

Agave, the Piña, and the Spanish-Mexican History of Distilled Spirits

The Question of Tequila

When discussing tequila, it is important to separate two different traditions: the ancient use of agave in Mexico and the later introduction of distillation technology through the Spanish colonial world.

Agave is native to Mexico, and Indigenous peoples had long used different agave species for food, fiber, sap, and fermented beverages. One of the best-known fermented agave beverages was **pulque**, which was produced through fermentation rather than distillation. The historical record therefore shows an established Indigenous agave tradition in Mexico before tequila existed in its modern form.

Spain already possessed traditions of producing distilled alcoholic beverages. Spanish agricultural and historical records document aguardientes made from grape pomace and wine, as well as long-standing traditions of wine distillation and brandy production. Spanish government records also contain documentation concerning aguardiente and wine distillation dating back centuries.

The important development occurred when distillation was introduced into Mexico during the Spanish colonial period and was applied to a plant that was already deeply established in Mexican life: **agave**. The Tequila Regulatory Council dates the earliest historical records of a tequila-like beverage in Jalisco to the sixteenth century and describes Spanish-introduced distillation as an important part of the development of distilled agave beverages.

The Heart of the Piña

The most fascinating part of this story is the **piña**.

The word *piña* means “pineapple” in Spanish. The harvested agave is called a piña because, after the long leaves are cut away, the remaining heart resembles a large pineapple.

This heart is the concentrated center of the plant. It contains the carbohydrates and sugars that can ultimately be transformed into alcohol.

In traditional tequila production, the mature blue agave is harvested before the plant sends up its flowering stalk. At this stage, the plant has accumulated substantial stores of carbohydrates. Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History describes the traditional harvesting process as cutting the mature agave, removing its leaves, and separating the central head or heart—the piña—which is then transported for processing.

The Tequila Regulatory Council similarly describes tequila as being produced from the fermented juices of the **cooked heart of blue agave**, *Agave tequilana* Weber var. *azul*.

This makes the piña more than simply an ingredient. **It is the heart of the plant and the physical foundation of the spirit.**

From the Living Plant to the Spirit

The process begins in the field.

The agave grows for years before harvest. When it reaches the appropriate stage of maturity, the leaves are cut away and the piña is removed.

The piñas are then cooked. Cooking breaks down complex carbohydrates in the agave and makes the sugars available for fermentation. The Tequila Regulatory Council describes this stage as hydrolysis, in which the carbohydrates are converted into fermentable sugars.

The cooked material is then crushed or extracted. The resulting sugary liquid is fermented, allowing yeast to convert the sugars into alcohol.

Only after fermentation does distillation take place.

The fermented liquid is heated in a still. Alcohol and other volatile compounds are separated through the distillation process, producing the concentrated spirit that becomes tequila.

So the sequence can be understood simply:

Agave → Piña → Cooking → Sugars → Fermentation → Distillation → Tequila

What Was Spanish and What Was Mexican?

This history is therefore more complicated than saying tequila was simply “invented by Spain” or simply “invented by Mexico.”

The agave plant, the cultivation of agave, the Indigenous knowledge surrounding the plant, and fermented agave beverages belong to the much older history of Mexico.

The **distillation technology and Spanish colonial system belong to the later historical layer.**

Spain already had its own distilled beverages, especially spirits associated with grapes, wine, and grape pomace. Spain's Ministry of Agriculture documents traditions involving aguardiente, orujo, brandy, and wine distillation.

Mexico then became the place where European distillation technology encountered the extraordinary native agave plant and the existing Indigenous knowledge of that plant.

That combination produced something historically distinctive.

The Spanish Connection

This is why it is useful to say that tequila has a **Mexican-Indigenous foundation with a Spanish technological influence.**

Spain did not bring the agave plant to Mexico. The agave was already there.

Spain did, however, bring or facilitate technologies and practices associated with distillation that transformed what could be made from the agave.

The result was not simply Spanish aguardiente made from Mexican ingredients. Over time, Mexico developed its own distinctive agave-spirit traditions, including mezcal and eventually tequila.

The geographical identity became important as well. Modern tequila has a protected Mexican **Denomination of Origin**, and the authorized production region includes Jalisco and specified municipalities in Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Tamaulipas.

Why the Piña Matters

The piña gives us a useful way to understand the entire history.

The **heart of the plant was Mexican.**

The **distilling technology came through the Spanish world.**

The **spirit emerged from the interaction of those two histories in Mexico.**

That is why tequila cannot accurately be described as an ancient Spanish drink, even though Spanish technology played an important role in the development of distilled agave spirits.

At the same time, it would also be incomplete to describe modern tequila as an entirely pre-Spanish Indigenous invention, because the process of distillation fundamentally changed what could be produced from the agave.

The piña sits at the center of this story: a native Mexican plant transformed through a later technological process into one of the world's best-known spirits.

Could There Be a French Agave Spirit?

This also brings us back to the earlier question of a **French version of tequila.**

France has its own long history of distillation and spirits production. A French producer could therefore create an agave spirit using French distilling expertise and French production methods.

It could be made from the heart of an agave plant, just as tequila is made from the heart of blue agave.

But it would not be tequila.

Tequila is Mexican because its name, protected geographical identity, authorized agave, and production rules are tied to Mexico.

A French product could instead become something new: a **French agave spirit**, with its own identity, production traditions, and relationship to French agriculture and distilling.

That distinction is important. A culture can create something new from a plant or technique without claiming that it originated the older tradition from which the idea was inspired.

The Heart

Ultimately, the story of the piña is a story about transformation.

A living agave spends years drawing water, sunlight, and nutrients into itself. At maturity, the leaves are removed and the heart is harvested. That heart contains the stored energy of years of growth.

The piña is then cooked, its sugars released, fermented, and finally distilled.

The heart becomes the spirit.

That is what makes the piña such an important symbol for understanding agave spirits. It represents the meeting point between the land, the plant, human cultivation, Indigenous knowledge, Spanish technology, and the later development of Mexican tequila.