



MOLDING THE PERFECT MEZCAL

Hangin' with Mr. Cooper

By Michael Nagrant

IF JOSE CUERVO IS THE PATRON SAINT OF BAD JUDGMENT AND HORRID HANG-OVERS, then Ron Cooper, purveyor of Del Maguey Mezcal, is the angel of discretion and good taste. Though sometimes his is a case of “Do as say, not as I do.” On the morning I interview Cooper, he chain-smokes and

squints in the morning light falling over Oak Street near the Newberry Library, his eyes rimmed by puffy bags. As a spirits professional, Cooper has no shortage of drinking buddies, and a few of them kept him out late after a tasting at Binny's South Loop the night before.

Cooper grew up in Southern California taking family vacations to Tijuana and Mazatlan where he fell in love with Mexican culture. He says, “You go to Mexico, look in someone's eyes, and you see two thousand years of culture looking back at you.” And so he kept coming back.

In 1964 he visited a cantina in Ensenada with fellow art students to celebrate and got drunk on really bad Mezcal. He says, “I was the guy waiting for the worm to come down, getting wrecked, and the next day crawling back to recuperate.”

In 1970 after a group-art-show opening in LA, he drank a bottle of Herradura Blanco with his dealer and some artists. Someone asked whether the Pan-American highway really existed, so Cooper and another guy got into a car and drove down through Mexico to find out, stopping in Oaxaca, where they found a village of Zapotec indians weavers.

By 1990, after a few big art commissions, he'd made some “fuck you” money and could do anything he wanted. He'd thought about traveling to Asia, but a voice in his head said, “You gotta go back to Oaxaca.” A weaver friend from the trip in the Seventies set him up with a place, and he went back for a three-month stint. One of his art projects was to create an edition of fifty hand-blown glass bottles based on a shape that celebrated the Zapotec god of supreme intoxication.

Cooper planned on filling the bottles with the best Mezcal he could find, so every third day, he'd head out asking people he came across, “Donde esta el major,” or “What's the best?” He didn't even have to specify “Mezcal.” They just pointed the way. He'd walk for hours on dirt roads until he found big stone-grinding wheels used to crush roasted agave or “maguey” to make a mash which is eventually distilled into Mezcal or Tequila.

All Tequila is Mezcal. Not all Mezcal is Tequila. Tequila is a legal government designation that characterizes Mezcal made from blue agave in specific geographic regions. It's similar to how sparkling wine made outside of the Champagne region of France legally can't be called Champagne.

When Cooper saw those grinding wheels, he'd seek out the distiller and fill empty Coke bottles with their Mezcal and bring it back to his village. Cooper would sit down with his weaver buddies, chow down on Chapulines, or grasshoppers, and drink his newfound bounty.

His friends were blown away. He wanted to make sure he had a good supply for personal use, but found you couldn't export bulk Mezcal to the United States. It had to be bottled at origin. Out of self-interest, Cooper applied for an importer's license and started sending his discoveries to the U.S. and his company Del Maguey was born.

He currently offers seven different Mezcals, which come from five different Mexican villages. The Mezcals are all made according to 400-year-old traditions using village water and the heart of the maguey plant. The hearts are roasted over hot stones in a pit in the ground for three to five days. This process caramelizes the plant, adding flavor. The hearts are then ground to a mash using stone mills, fermented in wooden vats and distilled twice in clay or copper stills.

The distinctive taste of each Del Maguey Mezcal is derived from the variety of agave plant used and the microclimate, soil, water supply and wild yeasts of the villages where each Mezcal is created. Cooper says that each Mezcal also reflects its distiller. For example, the guy who makes Cooper's Chichicapa Mezcal is brash and confident, and his version runs very aromatic and hot on the palate.

Even the Del Maguey bottles are works of art, featuring labels based on original watercolors from New Mexico based artist Ken Price. The bottles are hand-dipped in purified bee's wax and are wreathed in hand-woven palm-fiber baskets made by Oaxacan women.

Del Maguey Mezcal tastes as good as it looks. Keep the shooters in the back of the cupboard, as it's so smooth you can sip it neat or on the rocks like a high-end whiskey. Because they're so meticulously crafted, most of the Mezcals are priced around \$64.99 at Sam's and Binny's. Adam Seger has Del Maguey at the Nacional 27 bar if you want to sample first. Although, you can rest assured that you aren't buying marketing as you would with a hyped vodka. There's nothing else like these Mezcals on the market, and the price is truly a reflection of the taste.

READINGS

THU/12

Bob Morris

The author discusses “Assisted Living: True Tales of Double Dating with My Dad.” *Barnes & Noble, 1441 W. Webster, (773)871-3610. 8pm. Free.*

→ David Sedaris

The popular humorist discusses his latest, “When You Are Engulfed in Flames.” *Barbara's Bookstore, UIC, (312)222-0890. 7:30pm. Free.*

Lynda Barry

The cartoonist reads from “What It Is!” *Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, (773)227-4433. 5pm. Free.*

FRI/13

Tristan Taormino

The author discusses “Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships.” *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.*

SAT/14

Ray Bawarchi

The author reads from “The Dirt People.” *Quimby's, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 7pm. Free.*

MON/16

Prioleau Alexander

The author discusses “You Want Fries with That?” *Barbara's Bookstore, UIC, (312)222-0890. 7:30pm. Free.*

WED/18

Catherine Friend

The author discusses “The Compassionate Carnivore.” *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.*

→ Karen Abbott

The author reads from “Sin in the Second City.” *57th Street Books, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 6pm. Free.*

Local Author Night

Featuring Connie Fairbanks, Jonathan Miles, Howard Johnson, Anastasia Royal. *The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.*

→ Neil Steinberg

The Sun-Times columnist discusses “Drunkard: A Hard-Drinking Life.” *Barnes & Noble, 1441 W. Webster, (773)871-3610. 7:30pm. Free.*

EVENTS

Andersonville Midsommarfest

A celebration of Andersonville's Swedish roots, with food, drink, live music and more. Foster and Clark, (773)665-4682. Sat-Sun. Free.

Festa Pasta Vino

The city's largest celebration of Italian culture, food and art. 2400 S. Oakley, (847)795-1800. Thu-Sun. Free. Through Jun 15.

Old Town Art Fair

One of the city's most popular art fairs, the annual shindig in Old Town features work by more than 260 artists from all over the country. 1763 N. North Park, (312)337-1938. Sat-Sun.

Puerto Rican Pride Parade

Show your Puerto Rican pride at the annual march down Columbus. Balbo and Columbus, (312)744-5000. Sat Noon.

Wells Street Art Festival

Featuring work from more than 250 artists, plus food, drink and music. Wells between North and Division, (773)868-3010. Sat-Sun. \$10.

Wrigleyville SummerFest

A street festival in the Wrigleyville neighborhood, with live music, food and even a Guitar Hero tournament. Seminary, between Roscoe and School. Sat 11am-10pm.

SLAMS AND OPEN MICS

THU/12

Open Mic with Garrett Lane

Gallery Cabaret, 2020 N. Oakley, (773)489-5471. 9:30pm, Free.

FRI/13

Open Mic Poetry Night

John Starrs hosts poetry readings. Coffee Chicago, 5256 N. Broadway, (773)784-1305. 8pm, \$2 suggested donation for readers.

SUN/15

Ritual Rhythms

Negro League Cafe, 301 E. 43rd, 773.536.7000. 8pm-12am.

Uptown Poetry Slam

Marc Smith hosts the granddaddy of them all. Green Mill, 4802 N. Broadway, (773)878-5552. 7pm, \$6.

TUE/17

Bert Hyman Open Mic

Bert Hyman hosts an open mic. Phyllis' Musical Inn, 1800 W. Division, (773)486-9862. 9:30pm-midnight, free.

Safe Smiles

Polyrhythmic Open Mic. Second floor; 21 and over. Trace, 3714 N. Clark, (773)477-3400. 10pm, \$3 suggested donation.

606

Open mic hip hop. Subterranean, 2011 W. North, (773)278-6600. 10pm DJs, 11pm open mic, \$5.