Mexican Whiskeys Fueled by Ancient Corn

Heirloom grains have become a novel base for an old spirit.

By CLAY RISEN

Of the 59 varieties of native corn in Mexico, nal t'eel is one of the oldest, having emerged in the Yucatán Peninsula some 4,000 years ago. It grows quickly, largely unbothered by heavy rains or drought — so robust that the Mayans called it "rooster corn."

Like almost all of Mexico's indigenous corn varieties, nal t'eel in recent decades has faced a seemingly unbeatable threat: high-yield hybrids, developed primarily in the United States and favored for their efficiency, though rarely their flavor. Fields once dotted with a rainbow of heirloom ears are now awash in wan yellows and whites.

But in 2020, nal t'eel was thrown a lifeline of sorts by Gran Maizal, a distillery outside the Yucatán city of Merida. Working with local farmers, the company uses nal t'eel and two other indigenous varieties of corn to make whiskey.

There are now more than a dozen distilleries across Mexico making whiskey, most of them using corn native to their region. About half of them export, or are preparing to export, to the United States, among them Abasolo, Sierra Norte and Maíz Nation. (Because the category is so new and still quite small, there are no sales figures available.)

In September, Gran Maizal also began exporting its whiskey to the United States, home to the world's best-known corn-based spirit, bourbon — a move that its founders see as both a challenge and an opportunity.

"Bourbon has been the center of the popularity and growth of whiskey in the U.S. for the last 20 years," said Gonzalo de la Pezuela, who founded Gran Maizal with Cesar Ayala. "So why not invite people to try a high-end whiskey from the birthplace of corn?"

Despite their common ingredient, Gran Maizal whiskey is a world apart from traditional bourbons, let alone barley-based whiskeys like Irish and Scotch. In bourbon, the charred oak barrel in which it ages is responsible for most of the flavor; in Gran Maizal, the centerpiece is the corn.

"We were doing distillation at a very small scale, a kitchen-counter scale in a lab," said Mr. de la Pezuela, who with Mr. Ayala spent years perfecting the Gran Maizal flavor, emphasizing the corn's rich, nutty sweetness and rejecting test batches that produced too much of the caramel and vanilla notes associated with bourbon. "And we quickly were able to say: 'Well, you know what? This is a lot like a bourbon. This is not for us.' "

While most bourbon is produced using a column still, which sacrifices character for efficiency, Gran Maizal is made with a pot still, which allows the grain's flavor to come through. Mr. de la Pezuela and Mr. Ayala worked with a research laboratory to develop a proprietary yeast strain to use in fermenting their grain.

The corn is also nixtamalized, an age-old process in which dried kernels are steeped in an alkaline solution to make it easier to work with, as well as taste better.

And rather than age the whiskey in wood barrels, Gran Maizal spends several months in terra-cotta amphorae, custom-made for the distillery by Andrew Beckham, an Oregon-based winemaker who has spent decades designing similar products for the wine industry. The only additional flavoring comes from a few handfuls of cured vanilla pods and cacao nibs — a traditional way to add a little sweetness to food and drink.

"Everything that we've done is based on what was happening in Mexico thousands of years ago," Mr. de la Pezuela said.

Each Mexican whiskey distillery has its own particular approach to the craft: Sierra Norte blends its corn with a small amount of malted barley, while Maíz Nation ages its whiskey for about two and a half years in new charred oak barrels, like bourbon. But at each distillery, the corn is king.

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Each distillery has its own particular approach to producing the liquor.

Maíz Nation, in the southern city of Oaxaca, buys its corn from a small number of local farmers who grow their crops using traditional methods.

"Every family has been growing their corn for hundreds of years," said Jonathan Barbieri, who moved to Mexico from the United States in the early 1980s and started making whiskey with his wife, Yira Vallejo, in 2014. "Corn is the intellectual property of Indigenous societies."

Oaxaca, where Sierra Norte is also based, is the heartland of Mexican corn: The distilleries are a short drive from the caves of Yagul and Mitla, a UNESCO World Heritage site where archaeologists have found the earliest evidence of domesticated corn.

Maíz Nation combines four corn varieties to make its whiskey — chalqueño, bolita, tepecintle and olotillo — each drawn from a different subregion around Oaxaca. Chalqueño grows in the far highlands, at about 9,400 feet, while olotillo grows on the coastal plains along the Pacific Ocean.

That array of corn varieties makes a colorful harvest, and provides a nuanced blend of flavors. But Mr. Barbieri said the more important thing was the cultural legacy they represented.

"When we talk about the incredible diversity of corn and the ecosystems it comes from, we tend to think about terroir," he said. "But for us, terroir is about much more than altitude, climate, soil or intersecting biology. Terroir is rooted in the way things are done and, in the present case, the history and culture of the people who, by farming it, are directly connected with their ancestors of 350 generations ago."

Maíz Nation, which Mr. Barbieri plans to begin exporting to the United States in a few months, has already been sold in Mexico and France for about four years.

While the critical reception for Maíz Nation, Gran Maizal and other Mexican whiskeys has been overwhelmingly positive, most distillers say their products have yet to find a foothold in a country where clear spirits like rum and tequila dominate, and where whiskey drinkers overwhelmingly prefer blended Scotch.

They have higher hopes for the U.S. market, where two decades of innovation among craft distillers has created a generation of whiskey fans eager to experiment with new styles and flavors.

"We think we have something unique," Mr. de la Pezuela said. "It is obviously not for the traditionalist in whiskey. But it's for somebody who is interested in the next discovery within whiskey — and that is delicious."

Above, an ear of nal t'eel corn grown on the farm of Pedro Poot, below left. Mr. Poot's crop is used to make Gran Maizal whiskey, right. The distillery worked with a research laboratory, below, to develop a yeast strain for fermentation. Sierra Norte, above right, is based in Oaxaca, which is the heartland of Mexican corn.