

Marie Sarita Gaytán, *¡Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. vii + 212, £14.99, pb.

As the recent growth of craft beer, real ale and artisan gin suggests, foods and drinks can draw on ideas about authenticity for commercial success, eliciting emotional responses from consumers and evoking a sense of local, ethnic or even national identity, often with reference to the past, tradition or history. Designating such products as authentic can be a politically, economically and culturally charged process, involving official legal protections, deliberate marketing ploys, adherence to particular production practices and the celebration of some cultural values or identities over others. In the case of tequila, a distilled agave liquor from the Tequila region of Jalisco, Mexico, official legal protection began in the form of a Denomination of Origin in 1974 (the first awarded in Mexico), and now comprises a whole host of regulated production, inspection and certification processes that promote tequila as a quality, unique and above all Mexican product. Marie Sarita Gaytán's fascinating book traces the longer-term history of how tequila became singled out for such protection, in the process explaining tequila's symbolic ties to Mexican nationalism, identity and culture. At the same time, she explores the power dynamics involved the tequila's construction as "authentically" Mexican, revealing that, paradoxically, large multinational tequila companies benefit more from tequila's symbolic association with "real" Mexico than small-scale, artisanal producers based in the Tequila region.

At the heart of Gaytán's analysis is the idea of *lo mexicano* or *mexicanidad*, a concept that will be familiar to students of nineteenth and twentieth-century Mexican history and culture. For those new to the Mexican context, *lo mexicano*, as the 'idea, a sensibility, and the fiction that there exists a collective, unified Mexican national consciousness,' is helpfully and clearly explained (7). Indeed, throughout the book, key economic and political developments,

context and background are summarised swiftly and lucidly, so that it will be perfectly accessible to non-Mexican specialists. Gaytán argues that by the turn of the twentieth century, tequila had come to embody ideals of progress and modernity in a way that other drinks derived from the same agave plants—mezcal and pulque—could not. This was partly due to Jalisco's reputation as a less indigenous, more racially ordered, more technologically innovative and economically thriving part of the country than other mezcal and pulque-producing regions. As tequila became further associated with national events and icons, such as the 1910 Revolution, Pancho Villa and the *charro* (or Mexican cowboy), tequila's symbolic association with modernity and Mexico's future became melded to nostalgic, romantic and idealised notions of Mexico's past. It is this complex symbolic fusion of tradition and modernity, made popular through Mexican films, songs and literature of the mid-twentieth century, that is now evoked in marketing and tourism initiatives that promote tequila's image as indelibly linked to the experience of *lo mexicano*.

The interdisciplinary methodology employed by Gaytán is impressive and yields some fascinating analysis. The book moves through an examination of historical documents such as newspapers; literary, musical and cinematic depictions of tequila; interviews with tequila producers, marketers and consumers; and participant observations of distillery tours, tasting events and a five-month Tequila Studies diploma program at the University of Guadalajara. Experiences at Mundo Cuervo (Cuervo World), the Tequila Sauza distillery tour and the Tequila Express are analysed in rich detail, highlighting the multiple strategies that these tourist attractions use to invest tequila with the layered symbolism of modernity, cultural sophistication, tradition, romanticism, uniqueness and Mexicanness. For instance, the iconisation of the *jimador* (agave harvester) and Mayahuel (the Aztec agave goddess) within these tourist attractions is shown to obscure the often exploitative realities of working conditions, the increasing degree of foreign-ownership and the marginalisation of local,

artisanal production methods within the industry. Similarly, parts of the book engage in a transnational framework of analysis to excellent effect. Particularly illuminating in this regard is the chapter exploring the meanings attached to tequila by consumers both in Mexico and the United States. For instance, US-based consumers displayed a heightened awareness of racialised stereotypes about Mexicans with which tequila consumption had been historically associated in the American press and popular culture.

While the interdisciplinary approach of the book is therefore a considerable asset, the anthropologically- and sociologically-informed chapters in the later stages of the book are more convincing and sophisticated than the earlier historical and literary/cinematic sections. The tensions between tradition and modernity in tequila's emergence as a national symbol could have been explored more thoroughly in the first half of the book. It is argued that tequila—and not mezcal or pulque—took on this mantle as symbol of the nation because of its connections to a modernising, forward-looking and Europeanised part of the country, but this was perhaps more contested than Gaytán implies. For instance, for some amongst the intellectual elite of the era, tequila was *too* modern and lacked as coherent a connection to Mexico's ancient past as pulque to be authentically Mexican. Exactly how tequila's symbolic connotations came to include both modernity and tradition, European civility and indigenous authenticity, could have been explained more fully and clearly particularly in relation to the Revolutionary era and the *comedia ranchera* film genre. The book also includes some suggestive references to beer serving, at times, a largely similar symbolic purpose as tequila (for instance, the use of the *china poblana* figure in both beer advertisements and tequila calendars). On these occasions, Gaytán could have more fully established how or why tequila was more symbolically powerful than beer.

Nevertheless, *¡Tequila!* covers a lot of ground in a short space; while some of the analytical threads could have been pulled further, this might have compromised the concise,

fluent, engaging and highly readable nature of the book, which should give it a wide non-academic audience. Gaytán's interdisciplinary approach also means the book will be of considerable interest to a diverse scholarly audience in the fields of Mexican studies, alcohol and food history, heritage and tourism, and cultural studies of globalisation, authenticity and craft/artisan food movements. The engagement with the critical idea of *lo mexicano* would also make the book an interesting and imaginative way to introduce students to Mexican history and culture. Ultimately, it is hard to disagree with Gaytán's conclusion that studying '[c]ommodities like tequila mark the passing of time and capture change in motion... They are dynamic, like the spirit of a nation' (160).

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