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## Mexico's mezcal loses image as poor man's tippie

Tue, Nov 20 2007

By Lina Yoon

OAXACA, Mexico (Reuters Life!) - Mexico's traditional spirit mezcal, infamous as a firewater drink of the poor and for the worms bobbing around in its bottles, is suddenly cool and growing in popularity.

The mezcal craze is not only sweeping through Mexico City's trendiest neighborhoods, it is also changing the feel of rough-and-ready cantinas in its home state of Oaxaca.

La Casa del Mezcal, or The Mezcal House, in the colonial state capital Oaxaca has served the agave plant drink since 1935 but only used to be visited by construction workers, old men and a handful of tourists. Those times have changed.

"Now young people, women, locals and many foreigners also come to drink mezcal," says Eleuterio Vicente Vazquez, its manager for more than 10 years.

Hundreds of miles away in Mexico City, fashion designer Paola Hernandez meets with friends in one of the capital's hippest bars. But instead of a fancy cocktail, she orders a mezcal.

"It is new, popular, more sophisticated and artistic," says 24-year-old Hernandez, comparing mezcal to its better-known cousin, tequila.

Mezcal is made from water and cactus-like agaves roasted in oven pits. Aficionados say the best ones have a smoother taste and a more sharply defined agave flavor than tequila.

Many brands have worms or even scorpions bobbing around in the bottle and the drink is traditionally accompanied with "sal de gusano", a mix of salt, red chili powder and dried worms.

Two years ago, five friends traveled to Oaxaca, famous also for its indigenous markets and spectacular ruins, and after visiting its micro distilleries they decided to open a Mexico City bar called La Botica specializing in the tippie.

"Nobody knew about it in the beginning. Now it's always full," says Emanuel Nino, the manager of the original La Botica in the fashionable Condesa neighborhood. The owners have since opened four more bars using the same model.

### YOUNGER AFICIONADOS

Cornelio Perez, who has held weekly mezcal tastings in different bars in Mexico City for almost two years, says interest in the drink is spreading.

"People want to know more, there is more interest and it is more fashionable," says Perez, adding that only older people were interested in his tastings at first but now younger people have started turning up.

Mezcal's rise has come amid turbulent times for tequila, which is mainly made in the western state of Jalisco.

Tequila saw a boom in the 1990s, but then suffered a dearth of the agave needed to make it. It started to become scarce and tequila makers started mixing other sugars to make the liquor.

"Quality dropped and consumers started looking for different options, discovering mezcal," says Perez.

To keep up with climbing demand, 12 new mezcal production plants have been built since 2005 and others are in the works.

Oaxaca's state government has invested \$1 million in promoting mezcal, up from a paltry \$50,000 in 2005.

The Mexican Regulatory Council for Mezcal Quality says the registered national output of certified mezcals in the first seven months of this year was 138,130 gallons (531,271 liters), already well above the total output in all of 2006.

"We expect this growth to continue," says Porfirio Chegoya, commerce director of the Oaxaca government. Real growth



could be even higher as many mezcals are not certified and there is no reliable estimate of total output.

But some aficionados are worried about the rapid rise of mezcal's popularity and about the move away from its humble roots, with exports of mezcal also growing rapidly.

"Homogenization, massification, and industrialization led by growing demand and popularization can be a threat for the culture of mezcal," says Perez.

"This is a drink made by small cooperatives. The moment you kill that connection, the tradition dies," he says.

(Edited by Chris Aspin)

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