



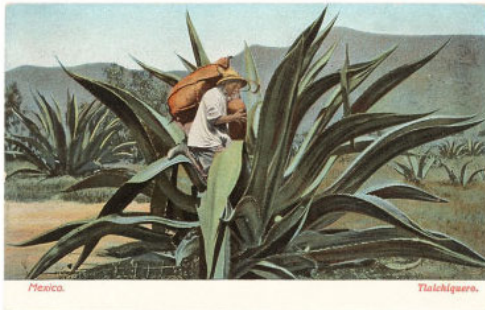
Agave Ancient History



Agave is derived from the Greek “agavos” meaning “illustrious.” The Aztec goddess, Mayahuel, represented Agave's symbol of long life and health, dancing and fertility. For the Nahuatl, the original inhabitants of western Mexico, the plant was worshipped, representing goddess Mayaheul's earthly power of wind, rain and crops.

Human remains dating back at least 10,000 years show the early uses of agave for food and fiber. The agave plant has long been part of human culture and was already ancient when the Spaniard Conquistadors arrived in 1492. By 1520, it was exported into the Old World. Agave is mentioned as a food of the Aztecs and natives in the Florentine Codex of 1580.

Cultivated in the high western areas, the succulent broad-leafed plant grows eight years to ripen. During the New World exploration in the late 1400's and early 1500's, Spanish conquistadors encountered the Nahuatl-produced fermented agave beverage ‘pulque’. It's primarily use was in religious ceremonies and for medicinal purposes in Nahuatl culture. By the late 1500's, Spaniards running short out of brandy, searched for fermentable sugars for distilling. They experimented with wild agave, which was abundant in the volcanic soils in the Sierra Madre region surrounding Guadalajara. The species that produced the most full-bodied taste was the Blue Tequilana Weber Agave, the blue agave or agave azul.



By 1600 the first tequila distillery was established by Don Pedro Sanches de Tagle, Marquis of Altamira. Don Pedro also was the first to begin cultivation of agave Espadín the processor of Blue Tequilana Weber Agave. In 1636, to enforce tax collection on production the Governor authorized the distillation of tequila and mescal. However, in 1785, Spanish rule suppressed tequila production, banning all native distilled spirits. The ban was lifted in 1792 but tequila production and agave farming did not flourish again until Mexican independence in 1821.

By the mid 1800's agave farming expanded with many tequila distillers beginning large-scale production. The two first two licensed distillers were Jose Antonio Cuervo in 1758 and Don Cenobio Sauza in 1873 and remain today major forces of the tequila industry.

By the end of 1800's, agave farming for tequila had become an important part of the regional economy. In the 2000's Agave farming is the dominant agricultural crop in the state of Jalisco representing about 50 % of the agricultural economy and part of the social-economic structure includes many agave grower cooperatives.



There are 136 known species of agave, with 13 species prehistorically domesticated by native inhabitants put to many uses.



Blue Agave, grown in Jalisco, is the only variety used to produce tequila. Historians and ethno-botanists have traced the first record of cultivated Blue Agave from the wilder Espadín to the 1800s. Blue Agave was selectively bred for its flavor, relatively short maturation cycle, baking qualities and compatibility with "industrial" processes. Intensive breeding of the cultivar allowed it to spread quickly. Interestingly, another name for Blue Agave, Maguey is not a native Mexican term, rather a word imported from the Antilles.

Salmina, another more historic wild variety, is grown in the state of Oaxaca by indigenous farmers on steeper hillsides. Salmina is used by Mezcal distilleries.

In the 1990's a joint private and public effort developed the method and regulations for using Agave to produce the alternative and organic sweetener agave syrup ([link](#)). Today, close to 10 % of total agave production is used for agave syrup, with most coming from Blue Agave.