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A life without lime on Cinco de Mayo

Simple facts of history don't favor the **margarita** as a Cinco de Mayo drink.

For one, the Battle of Puebla occurred in 1862. The margarita was invented, by the most charitable version of events, around 1930 in Taxco, or perhaps in 1936 in Puebla, by bartender Danny Negrete. That's a good 70-year gap, even if you discount the versions of history that have the margarita minted closer to the 1950s.

Don't get me wrong. A proper margarita is a thing of beauty, and one reason why citrus plays a major role in Joanne Weir's new book, "Tequila" (Ten Speed Press, \$17;). "I don't think that **lime** is there just because it's south of the border," Weir points out. "I think it's because, with Tequila, it just brings some life."

But for Tequila - for all mescal, since Tequila is just a subset of the larger Mexican tradition - lime has gone from being partner to crutch. So this year, as the call of the agave beckons on Tuesday, try life without the lime. After all, mescal was already around at the time of the Puebla showdown. Distillation had been under way since the 16th century, and forgiving the presumed colonial influence on its production, it was already a part of life - for the Mexican military as much as anyone. North of the border in 1862, Jerry Thomas was publishing his classic, "How to **Mix Drinks**: A Bon Vivant's Companion." Limes and lemons played a role in his lineup, but a proper cocktail was something more savory, with bitters in the mix.

So it's not implausible to give the day to Tequila's more serious side, treating it with respect accorded gin and whiskey. Indeed, an increasing number of cocktails do just that. They're just the thing to give Cinco both gravitas and multicultural cheer. Vermouth, absinthe, cherry brandy, Chartreuse and more - the full arsenal of flavors is ever more



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regularly put to mescal. I say mescal because, as Weir's new book points out, mescal from the Jalisco locale of Tequila didn't start officially wearing its hometown name until 1873. Also because the smoky, salty punch from the small-production Oaxacan mescals now on the market provide a different edge to your drink. Most Oaxacans still use the very low-tech method of cooking agave piñas in stone pits over an oak flame, a nod to tradition that might fit Cinco de Mayo perhaps better than Tequila's sometimes industrial efforts.

To cocktails: A straightforward approach simply adds agave sensibility to a classic. Añejo Tequila subs for whiskey in a Manhattan. But that's a mere departure point. The Mexican Standoff, devised by Nopa bartender Matty Conway, harnesses the smoky depths of single-village mescal to the astringency of the Sicilian amaro Averna - which hints at citrus but never quite goes there - and a spike of chile heat. (It might want to adopt a new name just for the day.)

But that's a strong package for some, and once citrus is out of the picture, such drinks can be a hard sell. The curse of the worm, the salt and the lime chaser still lingers. Patrons often need what Conway calls "a little hand-holding" - convincing that Tequila and mescal can be the base of serious drinks without a lime in sight.

Along similar lines, when customers order the Hub, devised by Conduit bar manager Reza Esmaili - a heady mix of blanco and reposado Tequila, agave nectar and absinthe - he has instructed his staff to provide a no-citrus disclaimer.

"That's, I guess, the kind of stereotype of Tequila, which is that it goes with this high-acid fruit component," Esmaili says. "It has so much complexity that it just needs a person to steer it in the right direction."

A day celebrating Mexican pride might also be the time to bridge the often contentious split between Jalisco and Oaxaca, at least on the spirits end. To that end, the Kama Sutra, from Americano's Ronaldo Colli, uses both mescal and añejo Tequila, with Chartreuse as a bridge between the two.



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The Hub

Makes 1 serving

This cocktail by Conduit bar manager Reza Esmaili highlights not one but two styles of Tequila. It's a strong aperitif.

1/4 ounce Kubler absinthe

1 ounce Partida Blanco or other white Tequila

1 ounce Partida Reposado or other reposado Tequila

1/4 ounce agave nectar

7 dashes Peychaud's bitters

Instructions: Fill a small old-fashioned glass two-thirds with ice and coat the ice with the absinthe. Place both Tequilas, agave nectar and bitters into a mixing glass, add ice and stir for 10-15 seconds. Strain over the absinthe-coated ice. Top the glass with fresh ice and garnish with lemon zest.



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