



The blue agave plant takes eight years to mature in the heat of the semi-arid desert. It looks like a cactus yet it's a member of the lily family, protecting its juicy, fibrous interior with thorny spines. And at its heart are the delicate earthy, spicy and floral flavours that distillers seek to share with a thirsty public in the form of agave spirit.

The spirit is of course best known as tequila, and in Mexico it also goes by mezcal or less frequently, *komil*. Much like champagne or port, we cannot call our locally produced version by these well-known names due to geographical protection, but we do produce it here. In fact, South Africa is the second most prolific cultivator of blue agave in the world, second to – of course – Mexico. No-one knows quite how the plants arrived here, but they were originally used for soil erosion control and as fodder crops for livestock during times of drought. The plants now number in the millions and are farmed near Graaff-Reinet in the Karoo. And thanks to the success of our local agave farmers, we are now the fourth most prolific consumers of agave-derived spirits in the world behind Mexico, USA and Russia.

A DEVIL OF A PLANT

We as South Africans do like to support local – always lekker – and it seems that we have all of the ingredients for a thriving agave industry. I set out to learn more about this ancient spirit and the meet some of the faces championing the locally made version.

Lucy Beard from Hope on Hopkins in Cape Town is best known for her acclaimed range of gins, but also produces a delicate and floral ode to agave called Esperanza Blanco. She identifies the naming issue as the single biggest challenge that agave spirit faces in the South African market. “The consumer does not associate agave spirit

PIONEERING SPIRIT

As the year 2000 dawned, Mexico was in crisis: thanks to a scarcity of blue agave plants, tequila and mezcal were suddenly in short supply. Farmers in the Eastern Cape Karoo carped some diem and began to harvest their agave plants for spirit production, with the first agave distillery outside of Mexico opening in Graaff-Reinet in 2003. Agave Distillers later closed, with the equipment bought by Aubrey Schutzler and moved to Kimberley. Schutzler began producing agave spirit under the brand Azul Distillers in 2011 and has since added a microbrewery to the setup, proving again that beer and agave are fine bedfellows.

with tequila,” she says.

There are other more physical challenges that the agave producers face. “It’s a devil of a plant, a real bastard,” says Adi Badenhorst, winemaker and creator of 4th Rabbit 100% Karoo Agave Spirit. Badenhorst is fabled for his no nonsense storytelling and equally for his alchemy skills. His blunt assertion is down to him been stabbed more than a few times by the plant’s spines and the painful stinging that comes with such an encounter.

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Perhaps agave’s biggest challenge is that people associate a similar painful stinging when knocking back shots of cheap imported *mixto* – a so-called tequila that is made up of minimum 51% agave with the balance

made up of non-agave sugars. It’s sometimes a necessary evil for the party and needs to be dosed with salt and lemon to negate the nasty taste. Well-made agave spirit can and should be sipped on like a fine whisky or cognac or in a signature serve.

CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS

Dominic Walsh is the owner of Mootee, an award-winning cocktail bar in Melville, Johannesburg. He notes a shift in thinking towards this spirit. “They have long been considered the drink that makes you pull a face after drinking,” he says. “Bartenders love to change stereotypes and play with spirits that were previously regarded as rubbish.”

At Hope on Hopkins I sample agave served with pink tonic and lime garnish, to demonstrate the versatility and adaptability of the spirit. Suddenly it starts to take on something resembling the delicate nature of a lily rather than ‘bastard plant’. Adi Badenhorst has gone down a more rustic route with the 4th Rabbit, whose marketing tagline is ‘All Desert Magic and Mischief’. The name is an ode to the Aztec mythology of the 400 drunken rabbit gods, meant to represent the many ways that drunkenness manifests itself; the fourth rabbit is a winged and mischievous one.

Adi harvests the plant from the Karoo,