warehouse Liquors*, 634 S. Wabash Ave., 312.663.1850, warehouseliquors.com

