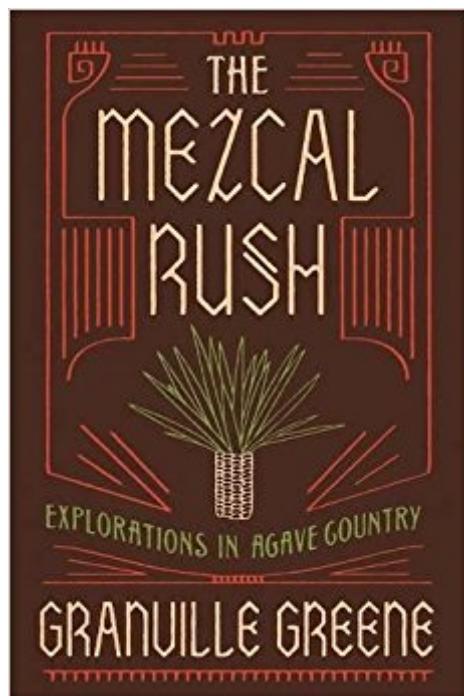


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The Mezcal Rush: Explorations In Agave Country



Synopsis

"A rich, inclusive portrait of one of the world's great drinks." — Kirkus Reviews Mezcal. In recent years, the oldest spirit in the Americas has been reinvented as a pricy positional good popular among booze connoisseurs and the mixologists who use it as a cocktail ingredient. Unlike most high-end distillates, most small-batch mezcal is typically produced by and for subsistence farming communities, often under challenging conditions. As Granville Greene spends time with maestros mezcaleros, who distill their drinks using local agaves and production techniques honed through generations, mezcal becomes a spirit of contradictions—both a liquid language celebrating village identity and craftsmanship, and a luxury export undergoing a gold-rush-style surge. The Mezcal Rush explores the complications that can arise when an artisanal product makes its way across borders.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Praise for The Mezcal Rush "A rich, inclusive portrait of one of the world's great drinks."

"A unique and fascinating journey following the mezcal trail from remote Mexican villages to trendy bars abroad, from indigenous fiestas to mixology events crammed with modish tipplers. Greene's lively and skillful blend of travelogue and social commentary charts the sometimes troubled links between these very different worlds." — Gideon Rachman, chief foreign affairs commentator, The Financial Times "Impressively informative, exceptionally well written, organized and presented, The Mezcal Rush is an original and inherently fascinating read

from beginning to end." — Wisconsin Bookwatch "An artful combination of travel narrative and research—I felt as if I was sipping mezcal through Mexico as I read it."

— Baylor Chapman, author of *The Plant Recipe Book*

GRANVILLE GREENE is a graduate of The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. He has written for Outside, The New York Times, and many other publications. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

This is an excellent read, but does not easily fit into any category. In a way it's a book about a beverage and so fits the foodie niche, but it's also travel, because Greene has visited many of the makers of mezcal in rural Mexico, and because of his detailed and sympathetic portrayal of Mexican village culture (especially mostly Indian villages in Oaxaca) it's sort of anthropology. It is also deeply personal over a considerable portion of his life and so is a kind of autobiographical account of his gradually growing understanding of the place of mescal in village life. And it's also an account of how a beverage becomes popular and the development of a culture based on it and corporate response to it. All this blends together in a very well-written account. If you are interested in Mexico, you'd probably like this book. If you are interested in mezcal, this is a must read. It also might interest readers studying the emergence of a new product--to consumers, it's centuries old in Mexico. There's plenty of interesting information. I had no idea there were so many species of agave, or that production of alcoholic beverages may have been much more common and further back in Mexican history than once thought. Cooked agave hearts (a food as well as raw material for distilling mezcal) go back, Greene says, to 9,000 BCE. He discusses the drug cartels a bit, noting that portions of the country are very dangerous and that by 2016 more than 100,000 Mexican lives have been lost in cartel and drug related violence. As for mezcal, much of it is artisan produced, in small amounts, in probably thousands of villages. The taste varies a great deal, he says, depending on the species of agave, the altitude they are grown, the water used in distillation, the composition of the soil the agaves grew in, the methods of the local distiller (Greene compares it to a kind of folk art), and many other factors, so that really there are myriad variations. The growth of the mezcal industry has attracted larger-scale distillers, middlemen who buy locally, bottle, label and sell it--they might pay 30 pesos for a liter and at the retail end sell a bottle for \$200 at an upscale venue. Greene thinks that the locals deserve a bigger cut of the gross, because much is produced by local people who have a difficult time paying for food and other necessities. The bulk of the product traditionally was used for celebrations such as weddings, births, on the occasions of death, village

fiestas and for other purposes such as medicinal. Greene describes ordering mezcal at a variety of places such as an upscale venue (not exactly a bar, but I'm not sure what other word to use). He sees an unfortunate separation between the end user and the producer. Mezcal has become an upscale beverage the way some vodkas have, and Greene is mildly caustic about some of that. He also discusses in moderate detail agaves of several species. The book sure could have used some photos. His many character sketches are excellent, but photos would help to get a sense of the villages and the layout of the agave process. There's a helpful glossary.

I really enjoyed this book. While much of it (particularly the first half) paid a bit too much homage to the Del Maguey Mezcal brand, the author later showed balance with respect to this fine brand. In fairness, much of what he learned about mezcal, and the stories he tells, are a direct result of his relationship with the brand, so that was this main perspective. And it is a good one. This book does a few things really well. First, if you want to gain an appreciation and understanding of the cultural importance of mezcal in Mexico, the author does a great job capturing the spiritual essence of mezcal. Second, he writes really well, and though there are no pictures, he does an exceptional job describing the micro-distilleries, the people, the landscapes, and the many small villages he spends time in - he really knows how to paint a picture. Plus, he is simply a good story teller so it is enjoyable to read. Third, I really respect how he immersed himself in the subject matter, spending a lot of time in Oaxaca, and even becoming an active participant in the production of mezcal. All in all, I really liked it, and if you are looking to deepen your cultural understanding of mezcal, you will enjoy this book!

Perhaps this book should be sipped, as you would a mezcal. But each time I picked it up I swallowed many pages, whole sections. It's a personal report, and the author's presence is both lucid and engaging. This is true for the writing, beautiful throughout and in how he deals with the many Oaxacans we're introduced to, most of them maestros mezcaleros, those who distill the mezcal. Greene gets down in the trenches with them, or more precisely, down in the hornos, the ovens filled with huge hearts of agave. He shows us not merely the distillers' techniques, but their families, their lives and beliefs. That's the heart of the book: the tangled science, culture and economy that lie behind the production of a drink that is both centuries old and new to many. Greene shows us the industry behind it. Not the corporate industry that has made tequila so popular, but the hard labor

and traditional methods of small-batch mezcal producers. Oven by oven, each is distinct, and it's a treat every time we're taken into a new valley, a new village, a new household where they're harvesting, baking and distilling the agaves. These days I can't even drink mezcal (or anything else, sad to say), so I'm hardly a mezcal aficionado. But I love a book, like this one, which sweeps me into another culture. And Greene is the best sort of guide, both respectful and curious. It can be delicate for an author to step into a world he's appropriating, in a way, for his project. Greene's discussion of

"Columbusing" is one of many small gems in the book. He pulls off his intrusion, I think, because he's open and sincere with the people he meets. For a hint of how they respond to him, consider the nickname they give him. Big-city would be the translation of his first name from the French, and when the mezcaleros figure this out they start calling him Pueblo Grande Verde, or Mr. Big Green City. They like him, and readers will too.

Superb. An un-put-down-able account of a deep dive into the rich origins of this fascinating drink, and the lives of those who make it. Part memoir, part travelogue, part paean to an older way of living, and part warning of the damage that untamed commercialism can do to ancient cultures, this is a timely and resonant work. Wonderfully well written too.

Greene takes you on a fascinating romp through the production of artisanal mezcal in Mexican villages, while reflecting soulfully on the history of alcohol production, art and the social realities of subsistence farming and transnational trade. For Greene mezcal is a door that opens onto many worlds, and into the heart.

Reads like the telephone book. I put it down.

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