

In 2015 I spent two November days with Esteban Morales Garibi in up-country Jalisco. Garibi is a Guadalajara restaurateur with a deep interest in the local mezcal called *raicilla*. We visited four artisan family *destilerias* he sources from for export (as Los Danzantes does for Alipus). Garibi's brand is La Venenosa, worth looking for.

The agaves used up-country are silvestran (wild), notably the *maximiliana*. Some *piñas* are huge, 100 kilos or more. Ancestral methods are very much alive, including the use of a still derived from Filipino prototypes introduced after the Spanish Conquest via Puerto Vallarta (see Henry Bruner, *Early Alcohol in Mexico*, which includes a photograph of an early still cut into a block of stone).

The photos were taken by Garibi and by Linda Newton as we visited the backyard *destileria* of Don Luis Contreras in the Sierra Negra.



the palenque, the smallest one I've seen



the crushing pit (empty, with a mazo)



the fermenting pit



mazos, long-handled pounders

Here's the *palenque*, the wood-fired roasting pit. Once roasted, the cut-up agaves are crushed by hand in a wooden pit, using *mazos*, long wooden pounders. The crushed agaves are transferred to a shallow concrete pit for fermentation (native ambient yeasts).



All four stills are running



the clay potstills enclosed in the oven. You're looking at what's left after the prior run



Tending the fire. Note that he's split the wood into thin pieces = more control of the heat of the fire

Don Luis uses four stills. Each still has three principal elements: the pot, the condensing chamber, and the copper condensing bowl. The bottom element is a clay pot embedded in a wood-fired stone oven.



the condensing chamber



the condensing chamber in place



sealing the space between the pot and the condensing chamber

Above the pot is the second element, a cylindrical clay condensing chamber open at the bottom and top. It stands on top of the bottom pot: Don Luis' wife is sealing the space between the two clay elements, using distillation residue and wet clay.



the copper bowl



agave spear collector  
inside condensing chamber



the bamboo tube

In the upper opening of the condensing chamber sits a shallow copper bowl with a slightly rounded bottom. Inside, the chamber has a lip protruding from its inner surface which supports a large segment of agave spear which catches the drops falling from the bowl's bottom and drains the liquid into a bamboo tube; the tube exits through the side of the still.



loading the still with fermented liquid



loading the still with fermented solids.  
Tequila distillers filter the solids out



two stills loaded and ready to run. The two in back  
haven't been emptied from the prior run.

The crushed and fermented agave liquid including the solids is wheelbarrowed over from the fermenting pit and loaded into the bottom clay pot; when the pot is full, the condensing chamber is placed above it.



adding water to the copper bowl.  
Notice how focused he is



distillate coming off

Heat from the wood fire in the oven brings the fermented agave liquid and solids to a boil. Steam rises into the upper element (the condensing chamber) and condenses into droplets on the bottom of the copper bowl. The distiller constantly adds cold water to the bowl to keep it cool, so that condensation happens readily. Condensed distillate falling from the underside of the copper bowl is collected in the ceramic tray inside the condensing chamber and is drained by the bamboo tube onto the cut-off broad end of the agave spear. It runs down the spear into a small clay pot.

In its basics, the method has not changed for more than 2000 years. The technical name for a potstill is "alambic", a word coming from ancient Greek through Arabic; the ancient Greek root is *ambyx*, meaning a saucer. Get it? = the copper dish on top of Don Luis' still (except the Greeks turned the saucer upside down over the pot and collected drops falling from the saucer's rim). The word *ambyx* came originally from Egypt, which is likely where the Greeks learned to distill. I was watching someone doing more or less exactly what some 380 BC Greek physician, or even some priest in Thebes in 1500 BC, would have done to concentrate an infusion for a dose of herbal medicine.



This is not Colonial Williamsburg: “Wow look at this weird old way of doing things”. Don Luis’ process has real-time value and meaning: agaves distilled this way can be among the finest spirits being produced anywhere in the world. Hand-crushing leads to more complete fermentation; small stills make better product. Most importantly, the distiller, if he wants to make good stuff, is compelled to pay constant attention: in total touch at every moment with what’s going on inside his still.



There are plenty of careless distillers, and therefore plenty of indifferent mezcals, but the artisanal process allows someone who really cares about what he’s making to produce a great spirit. The day before, I had visited a first-rate tequila distillery and tasted through some of their best stuff. The *raicilla* coming from Don Luis’ still was richer, more profound.

I was seeing first-hand where the elements of a modern potstill, say Germain-Robin’s old cognac stills, come from. The G-R stills have a pot; underneath is not a wood fire but a propane burner: both use open flames. The G-R stills have a “hat” and a “swan’s neck”; as with the upper element of the clay still, a significant amount of redistillation (rectification) occurs as some of the steam condenses and falls back into the pot, enriching the end product. The GR condensing coils are simply a more efficient way of turning the distillation steam back into a liquid; here, modern is in certain ways better because you can more closely control the temperature of the exiting liquid and slow cooling in a coil/water bath is often superior to quick cooling. On the other hand, when Crispin Cain went to Oaxaca and distilled mezcal using a Hoga potstill with a large “hat” and controlling the condensation by adding ice to the bath surrounding the condensation coil, the resulting product was more elegant but lacked the vegetal intensity of mezcal. It was not as rich.



Know what I liked best? I wasn’t watching someone do his job. I was watching someone living his life. His grandchildren were there, growing up *inside* the process, the way he had, and his father before him. Don Luis was on crutches from an automobile accident, so his wife was helping. You could tell she felt good about it, proud of her contribution. Before Esteban Garibi, the customers who bought and drank what Don Luis distilled were his neighbors, his *pueblo*, the people he lives among. In his *destileria* is zero modern-day alienation of labor. His time has not been monetized. When he (or any of the thousands of other back-country *mezcaleros*) says “I’m a distiller”, he’s not talking about his job, he’s talking about his life, and you can taste that fact in the subtlety, high quality, and individuality of his *raicilla*. People like Esteban Garibi – or like Jaime Muñoz and Hector Vasquez and Karina Abad of Los Danzantes – are so deeply engaged because they believe in keeping this precious thing going, keeping it alive.