

CULTIVATING MARKET



NICK LAMMERS — Staff

Jake Lustig of Oakland has spent years cultivating a market for his mezcal, which he produces in Mexico.

Supplier changes mezcal image

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JAKE LUSTIG is fighting the worm. Lustig, 27, is the president of Reunion Mezcal Co., an Oakland company that produces and imports Don Amado brand mezcal.

You will not find a worm (actually a caterpillar) lurking in the bottom of the hand-blown glass bottle that encases Don Amado mezcal.

That would be an insult to the smoke-imbued liquor Lustig and his partner lovingly distill in a Oaxaca, Mexico, "palenque."

The mezcal that Lustig produces — using centuries-old techniques — is more akin to a single-malt scotch than the inexpensive south of the border booze that has haunted many a college night out, Lustig said.

The similarity is not so much in the taste, he said, but in the way both liquors have a layered flavor — nuances of taste that are imparted during production.

"It's a long process to educate Americans that our mezcal is not that rot-gut, worm-in-the-bottle mezcal they may have tried," he said.

Mezcal, like tequila, is distilled from the agave plant. The way in which mezcal dif-

fers from tequila is in the manner and scale of production, and its geographic origin. Tequila comes from the Jalisco region of Mexico, whereas mezcal is produced in a zone surrounding the state of Oaxaca.

Since the Spanish introduced copper stills to Mexico in the 1500s, tequila has been produced on a much larger scale than mezcal. That remains true today.

Mezcal is still made by hundreds of small-scale "palenqueros" each producing only a few hundred liters of the spirit per month.

This down-home approach is taken a

Mezcal: U.S. sales growing rapidly

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step further at the Reunion Mezcal Co., where Don Amado is twice distilled using traditional ceramic and bamboo stills, an anachronism in these days of stainless steel tubing and chemically assisted fermentation.

The craft approach, however, is how Don Amado mezcal and a handful of other mezcals and tequilas are trying to find a place on the top shelf of bars, restaurants and liquor stores.

A bottle of Don Amado sells for about \$30, and can be found locally in places such as Beverages & More, Draeger's, Piedmont Grocery and a slew of restaurants and bars. That price range puts it in competition with a great many long-established elixirs, but in recent years mezcal and tequila have been growing as a segment much faster than other liquors, industry analysts said.

The growth of Don Amado sales in the United States — from 20 cases in 1997 to 500 cases last year — is due primarily to the tireless efforts of Lustig.

"For about the first six months I was selling it out of the back of my junky 4-Runner," Lustig said. "People

didn't know what to do with me."

They soon figured it out.

With a knowledge won after years spent in Oaxaca talking and working with a number of "mezcaleros," Lustig has become a recognized expert on mezcal. His ability to educate would-be buyers, and the allure of the mezcal itself won people over. As one might expect, among the first converts were a number of Mexican restaurants and bars in Oakland's Fruitvale section, not far from where Lustig, his wife Deva, 28, and son Eli, 4, live.

Lustig pushed on, and won accounts in restaurants all over the Bay Area. His gusto for mezcal eventually drew the attention of Union City-based Southern Wine & Spirits, one of the largest liquor distributors in the nation.

Although Don Amado volumes are minuscule compared to the heavy-hitters of the liquor industry, they agreed to take Lustig and his mezcal on.

That Lustig would try his hand at running a mezcal company makes sense when you find out he is the son of restaurateur Susan Nelson.

Nelson was the owner of the now defunct Berkeley landmark restaurant the 4th Street Grill.

As a child, and through Berkeley High School and the University of California, Santa Cruz, Lustig spent summers and vacations visiting his mother who lived for a time in Oaxaca.

During those visits, Lustig honed his Spanish and by chance began to educate himself about mezcal.

He and a Oaxacan friend used to earn money by taking tourists to visit local crafts people.

"It was generally rugs and pottery, and then tourists began to ask us to take them to mezcal distilleries," Lustig said. "Very quickly it became a regular stop on our tours."

Through the connections he made as a tour guide, and later running a mezcal business for former Stag's Leap winery owner Carl Doumani, Lustig was primed to start his own business.

Lustig doesn't expect or want Don Amado to become as ubiquitous as a major-brand tequila. That is not what his mezcal is about, he said.

"We're breaking even now," Lustig said. "It's a lot of fun, and it's a good way for us to go back and forth to Mexico. My goal is to sell about 3,500 cases per year — if we can do that, we'll be sitting very pretty."