



The worm has turned: Sampling the newly hip libation at Chicago's La Frontera Grill

TRENDS

Highbrow Hooch

Mescal's fans think it tastes of fruit and pepper

CONNOISSEURS ONCE DISMISSED Mescal as a lowbrow Mexican hooch. Grizzled *bandidos* were famous for swallowing the traditional drowned worm at the bottom of each bottle. The worm has turned. In Berkeley, California, 31-year-old lawyer Bob Dorsey likes to pour his 840 bottle of mescal after dinner into a snifter, not a shot glass. He swirls the mescal in his mouth, where the spirit reveals—he says—flavors that run from smoky to herbal to a hint of fruit and pepper during the long *final*. "It's as complex as any of the best single-malt Scotches I've had," says Dorsey, who adds "and it's a lot more exotic."

Amazing but true; the new highbrow spirits come from Mexico. In premium mescales and tequilas (not to be confused with the lower-end varieties Margaritas are made with) drinkers of the '90s have found their hip *digestif*—a way to sip what they used to slam in college. Aged tequila and fine mescal are the only spirits with increasing sales in the United States. Once obscure tequilas like El Tesoro sold 300,000 cases last year, at \$88 a bottle. They're seeing their first growth spurts in Canada, Europe and Asia, and in celebrated joints like the Raffles Hotel bar in Singapore. Enticed by the boom, British distillers, including Guinness, recently acquired major shares in Cuervo, Sauza and Herradura, Mexico's three major tequila producers.

The buzz is particularly strong over premium mescal, similar to tequila but widely

considered a more interesting tippie. In June, California importers Carl Doumani and Pamela Hunter launched Encantado (\$40 a bottle) and found demand fast in 28 U.S. states. "Mescal was once the drink of Mexico's elite," says Doumani, co-owner of the Stags' Leap winery. "It just needed the right marketing here." For example: dump the worm. Now San Francisco's elegant Stars restaurant serves Encantado for \$7 a glass. Chicago's Rick Bayless, one of America's hottest restaurateurs, is so fond of fine mescal he sometimes sends free rounds to customers. "It's definitely an educational sell," he says. "But the more they try it, the more mescal's old, bad image fades away."

Tree-huggers prize mescal's handmade quaintness. Most tequila is produced in central Mexico near Guadalajara, mescal in the mountainous southern state of Oaxaca, from different varieties of the agave plant—a cactus crown of daggers that evokes the drinks' hard-edged reputations. Even fine tequila has become a more industrial product, prone to nonnatural flavors; but mescal still epitomizes "artisanship," says Oaxaca maestro Alberto Sánchez. The agave heart is baked for three days in a rock pit (for tequila it is steamed), then fermented and distilled in a technique dating back to the Spanish Conquest. The result, fans say, is as clean as it is complex—or, as one mescal maker put it recently after her third cup, "like a man should be: strong but soft." Imagine her saying that if she'd just chewed three worms.

TIM PADGETT in Oaxaca

TRANSITION

DIED: English novelist, poet, and critic Sir Kingsley Amis, 73; after a fall that crushed several of his vertebrae, in London, Oct. 22. Best known for his 1954 comic masterpiece "Lucky Jim," Amis became an unrepentantly conservative satirist, a contentious figure to the end. His last novel, "The Biographer's Moustache," published this year, was savaged for its incorrect politics. Amis always said bad reviews ruined his breakfast but not his lunch. "Lucky Jim's" scalding sendup of academia won the Somerset Maugham Prize in 1955. But Maugham himself snubbed the work of this lower-middle-class upstart as "vulgar." The book made Amis postwar Britain's pre-eminent foe of phonies and received wisdom. "Importance isn't important," he said. "Only good writing is." And he produced a prodigious amount of it: 25 novels, reams of verse, a memoir and three volumes on the joys of drink.

Former tennis ace Bobby Riggs, 77; of prostate cancer, in Leucadia, California, Oct. 25. Riggs was ranked No. 1 in the world when he won both the singles and the doubles titles at Wimbledon in 1939. Two months later he won the U.S. Open, a feat he repeated in 1941. His greatest fame came in a publicity stunt 32 years later when he challenged women's tennis champ Billie Jean King to a match. He lost the "Battle of the Sexes" at the Houston Astrodome; the televised showdown gave a huge boost to women's tennis in the United States.

Swedish film, stage and TV actress Viveca Lindfors, 74; of complications from rheumatoid arthritis, in Uppsala, Sweden, Oct. 25. Lindfors made more than 40 films over a 50-year period. She won the Best Actress award for "No Exit" at the 1962 Berlin Film Festival. Stage work included her critically acclaimed performance in the 1955 Broadway production of "Anastasia," as well as roles in works by Tennessee Williams and Bertolt Brecht. In 1966 she co-founded the Berkshire Theater Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Interim Haitian President Emil Jonassaint, 82; of natural causes, in Port-au-Prince, Oct. 24. The former Supreme Court judge briefly served last year as the puppet president of the military junta responsible for overthrowing President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991.

Polish-born social historian Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki, 70; of cancer, in New York, Oct. 24. A survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, Dobroszycki authored several books about Poland's Jewish community before, during and after World War II.