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Mexico's "nectar of the gods" dies a slow death

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By Chris Aspin

ZEMPOALA, Mexico (Reuters) - In Aztec times, pulque was the highly esteemed drink of the elders, priests and warriors, a nectar that according to myth oozed from the 400 breasts of the goddess Mayahuel.

In modern Mexico, the foamy, slightly viscous and foul-smelling booze is slowly disappearing, a victim of the rising popularity of beer and of failing to shake off its image as a poor man's tippie.

The drink, the fermented sap of the agave or maguey plant, remains the same but the change in perception -- from nectar to nasty -- is central to its recent demise.

At the turn of the 20th century, there were 1,500 pulque bars in Mexico City. Now there are around 100, many squalid dives only frequented by the old and poor.

In Zempoala, a town in the pulque heartland state of Hidalgo, there is only one producer left.

"It's a dying drink," said Zempoala's pulque maker, Palemon Huesca, standing next to his bubbling vats that now make 130 gallons (500 litres) a day, down from 10 times that amount three decades ago.

"Young people tend not to drink pulque anymore," the 75-year-old said.

Not everyone can stomach the drink which dates back to at least 2,000 years ago.

"It doesn't taste too bad, but it smells horrible and its texture is like spit," said Salvador Nava, a rum-drinking pork butcher from Mexico City.

According to Aztec myth, Mayahuel invented pulque and introduced the elixir to other gods, including 400 rabbit gods whose drunkenness was so legendary that a pulque high was counted in rabbit units in the language of the time.

Total drunkenness was known as 400 rabbits, the number being a synonym for innumerable and also the mythical number of Mayahuel's breasts that oozed pulque.

SACRIFICIAL SLAB

Pulque was only drunk by Aztec elite and if commoners were caught drinking it they were given a severe public beating. Anyone caught red handed a second time went on the sacrificial slab to be killed for the gods.

But after the Spanish conquest, controls lapsed and pulque, which is made from the same family of plants as tequila and mezcal, became the drink of the masses.

As Mexico City's population exploded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, huge pulque estates sprang up in surrounding regions like Hidalgo. Their owners made fortunes, sending the booze in barrels by train to the capital.

Nowadays, working pulque estates are few and far between as pulque consumption wanes and pulque bars disappear.

Hacienda Tecajete in Hidalgo state is now a weekend retreat and the majestic pink-collared estate, built in 1883, is occasionally rented out to shoot period-piece soap operas.

"Beer put an end to pulque," said Hacienda Tecajete's owner Jaime Escandon.

The rise in popularity of beer, coupled with a popular belief that human excrement was traditionally used in the fermentation process of pulque, were major

nails in the coffin for the nectar of the gods.

Pulque makers like Zempoala's Huesca deny the link with excrement. "That is pure anti-pulque propaganda that the breweries started."

Excrement or not, diehard aficionados prop up Mexico City's colourfully named pulque bars like La Hija de los Apaches (The Daughter of the Apaches) and tout the drink as an aphrodisiac.

PULQUE VERSUS VIAGRA

"Give me pulque before Viagra any day," said Fernando Castillo, a father of six and pulque drinker for 25 years.

In a similar fashion, Epifanio 'Pifas' Leyva, who runs the bar counterattacked the rise in beer drinking.

"People who drink beer or spirits do not have as many children as those who drink pulque because those drinks make them less virile," said the former boxer.

But Leyva admitted if he did not sell beer alongside pulque his business would collapse. He advocates government support. "It must be given an advertising campaign to give it a boost."

Pulque bars survive partly on first-time customers, including tourists, who hear about pulque and give it a shot.

But there are few one-off customers and not a tourist in sight in pulque bars like Las Cremas (The Creams) located in a crime-ridden and working-class part of the capital.

Inside, the bar is dark. Old men in old suits sit at the six tables. Opening at 9 a.m. and selling natural pulque at 8 pesos (35 pence) a glass and flavoured pulques at double that price, most customers have slurred speech by midday.

Yet there is a glimmer of hope even in Las Cremas. In one corner a group of young Mexicans swig back china mugs of strawberry- or oyster-flavoured pulque.

"We come here after playing football," said Jesus Serrano, a carpenter. "Pulque helps us replenish our energies. I tell all my friends about pulque. It's one of our traditions that is slowly being lost and only we Mexicans can keep it alive."

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