

Agave Spirits: The Past, Present, and Future of Mezcal. By Gary Paul Nabhan and David Suro Piñera. 2023. W.W. Norton and Company, New York. 320 pp.

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The long-term symbiotic relationships that have evolved between humans and agaves have led to the flourishing of botanical diversity (through human selection of local varieties) and cultural diversity (in both the anthropological and microbiological senses of the word). Over millennia, strategies have developed for stewarding this diversity and producing complex aromas and tastes from distilled mezcal, tequilas, *bacanoras*, *raicillas*, and related beverages. Unfortunately, threats to these practices are intensifying, resulting in an ever more precarious industry hurdling toward homogenous fields and flavors at the expense of wild populations and heirloom varieties.

In an effort to rekindle reverence for these plants and processes, authors Gary Paul Nabhan and David Suro Piñera wrote *Agave Spirits: The Past, Present, and Future of Mezcal*. Their holistic examination of the cultural and ecological state of *Agave* species and their distillates spans phytochemistry, microbiology, population, and community ecology while addressing human actors from farmers to distillers to bartenders to drinkers. This holistic approach is only possible because of the authors' multifaceted and complementary backgrounds. In the book, they identify as "mezcal historians, scholar-activists, and entrepreneurs" (p. 3). Nabhan draws on his extensive experience as an ethnobotanist and agricultural ecologist in the arid United States-Mexico borderlands, as well as his role as co-founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH, a non-profit dedicated to preserving crop diversity in the Southwestern United

States. Restaurateur and tequila producer Suro Piñera's deep roots in the tequila industry adds nuance to the critiques of contemporary commercial tequila and mezcal production. As the founder of the Tequila Interchange Project, he has championed sustainable, transparent, and traditional production practices.

The authors' own reverence for agaves comes through clearly, with rhapsodic descriptions of the drinks, such as (p. 65):

Why should we regard these cultural achievements as any less valuable than the Egyptian pyramids or the Great Wall of China, simply because they were not built of stone, but of succulent plant mandalas raised up into delectable spirits?

and the impassioned Mezcal Manifesto—a statement of values and an action plan developed in consultation with a wide range of *Agave* experts. The points discussed range from concrete conservation strategies to improved wages and healthcare for harvesters and distillers. The authors deliver insightful critiques of systems that superficially appear to be pro-Agave but in practice promote low-diversity industrial production such as the Denomination of Origin for tequila. The ten-point action plan and stories of fierce commitment by farmers, distillers, and other activists are inspiring, setting it apart from works that end with the reader mired in helpless pessimism.

Additional value for ethnobiologists is distilled in the appendix tables—a trove of comprehensive lists



including *Agave* species used in *mezcal* and other distillate production that is taxonomically up-to-date and includes geographic information and local names. A list of plants and animals that are traditionally infused in—or distilled with—agaves (ranging from *Tagetes* marigolds to chicken) for flavor and medicinal properties is also fascinating and could guide a range of follow-up directions.

This volume balances its usefulness as a reference for anyone involved in *Agave* conservation, biology, production, or commerce with its accessibility for curious non-professionals and *mezcal* aficionados. While scientific detail is abundant, covering topics such as adaptive radiation, crassulacean acid metabolism (CAM) photosynthesis, phytochemistry and more, it is delivered in a digestible manner: “Succulents [conserve water] by virtue of a biochemical and physiological sleight of hand called the...CAM. That’s a lot of syllables to say ‘(We) save water’” (p. 31).

Having recently started working with communities in western Mexico to document and revitalize *mezcal* traditions, I found this book to be an extremely efficient crash course in the sociobiology of agaves and their spirits. In the last several years, I have witnessed tequila monoculture creeping into the endangered dry subtropical forests of the Sierra Madre

Occidental and cheap tequila replacing ceremonial Indigenous *mezcal*s, resulting in a cascading loss in biocultural knowledge. This volume’s solutions-focused orientation has been both comforting and bracing.

An overtone that thrums throughout the book is *Agave* as an other-than-human person. This animistic presence is captured in the alternative interpretation of the title “Agave Spirits,” with the authors describing their work as a “spiritual quest” (p. 107) and championing the spirit of the plant, its dignity, and agency. They share stories of Aztec deity *Mayahuel* (p. 62), an embodiment of *Agave*’s lifegiving generosity and express affection and veneration for the plant throughout. I read this as a meta-lesson of the book: we need to remember how to uphold our side of the relationship with our plant partners—and reviving our reverence is the first step.

The breaking down of agave-human symbiosis reflects the sobering global loss of affective bonds with plants which has driven overexploitation of plant resources that were once considered plant relations. Nabhan and Piñera offer this book, which is one part ode to these species and cultures, one-part scientific manual, one part diagnosis of challenges, and one-part passionate manifesto, providing the blueprint for repairing our relationship.