

by SEAN ARMSTRONG
photography by MELANIE GRIFFITH
location courtesy of INTERO RESTAURANT



The first sip hits like a truck on fire. The second, taken cautiously, soothes the flames to reveal its true nature: a singularly smooth, sweet and smoky gift from the gods.

Mezcal, an artisanal Mexican spirit distilled from agave, is equal parts boisterous and shy. With a typically high proof and an antiquated production process involving underground fires, wild fermentation, centuries of mystique and the occasional donkey, every sip conjures a list of adjectives long enough to rival the most seasoned sommeliers. It's clean and crisp, earthy and elegant, vibrant and vegetal, and always uniquely invigorating. Depending on the phase of the moon and who you're asking, mezcal can be either a sublime revelation or a slap in the face from someone you love.



It can also be one of the most effective treatments for *susto* — a chronic attack of the spirit caused by a severe fright or shock. Common in Latin American cultures, *susto* is said to be an affliction that leaves

its sufferers with a sensation of soullessness.

The condition also provided inspiration for Grupo Compadres to make their own version of the cure: SUSTO Mezcal. “Susto is a startling,” said Liz Stewart, one of the Oaxaca-Austin spirit brand’s three co-owners. “It doesn’t necessarily have to be connected with a disaster. You go to a shaman, and they seal it with a sip of mezcal.”

Stewart and long-time friends Ingrid Taylor and Titi Rodriguez launched Grupo Compadres in 2017, realizing a dream that had first taken root over two decades ago when Stewart and Taylor were both working for the Texas Comptroller’s office. Years later, Rodriguez was introduced to the pair while serving as Minister of Tourism for the Mexican state of Oaxaca.

“We ended up going to Oaxaca quite a bit and getting to know the culture there through Titi and other friends,” said Stewart. “It’s this very mystical place that has a lot of ritual and tradition in the food and the culture and the drink. And as we got to know Oaxaca, we got to know mezcal.”

A star ingredient in the region’s intoxicating cultural cocktail, mezcal is deeply infused into everyday life in Oaxaca. The drink is used in equal measures to complement rich meals, bless births, ward off evil spirits, mark milestones, heal wounds and treat a bewildering array of ailments—from common colds to particularly stubborn cases of *susto*.



“We think it’s the oldest distilled spirit in the Americas,” said Taylor. “It’s been used in religious and spiritual ceremonies for hundreds and hundreds of years. It’s rubbed on pregnant women’s bellies and used at weddings and quinceaneras. It’s about celebrations and rituals and traditions.”

The mingling of state and spirit stretches back at least four centuries, when Spanish conquistadors introduced the art of distillation (and, regrettably, Armageddon) to Mexico’s indigineous peoples. Seeing their initial alcohol supplies running low, the desperate conquistadors began experimenting with ways to distill liquor from the native Agave plants. Eventually, mezcal was born.

A few hundred years later, the basic production process remains largely unchanged. Crispín Pérez, SUSTO’s expert mezcalero, still painstakingly crafts each and every batch by hand using many of the same methods and traditions as his long-ago predecessors. Often accompanied by his children, the Oaxaca native starts the process by slowly roasting *espadín* agave hearts—known as *piñas*—in an earthen pit oven. The cooked *piñas* are then crushed with help from a hard-working donkey, mixed with water for fermentation, and, finally, distilled twice in Pérez’s copper still.

Pérez, part of a long line of Oaxacan mezcaleros, worked abroad for many years to support his family. Eventually, he saved enough to afford the copper still that allowed him to take his craft back home. His uniquely smooth results didn’t go unnoticed. Facilitated by Mexico’s mezcal regulatory body, the Consejo Regulador del Mezcal, a batch of Pérez’s homemade mezcal found its way into a blind taste test matched up against 16 other local producers. The prize? A life-changing partnership with a new brand soon to be launched across the border: SUSTO.



MEZCAL With A Local FLAVOR

INGRID TAYLOR & LIZ STEWART (NOT PICTURED: TITI RODRIGUEZ)

“It was a good afternoon,” Taylor said of the taste test. “You don’t know how to discern the different flavors at first, but we learned that it’s three components: sweetness, smoothness and smokiness. That’s what we ranked our tastings on.”

Pérez’s batch was the runaway winner, earning top marks in all three categories. The partnership was made official the very next day, and Pérez invited the group to his home to seal the deal with a celebratory round. “We really felt like he was someone we felt great about doing business with, and the product was one we all believed in,” said Taylor.

Through Rodriguez’s connections and Taylor’s husband, who grew up in Mexico, Grupo Compadres was able to secure government grants to help get Pérez’s operation ready for export. At the same time, they began navigating the long, multinational bureaucratic maze necessary to secure a Normal Oficial Mexicana (NOM) certification—an official mark of authenticity ensuring that SUSTO is the real deal.



“The NOM requires a lot of documentation and verification that you are making a mezcal with integrity,” said Taylor. “It’s one of the things we’re most proud of. We want this to be consistent with the principles we live with here, that Titi has there, and to honor the traditions of the people who make the mezcal.”

While other brands often simply add their own label onto mass-produced, third-party mezcals (a process known as white-labeling), SUSTO’s production process stays true to mezcal’s homemade heritage.



“We’re going for authenticity in the partnership,” said Stewart. “We fell in love with the variety of mezcal available, and the individual producer stories. There aren’t any that are mass produced. Ours is artisanal, which means it’s always going to be small-batch. And that’s important to us.”

That commitment to authenticity means that SUSTO’s success is measured in more than just numbers. As part of their business model, Grupo Compadres is committed to making a difference on both sides of the border. The group helps support several nonprofits in Austin and has partnered with the Oaxaca Community Foundation to provide funding for textbooks and other school supplies for students in the community where SUSTO is made.

For Taylor, SUSTO has always been more than just a hobby among friends. “We built a model into the business so that we give money back to the community,” she said. “And that’s been made possible because we’re building a product that’s selling.”

Stewart adds that strengthening ties between the two countries has been a part of Grupo Compadres’ mission from the beginning. “There was a lot happening in the world when we started this that was tearing people apart and tearing us apart from our neighbors in Mexico,” she said. “If we can make people’s lives better on both sides of the border, we can deepen the connection.”

Now, as the world finds itself startled into a collective state of susto driven by pandemic and protest, upheaval and unrest, the only certainty is that these uneasy times won’t last forever. Until then, there’s mezcal.



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—LIZ STEWART