

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS FRIDAY 5 P.M.

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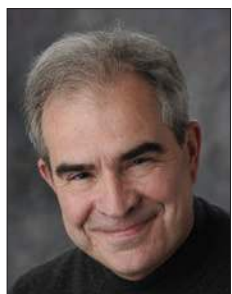
VIEWPOINTS

Three astrophysicists
in San Diego
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Amerikas chef creates a new mezcal

For a while now, chef/owner Armando Gonzalez of Amerikas in neighboring Oak Park has offered mezcal made in conjunction with Prolijo, an award-winning maker of the spirit; we've tried it, and we liked it: herbaceous, lightly smoky and silky. This coming spring, Gonzalez will again be working with Prolijo to launch a new mezcal, Oaxaco, a name derived from his home state of Oaxaca, the Mexican state best known for producing mezcal.



DAVID HAMMOND
Local Dining & Food Blogger

Mezcal, though not as well-known as tequila, is gaining in popularity; in fact, it's currently one of the fastest growing spirits in the United States. There are reasons for this popularity in the U.S. and elsewhere, but chief among those reasons, at least for me, is that mezcal offers more flavors.

Mezcal and tequila are both made from the agave plant, but mezcal expresses flavors not available to tequila. That's because by federal regulation, mezcal can be made from dozens of different agave plants, whereas tequila can technically be made only from Blue Weber agave, thus limiting tequila's taste

range. Oaxaco, Amerika's new mezcal, will be a blend of espadín along with two other agave varieties, arroqueño and tepextate, which means that each bottle will deliver a whole lot of flavors you won't find in tequila.

Mezcal is also better suited to reflecting the many tastes of the terroir, the place where it grew. One of the reasons mezcal mirrors the land so well is that it takes a long time for agave plants to grow to maturity; with espadín, it can take up to eight years for the agave plant to mature. During all that time in the ground, the plant is absorbing the flavors of the Mexican countryside. In contrast, consider that scotch and bourbon — one mostly barley, the other mostly corn — leverages the flavors of plants that live and die within one single season.

"Artisanal" is a buzzword, sometimes meaningless, but the Amerika's mezcal is truly artisanal, produced

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FILE

Clockwise from top left: Thursday Night Out, Day in Our Village, Farmers Market, Oaktobefest

A few of my favorite things

Oak Park is magical for me, and I look forward to sharing some of my favorite things about it during 2024.

I am an Oak Park transplant who lived in both the city and the suburbs before settling here. On my street in other suburbs, people often casually waved to their neighbors driving down their street on the way to their attached garages. Very few people walked with a destination in mind, as there were few sidewalks and to get to places, you needed to drive. In the city, with ambulance sirens, bus traffic and people talking loudly as they walked outside my window, it was sometimes an assault on my senses.

Oak Park's sidewalks, on the other hand, offer the opportunity to do walking errands and chat with people, which is so much better than living in either the city or the suburbs.

And while I do like Oak Park's two favorite sons, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ernest Hemingway, they are



JOY AARONSON
One View

only part of what I love about my adopted hometown.

Here are some of the things that I especially love about Oak Park: Independent businesses; a plethora of restaurants; dedicated volunteers asking residents to sign petitions; residents sharing their thoughts and convictions in Wednesday Journal's Viewpoints section; and village and township government filled with volunteers. In fact, when I applied to serve on a local government committee, I not only had to fill out an application, but I was also interviewed by several people. It was a more rigorous process than many job interviews for pay.

For me, Oak Park is filled with vibrancy and diversity. Many times, I walk down the streets and start to smile, as if I were seeing a wedding or a cute baby. It's a family-friendly community where you can

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JOY AARONSON

Favorite Oak Park things

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find a Root Beer Garden near the Beer Garden at OaktoberFest, which takes place in September. There is a vibrant Farmers Market (which I wrote about in depth this past spring, summer and fall) and many other happenings.

In Oak Park, I see people of different skin-color hues, old and young, able-bodied and those in wheelchairs and those who carry canes. I smell more acceptance in the air than in other communities I've visited or lived in.

What I don't like so much are parking and property taxes. A friend coming to visit recently called from her car with desperation in her voice, frustrated that there were so many parking signs with so much different information that she couldn't read them without parking her car. I gave her suggestions on where to park and she was able to visit me without getting a ticket. To park overnight, you need to download an app and can get only a limited number of free times each month. All in all, Oak Park — or as it is sometimes called "Oak Park, No Park" — is not too welcoming for drivers.

Also, property taxes are high and many people can't afford to own a home here. It makes me sad that some longtime residents who love Oak Park, raised their families here, and are now on fixed incomes, can't afford to remain here when they retire.

But for me, the wonderful parts outweigh the not-so-wonderful parts of Oak Park. In the next months I will share some of my Favorite Things. In these essays, I invite you to come along with me to visit, and if they pique your interest, perhaps later you can visit them and put them on your Favorite Things list too.

Joy Aaronson is an Oak Park resident who wrote stories for the Wednesday Journal in 2023 on the Oak Park Farmers Market. Previously, she contributed to Chicago Parent and written the Kids' World column for the former Logan Square Free Press.

DAVID HAMMOND

A new spirit

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using the traditional, handcrafted ways. Agave hearts are trimmed with a machete and cooked in huge outdoor pits to develop sugars that will be converted to alcohol during fermentation.

In larger commercial operations, the agave hearts may be put through something like a wood-chipper before going into the fermentation tanks. Amerikas' mezcal, however, uses a traditional technique: agave hearts are crushed using a tahona, a large cement wheel pulled by a horse or burro. In a 2017 Chicago Tribune article, I explained that grinding agave, like grinding herbs, releases flavors in ways that just don't happen when you chop them up; for the same reason, you "mull" ingredients for a cocktail: smashing them releases flavors that won't be released if you simply cut them up.

"I have mezcal in my blood," chef Gonzalez told us.

On your next trip to Amerikas, try to make sure you have some of their mezcal in your glass.



DAVID HAMMOND

Prolijo mezcal at Amerikas

O B I T U A R Y

Julia Hickey Memorial



A memorial service for Julia Hickey will take place on Saturday, Jan. 27 at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest. Julia died on Dec. 1, 2023 in St. Croix Virgin Islands, where she was living. She attended Oak Park schools when the family moved here from Wales, UK.

She is survived by her mother, Susan; her brothers, Paul, Chris and Patrick; her sister, Gaye Kassir; her nephews, Dan Hickey and P.J. Hickey. She was preceded in death by her father, John, and her sister, Camille. Many

remember her bubbly personality and compassion.

There will be a gathering at 10 a.m., with the service starting at 11. There will be a reception with food at noon. An open mic will be available for anyone who would like to share a memory they have of Julia.

In lieu of flowers, please donate to any animal rescue or domestic violence support organizations of your choosing.

W E D N E S D A Y

JOURNAL

of Oak Park and River Forest

To run an obituary

Please contact Ken Trainor by e-mail:
ktrainor@wjinc.com, or fax: 708/524-0447
before Monday at noon.

Please include a photo if possible.