

# Ron Cooper

Single Village Mezcals



Founder and President  
Del Maguey Mezcals

## An Interview with Ron Cooper, Founder and President, Del Maguey Mezcals

By Jim Clarke / [StarChefs.com](http://StarChefs.com)/July 2004

**Jim Clarke:** *You don't seem to have had much of a business background; was it difficult to get the company started?*

**Ron Cooper:** Being an artist since 1965 and making sculpture is a small business. Organizing a large bronze fountain commission that took a year and involved myself and studio assistants, seven different companies and more than twenty people. Contracts, communications, schedules, records and payments - not to mention the art aspect - was nothing compared to dealing with government regulations, bureaucracies, and the complexities of individual distributors and their sales staffs in each state and its regions.

**JC:** *Were the village palenqueros and farmers receptive to your idea to bottle and export their mezcals?*

**RC:** Each palenquero was suspicious at first as their mezcal had never been in a bottle previously and they had never had any dealings with a gringo - in fact, they barely speak Spanish. Due to my attitude and Francisco Martinez, a master Zapotec weaver and friend who is DM's manager and guardian of the Zapotec customs we are now, after nine years, very tightly connected and interwoven, almost like family as we have demonstrated support (not change) for our producers and the traditional Zapotec culture.

**JC:** *Was or is it a struggle to divert people's attention from tequila and toward quality mezcals?*

**RC:** I naively thought that when we brought in the first shipment in December of '95 there would be 6, 400 (our first year's production) hands reaching out for a bottle... didn't happen! I discovered that what it takes is education, getting one person at a time to taste these elixirs; then 99% of the time, once they understand the true, ancient slow traditions and have tasted it, they become aficionados. Tequila is mezcal, and Del Maguey is the true mother or father of all tequilas and mezcals as it is made the sixteenth century way.

Actually, two more tequila myths that have been busted recently. Gary Nabhan, the ethnobotanist, has written in his most recent book that the blue agave is actually a regional clone of the maguey Espadin (sword) that we use generally in Oaxaca. The scientific name for both is "An-gustifolia Haws" or "Narrow Foliage Haws." So the old bragging rights to blue agave being superior up in Tequila country are unfounded.

He (and others) also wrote that the pre-Conquest indigenous peoples did in fact have the technology of distillation and produced mezcal before the Conquest.

**JC:** *Del Maguey's devotion to the environment and communities in the villages where you make your mezcals is really innovative. Could you outline the activities of your non-profit organization, the "Foundation for the Sustainable Development of the Producing Communities of Maguey and the Cultural Rescue of Mezcal?"*

**RC:** Jorge Quiroz is an agronomist, banker – making low interest-short term loans to farmers – and aficionado, and has become the head of the tribunal that settles disputes under the new Norma [the Norma de Mezcal, a new government agency formed to regulate mezcal production and promotion]. He invited me to be a part at the founding of the organization five years ago because of my commitment to sustainable production and the ancient culture. We annually put on the "Semana Cultural de Mezcal" in collaboration with the University Vasconsuelos in Oaxaca. It's a week of the culture of Mezcal that includes lectures and tastings and promotes public understanding and support of the old traditions. This includes invited guests involved in tequila to show the differences in industrialized production. There is incredible economic pressure from all sides (including the new government Norma de Mezcal) to change and produce cheaply and in high volume, which entails using chemicals and watering down the product. The foundation maintains a tasting collection of traditional mezcals for interested people, as well as seeking funding and means to support the growing sector. This includes educational programs regarding natural reproduction and planting in addition to funding to finance and encourage sustainable planting.

**JC:** *How did you decide to use Ken Price's artwork for your labels, and to use the palm fiber bottle covers?*

**RC:** Being naïve, my original concept was to not use labels to identify our Single Village Mezcals but instead to put each unique village's bottle with its own design in handwoven palm-fiber estuches, which are an ancient Zapotec tradition (As a matter of fact; I believe the very first sculpture, even before pottery, was made by hunter-gatherer women out of soft grasses and fibers.). That way the consumer would not have to ask for it by village name; instead they could just point and say "Give me some of the one in the purple basket, etc." Of course the ATF demands a label, so I decided to have a different artist friend design a different label for each new village as they came on line. Paul O'Connor, a photographer friend, and I designed the first year's labels for Chichicapa, showing Faustino, our palenquero, doing the "Cordon" testing the old way for proof and purity - using a Jicara (half gourd) and bamboo pipette. For San Luis del Rio the label showed Mario, the son of Paciano, our palenquero, with a burro hauling a load of maguey across the Red Ant River.

In 1996, when we were bringing in Santo Domingo Albarradas and Minero I asked Ken Price, who has been a friend for 35 years, if we could use some of his fabulous gouaches - he has never been further south than Ensenada, but has his fantasy. He gave me a ton of these drawings to photocopy and use as I see fit, and the Zapotecs loved and respected them. Upon introduction of these new labels a powerful NY distributor said "You can't use pictures of poor people on your labels, and besides, it will confuse the market," so we decided to use all Ken Price labels. That left us with 100 cases of 1995 vintage Chichicapa and San Luis in our bodega. They are now nine years old and have softened incredibly due to the oxygen in the neck of the bottle (breaking another myth: the only way to age mezcal is in oak). We have been selling them slowly as "the classicos" to aficionados "in the know" from our website. They have the original labels, baskets and a poster with info on pulque, tequila and mezcal: our first education marketing attempt.

**JC:** *Have you found a comfortable balance between being president of Del Maguey and continuing your artistic work?*

**RC:** I consider the Del Maguey project to be Art. In fact, a few years ago we were invited to participate in the prestigious Venice Bienalle, the longest running art exhibition in the world. I continue to produce visual art as well, although the real amount of time I can put in is about five percent as DM takes me twelve hours a day seven days a week. It is just me out there doing production and bottling oversight, export from Mexico, import into the U.S., national and international sales, Webmaster, Educational events, POS design, and head burro. Suzanne de Silva here in Ranchos de Taos helps with compliance, bookkeeping, and shipping.

**JC:** *With the Crema de Mezcal you've begun to experiment with the recipe for mezcal a bit; can you give us any hints about new Del Maguey Mezcal on the way?*

**RC:** Ha! Crema was a fluke. There are many cremas in Oaxaca; the tradition is to put in fruit, coffee, Kool Aid, or something, to mask and sweeten the flavor of a bad mezcal. Back in '96 I thought: Wouldn't it be interesting to sweeten our mezcal with the material prima, the unbelievable miel de maguey (honey of the maguey) that you get by pressing the maguey after uncovering the heart after it's been roasted over hot rocks for five days? So I mixed twenty percent miel with eighty percent San Luis and voila! I never thought to export it, but two friends - big guys - appreciated it even more than our Single Village style and demanded that I make it available. The difficulty getting label approval from the ATF was totally unanticipated; they use the tequila regulatory council for their info and nobody had ever heard of it. It took six months to get approval.

I have two new villages identified that I would love to bring in. One of them is the most remote I have ever found. They do not plant maguey, but distill from three different wild varieties, creating a very unique tasting mescal. They use giant croquet-shaped mallets to break down the roasted maguey in a bowl carved out of a black rock. The problem with bringing the producer on is that there are three producers in this tiny village of three hundred, and the producer whose mezcal I favor (it's always that way) insists we purchase from everyone. Otherwise there could be "envidia" (envy) which could cause him to get "mal aire" (bad air), meaning that he would be cursed, and bad things could happen to him and his family or cornfields, etc.

I have a solution, which is to purchase from all three and resell the other two at a very reasonable price to Zapotecs in our local region for fiestas. Since it is really just me at this time, I would not only have to communicate weeks in advance to arrange travel and set up a "Deal," but also submit samples to the ATF for analysis, design a new label, get ATF label approval, print new labels, have the women start producing a new basket, get all three producers registered for the new Norma, and arrange for someone in our region to receive and resell the other two mezcal (which are organic and good, but not to my taste). I will have to wait until our new employee, Dan, comes on and is able to cover for me in the U.S. sufficiently to afford me enough time to devote to this project. Dan is a 26 year-old Latin-American business analyst presently working with an established company that makes investment recommendations to institutional and private investors. The second mezcal is from the far southern, tropical producing region and the mezcal has a nose of sweet, rotting, fermenting jungle floor.

Ron Cooper, the President of Del Maguey, is an artist, and is deeply involved with the art and history of the Southwest United States and Mexico. In 1990 he made a three-month trip to Oaxaca. He had three different projects planned, one of which was to create a set of 50 hand-blown glass bottles, each featuring the profile of the Aztec god Ometotchli, who represents the myriad forms of intoxication. These were to be filled with great mezcal, so when not creating Ron wandered through Oaxaca with an eye out for deserving spirits. After a few trips down dirt roads to isolated villages he realized he had discovered some very special drinks.

When the time came to return to his home in Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico, Ron loaded up his truck with his artwork and a dozen or so liters of mezcal to bring back and share with friends, only to be told at the border that one liter was the maximum limit under U.S. Customs law. This spurred Ron into entering the spirits business, because he felt certain that mezcal of this quality deserved to be shared more broadly.

The product that Ron is so keen about is a distillate of the maguey (ma-gay) plant, also known as the agave. “Agave” is a Greek word meaning “noble” and was introduced by scientists to describe the species about 100 years ago (The Pre-Conquest name was “Metl.”). Whereas tequila is made exclusively from the blue agave, and can only be produced in the five Mexican states adjoining Jalisco, mezcal can be made from a number of different magueys throughout the country; the company’s name, appropriately, means “from the Maguey.” Del Maguey’s farmers harvest the plants when they are between seven and ten years old. Removing the leaves, they slowly roast the hearts (called “piñas” for their resemblance to pineapples) of the plants in an earthen pit for several days, covering them with palm-fiber mats, maguey fibers, and soil. Then, after resting in the shade for a week, the piñas are ground to a mash by horse-driven stone mills. The mash is transferred to large wooden vats and the only other ingredient, water (about 5%), is added. This then ferments for a month.

After fermentation, the palenquero (distiller) distills the liquor twice in wood-fired stills of copper or clay. The finished mezcal is not diluted as many other spirits are; if this were scotch we would say it’s a “cask-strength” product – proofing in the high 90s. Production is very limited (3,200 bottles a year for each village) because of the artisanal nature of production and a commitment to sustainable agriculture; since the maguey plant requires a long time to reach maturity long-term planning in this regard is essential. In fact, when tequila made its great jump in popularity several years back, many producers encountered a shortage in their most important ingredient. The Del Maguey Mezcal are entirely organic, being made exclusively from the maguey plant, without additives, and all these factors together place Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal in the high-end category, ranging from \$36 to \$200 in the store.

