

# Pulque

## Mexico's National Beverage?

Javier Gómez Marín\*

Mexico's gastronomical culture includes a drink known as "pulque" (from the Náhuatl *octli*, meaning 'juice of the maguey'). As the name implies, it is prepared by fermenting the sap (aguamiel) of a variety called the *manso* (tame) maguey, belonging to the genus *Agave* ("agave" is from the Greek for "admirable," since the plant grows in very arid climates).

This may well be the oldest fermented beverage in the Western Hemisphere. Archaeological evidence has been found of its existence more than 2 000 years ago. The cultural value of this low-grade alcoholic drink (from six to eight proof, or three to four percent) lies in the fact that it is both produced and consumed in the same way as in ancient times. It is therefore said to have survived colonial domination, wars of independence, and revolutions; and today, in our times of globalization and world standardization, it continues to be

part of Mexico's gastronomy, particularly that of Central Mexico, as it has for centuries, something unique in a world where everything loses its original characteristics when it is industrialized.

### THE LONG PROCESS

To make pulque, you have to wait from 8 to 12 years for the maguey plant to mature. Before it can flower, the flower stalk is cut, and you must wait six months for the heart of the plant to ripen. Then it is "scraped," which consists of taking out the center where the soft leaves grow, with a kind of a scoop, leaving a hollow. This makes the maguey plant release its sap, or aguamiel (honeywater), which gathers in the hole.

For almost six months, the plant will exude six liters of aguamiel a day, that is, more than 1 100 liters of raw material for pulque making. Because of this high productivity, the richest man during the presidency of General Porfirio Díaz

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Vat with pulque from Chalma, 2011.

(1884-1910), Don Ignacio Torres Adalid, the so-called “model entrepreneur of the *porfiriato*,” dubbed these magueys “green cows.”

The aguamiel is collected manually twice a day by the *tlachiquero*, the person in charge of caring for the magueys. His trade is perhaps the oldest in the culture of the Americas. Once collected, the sap is taken to a cold room with very high ceilings called a “*tinacal*,” or fermenting shed. There it ferments for two days, turning into white pulque, or “Mexican wine.” Then, it is transported in wooden barrels for sale and consumption in *pulquerías*, which for centuries were very popular in the country’s capital and today are regaining their popularity. It is said that in the early 1900s there were thousands in Mexico City; by 1968,<sup>1</sup> there were 1 024, and today there are barely 68;<sup>2</sup> however, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

#### THE HISTORY OF PULQUE

There is no data about when honey water began to be used to make pulque, but in the state of Puebla’s Tehuacán Valley the maguey plant was already being cultivated in the year 6 500 BC. Naturally, this does not prove the existence of pulque in that period, but it is known that that region has been arid for millennia, making it logical to suppose that even in an-

*By the seventeenth century, pulque had been added to Spaniards and mestizos’ palates, and some of them made huge fortunes from the pulque haciendas, and then from the pulquerías.*

C.B. Waite



Pulque shop, ca. 1906.



Javier Gómez Marín

Anonymous Mexican painter, *The Discovery of Pulque*, ca. 1860. Sumuaya Museum Collection.

cient times local inhabitants would have sought alternative sources of moisture.<sup>3</sup>

The pyramid at the Cholula archaeological site, also in Puebla, has the oldest artistic representation of pulque: *The Mural of the Drinkers*, a fresco measuring almost 120 square meters, dating from AD100, depicting a group of priests in a ceremony drinking pulque.

Popular tradition attributes the discovery of pulque to Xóchitl, in the year AD997. According to Toltec mythology, Xóchitl noticed a rabbit drinking the transparent sap from the center of a maguey. She took some of it to her house and, two days later, realized that it had fermented and turned white. Xóchitl and her father, Papatzin, took it to the Toltec king Tecpancalzin, who liked it very much and drank it with his courtiers until they became inebriated. The king was not only won over by the pulque, but he also fell in love with the young woman's beauty, so he ordered her to be kidnapped and hidden in his palace. Then Papatzin stole into the palace, but when he realized that his daughter was pregnant, he cursed the king, saying that his son would bring down the Toltec empire. The son, Meconeztin ("son of the maguey") assumed the throne when his father died, but started a civil war that led to the destruction of the Toltec people.

#### THE VICISSITUDES OF PULQUE IN THE CULTURE

Before the Spaniards came to the Americas, pulque was a sacred beverage consumed moderately, with strict laws preventing its abuse. After the consolidation of Spanish colonialism, pulque was relegated to the background because it was said that, since it was an intoxicant, the indigenous used it to get drunk and forget their circumstances, which bordered on slavery. The new rulers tried to replace it with Spanish beverages like milk and wine, but they never managed to change indigenous and mestizos' taste for pulque.

By the seventeenth century, to the contrary, pulque had been added to Spaniards and mestizos' palates, and some of them made huge fortunes from the enormous industry of the pulque haciendas. After the War of Independence (1810-1821), pulque consumption was subjected to heavy taxes and regulations, generating high revenues for each government because of its popularity. It was not until the advent of the railroad in Mexico in 1866, however, that it could be swiftly transported in large quantities to the cities of Mexico, Puebla, and Pachuca. The tracks went right through the pulque haciendas, and from there to the *pulquerías*.



Frame of a *tlachiquero* with a maguery plant taken from the 1938 German documentary *Making Pulque in Mexico*, directed by Hubert Schonger. Javier Gómez Marín Collection.

Only six years ago, the *pulquerías*' regular customers were nostalgic seniors; today they have been invaded by 18- to 25-year-olds who are trying to recover part of their pre-Hispanic gastronomical legacy through pulque.

The *porfiriato* (the 30-years dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz) was the golden age of pulque, particularly the last 10 years (1900 to 1910). Great fortunes were amassed from its production, and with them emerged the "pulque aristocracy," that is, the owners of both haciendas, where it was produced, and the points of sale in the cities and towns. These industrialists grouped together in the Pulque Merchants' Company, the largest union of merchants who sold the beverage, who were also the owners of more than 300 haciendas that grew the pulque maguery.

Enormous efforts were made with large capital investments to industrialize the beverage, bottle, and export it to the whole world, as is done with beer. But no one ever found a way of stopping pulque's fermentation, and so it could not be bottled. However, in the early twentieth century, the country's capital filled up with *pulquerías*; there were said to be more than 2 000 establishments, one on every corner, since,



Gabriel Vargas, cover of *La Familia Burrón* (The Burro[n] Family) comic book, year 6, no. 350, June 12, 1985 (offset). Javier Gómez Marín Collection.

at that time, 86 percent of the alcoholic beverages consumed in the country were pulque.<sup>4</sup>

Production dropped with the Mexican Revolution, but the revolutionaries did not touch the haciendas, since they were only interested in grain and cattle. It was not until the 1930s that President Lázaro Cárdenas split up the pulque haciendas as part of the agrarian reform into small plots that were never productive because the peasants could not afford to wait 10 years to harvest their crops. At the same time, the government began a campaign to ruin pulque's reputation and openly favor the country's large breweries. The evil legend of pulque began to circulate, according to which aguamiel was fermented with cow dung. Together with this, the beer industry began selling their product in transparent glass bottles to show consumers that beer was a clean, pure beverage, not "dirty" like pulque.

Beginning in the 1940s, the pulque industry began to decline, forgotten by government and entrepreneurs. Today, in the twenty-first century, thanks to young people who have re-acquired a taste for it, pulque is coming back from oblivion.



José Guadalupe Posada, *Pulque Shop at the San Nicolás El Grande Hacienda*, 20.8 x 32 cm (engraving).



Women drinking pulque out of a *xorna* bowl, ca. 1915-1920. Casasola Fund.

**PULQUERÍAS, A LEGACY THAT  
CROSSES GENERATIONS**

*Pulquerías* were perhaps Mexico City’s most attractive sales venues, and they used a myriad of marketing strategies to attract clientele. Today, the city is the country’s bastion of pulque sales, with its 68 surviving *pulquerías*, plus six new establishments. Only six years ago, the *pulquerías*’ regular customers were nostalgic seniors; by contrast, today they have been invaded by 18- to 25-year-olds who are trying to recover part of their pre-Hispanic gastronomical legacy through pulque.

One of the oldest operates in downtown Mexico City: La Risa (Laughter), located at 75 Mesones Street. It is worth visiting other *pulquerías* that preserve the old flavor, like Las Duelistas (The Women Duelists), at 28 Aranda Street, decorated with large, very Mexican murals. You can’t miss the Salón Casino (Casino Room), at the corner of Lorenzo Boturini and Isabel la Católica; those in the know say it serves the capital city’s best pulque. Other must-sees are La Paloma Azul (Blue Dove) on Popocatepetl Avenue and the Central Thoroughfare; La Pirata (The Pirate), between September 13 Street and December 12 Streets; Los Hombres sin Miedo (The Fearless Men), at 765 La Viga Boulevard; and La Titina, at North Thoroughfare 3 and Los Misterios Boulevard.

**Pulque has survived colonial domination, wars of independence, and today, in times of globalization and world standardization, every pulque is different, and every *pulquería* has its own character.**

Modernity has brought us alternative *pulquerías*, like Las Bellas Hartas (Fed-up Beauties), at 17 Cuba Street, whose publicity advertises it as “the world’s first gay *pulquería*.”

**DRINKING MEXICAN-NESS**

These establishments serve two kinds of pulque: white and “cured.” White pulque is the unadulterated, natural drink; the “cured” pulque is white pulque with fruit and/or vegetable juices added. All *pulquerías* serve the beverage with free spicy bar-snack tacos on the side.

Modern music has filled these venues that used to be nostalgic, so you can drink Mexico’s millennia-old national beverage, produced today only in the states of Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Mexico, and Puebla, while enjoying rock, *Trova*, and electronic music.



G. Vuillier, *Pulque Worker*, France, ca. 1880 (engraving). Javier Gómez Marín Collection.



Patrons of a pulque shop, ca. 1930-1935 (photograph). Casasola Fund.

Globalizing monopolies are trying to standardize our gastronomical tastes, practically forcing us to consume their bottled drinks with the same flavor and “quality” in every country in the world. By contrast, every pulque is different; every maguey plant produces a different pulque; every *pulquería* has its own personality; and this drink has no trademark. Today,

pulque is produced, distributed, and sold only by family-owned companies, and the huge multinationals cannot take part in this great tradition. Beer and distilled alcohol exist the world over; but pulque, only in Mexico. As the old saying goes, nothing is “more Mexican than pulque.” **VM**

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#### NOTES

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