

Mezcal Vago

Bien Picado de Aquilino

89% Espadín (a. Angustifolia)/11% Mexicano (a. Rhodacantha)

Batch A-05-EM-19

The term Bien Picado is one you hear occasionally when visiting palenques in Oaxaca. It refers to a batch of mezcal that is made from mostly overripe agave. When maguery is ripe it starts to sprout its quiote. Once the quiote is about a meter high they chop it off so that the sugars stay in the plant. Almost immediately after being cut bugs called picudos, which are the adult form of the gusano de maguery, begin to attack the plant. Picado can mean “bitten”, hence the term Bien Picado meaning “bitten up”. If a plant is left too long it will eventually rot and die within a certain timeframe depending on the varietal. Espadín will last about three months before becoming over-ripe and starting to rot. An average batch of Espadín (one oven full) is about 125 piñas, so the mezcalero waits until he has enough ripe piñas for a full batch. By the end, the earliest ones to ripen have become overripe, while the younger ones are just becoming mature. As such, its normal for a batch of Aquilino’s mezcal Espadín to contain around 10% Espadín bien picado.



Occasionally you will find a mezcalero who has a small batch made from more bien picado maguery that the mezcalero didn’t want to include in his normal batch. This is coveted and usually saved for themselves. There is less sugar but a more complex flavor profile. The lower sugar content elevates the savory notes of the mezcal; the salty, cured meat characteristics, as well as the earthy profile. Conversely, it dampens the fruitier, brighter notes of the roasted Espadín, producing a more darkly balanced flavor profile.

Agave Mexicano

One of the difficult parts of mezcal culture for many to grasp is the influence of regional colloquialisms on agave terminology. With so many indigenous languages even within Oaxaca alone, there is a lot of overlap in informal agave names, with some being used to refer to different species in different regions. Even more, the same species can have different names in different regions. In the

region surrounding Sola de Vega, Mexicano is used to refer to a sub-variety of species *Agave Rhodacantha*. This sub-species typically has shorter, broader leaves with an oblong shape and short, dark brown to black spines. Needing only 7 - 12 years to reach maturity, these agave are, on average, 30% smaller than Espadín at the time of harvest. These agave typically have less sugar content at the time of harvest than Espadín, producing lighter, dryer and more floral notes. Mezcales from Mexicano can often be very delicate with long finishes. The lightness of these mezcales tend to balance well with the heavier-bodied style of Tío Rey. The geographic distribution of *A. Rhodacantha* is represented in the map below by the brown coloration.



*Image taken from CONABIO website.

Agave Espadín



Espadín typically takes 7 – 12 years to mature, reaching roughly 5 – 6 feet in diameter and 4 feet in height. The rosette has very straight, narrow pencas with a gray-green hue and small spines. Once the pencas have been removed, the piña of a mature espadín can weigh around 100 kilograms.

The genetic “mother” of a. Tequilana, a. Angustifolia var. Haw, or “Espadín,” is the most prolific species of agave used in mezcal production. The plant grows prevalently throughout Oaxaca but its range extends between both the north and south borders of Mexico. The plant is very disease resistant, has a large yield of mezcal produced per kilo of agave harvested (due to high sugar concentrations) and has a shorter maturation time compared to most other agave used for distillation. The plants can be easily cultivated and are able to reproduce clonally; all of these factors combining to allow a. Angustifolia to dominate the mezcal market. Almost every brand of mezcal begins by bottling an Espadín and it is usually the first one that consumers experience; both because of its availability and price point. 77.4% of mezcal produced in 2014 was from a. Angustifolia. The geographic range of a. Angustifolia can be seen in the map below:



Image taken from CONABIO website

Aquilino García López

Location: Candelaria Yegolé, Oaxaca

Aquilino is the father-in-law of Mezcal Vago’s co-founder, Judah Kuper. This family connection and his exquisite mezcal were the inspiration to form Mezcal Vago. Aquilino had never produced commercially before working with Mezcal Vago and produces exclusively for Mezcal Vago.

Aquilino García López, grows Maguay Espadín, and Maguay Mexicano. He wild harvests Maguay Cuixe (Tobaziche) and



Tepeztate. He has taken over fields from his father and also has family and friends with whom he sources agave.

His *palenque* is in Candelaria Yegolé, Oaxaca (16°29'41.36"N, 96°18'38.69"W) This is a river town in a hot and dry climate at an elevation of around 1100 meters. Two rivers converge in a narrow Valley and it is mountainous on all sides. It is a rugged three-hour drive from Oaxaca city.

The palenque is on Aquilino's ranch where he lives full time. He and his father moved it to its current location 15 years ago. It has moved around from nearby locations over the years. He believes his family has been making Mezcal for at least five generations. Aquilino does nearly all of the work himself.



The Agave Espadín and Agave Mexicano both take 7 to 9 years to mature and Aquilino is very careful about only using ripe agave. It takes 1000 kilos to yield around 100 liters of Mezcal. So every 10 kilos will yield a liter. The Espadín we cut ranges from 5 to 100 kilos per agave with an average of around 50 kilos for a well-grown ripe piña (agave heart). Therefore, one ripe Agave Espadín yields around seven 750ml bottles of Mezcal. A bit less but similar for Coyote, Arroqueño and Mexicano. Agave Tobalá and Cuixe yield even less.

Batch sizes of Espadín and Elote are around 750 liters. Each batch needs around 7 tons of cleaned and prepared agave piñas. Aquilino limits his batch sizes to one full oven.

The Mexicano and the Cuixe are smaller batches due to the availability of the agave. A batch of Mexicano is between 200 and 900 hundred Liters. The Cuixe is between 100 and 300 Liters (he only

does around 2 a year.) The Cuixe is very laborious to make. Locating ripe agave growing wild and spread out over a large region surrounding the village takes lots of time and patience. Many of the agave are far from the road and need to be brought down the mountain by burro. The Cuixe is also laborious to clean and prepare and is tough to grind. It is roasted at least a full day longer than Espadín to fully extract the sugars.

Aquilino uses a traditional stone *tahona* to grind the cooked agave. All of the mashed agave and its juices are scooped together into the fermentation vats. A full oven of agave will take a couple of weeks to grind. This helps space out the fermentation process so not everything finishes at the same time.



Aquilino's nine fermentation vats are made of pine and hold up to 1000 liters. The cooked agave and water ferment from the natural airborne yeasts in the air. No additional ingredients are used to make the mezcal other than agave and water.

Each batch ferments for around a week. This varies depending on the ambient temperature at the time of fermentation. Aquilino distills his fermented mash before all of the sugar has fermented. This is sooner than other mezcalero's' techniques.



Aquilino has a copper still that has a 250-liter capacity. He makes all the separations (cuts) by smell and taste. The heads are between 70% and 30% AVB and his tails are between 30% and 15% AVB. Everything else he doesn't use.