

# WHITE SMOKE

It's not just dark spirits that can pair with cigars – we found mezcal makes a mean match too.  
JACOPO MAZZEO reports





As 'creating an experience' becomes increasingly pivotal to retain a steady footfall in your venue (and for more on that turn to p.96), a cigar and drinks pairing might be the very thing that offers your guests a potentially new adventure – one which would be difficult to replicate at home and that will keep them ordering drinks for at least the entire length of the smoke.

Cigars are traditionally paired with dark spirits, as white spirits are deemed to lack the necessary depth of flavour, intensity and complexity to stand up to an entire smoke. This is not the case for mezcal though. The Mexican distillate is renowned for packing plenty of complexity without the need, in most cases, of a lengthy maturation in wood.

All of which explains why we thought it was the ideal candidate to unpack the white spirits category's cigar-pairing potential.

Furthermore, flavour profiles vary widely (mezcal can be made from over 30 varieties of agave) and its production process often lends a certain smoky character to the spirit, which is an added plus when pairing with cigars.

So how does one go about matching the two categories? To find out, we called in a diverse range of top mezcals, including

some that have spent time in wood, and a trio of well-known habanos from cigar specialists Hunters & Frankau. We then tapped a team of somms, bartenders and cigar experts to decide on the best pairings.

#### HOW IT WORKS

We asked UK agents to submit examples of premium mezcals from their portfolios, of any style, all available to the UK on-trade and independents. Leading cigar distributor Hunters & Frankau supplied a trio of widely known habanos. We tasted all the spirits blind, then lit up the cigars and attempted the pairings. We unveiled the mezcals' identities once all results were in. >>

#### PANEL

**Glen Collins**, manager at Boisdale Belgravia; **Adam Lajca**, head cigar sommelier at The Corinthia; **Jacopo Mazzeo**, *Imbibe*; **Jimmy McGhee**, head of communications and training at Hunters & Frankau; **Gergely Horvath**, general manager at No.6 Cavendish; **Dino Pala**, assistant bar manager at Bökan; **Andres Sossa**, head sommelier at Balthazar; **Melody Wong**, head sommelier at Skylon



## PANEL COMMENTS

‘As a cigar expert, my approach to pairing is often to find one that brings out something of the cigar, something quite unusual,’ explained Hunters & Frankau’s Jimmy McGhee. ‘However, it’s always important to find an even match, you have to be able to enjoy both products.’

Indeed, when pairing cigars with drinks – or food with wine for that matter – neither product should ever prevail. As Adam Lajca pointed out, for instance, his top spirit of choice was Ilegal Añejo, but he thought that it tended to overwhelm the smoke when sipped alongside the cigars.

Overall, most tasters were astonished by how well white mezcals paired with cigars, as they often found more than one ideal accompaniment to each habano.

‘I found a lot of different personalities and wrote tasting notes that I would have never imagined,’ said Melody Wong. ‘People think that mezcal has to be necessarily very smoky, but these actually present a delicate smokiness and rather a lot of umami flavour: mushroom, earthiness, soy sauce.’

Given the promising number of successful matches, the tasting helped rethink the cigar category too, unveiling its potential to reach a new audience by going beyond classic pairings and experimenting with new drinks categories.

### PAIRINGS HOYO DE MONTERREY EPIPURE NO.2

There was little consensus on which was the best match for this cigar. For this writer, at first the ideal pairing was with Koch Tepextate, which offered appealing meaty notes, but halfway through the smoke the fuller body and higher intensity of Derrumbes Zacatecas added interesting tomato and blackcurrant leaf notes. ‘I would match the Epicure with Derrumbes Zacatecas too,’ commented Glen Collins, ‘as it brings out some nice barbeque and peppery notes, but also Alipús San Andrés, especially a little while into the smoke.’

For Andres Sossa it was Koch Ensemble, ‘as the cigar brings out the freshness and sweetness of the mezcal, with all its tropical, banana and citrus notes.’ McGhee was of the same opinion: ‘the cigar helped to

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enhance Koch Ensemble’s rich fruitiness and sweetness.’ For Pala it was Koch Espadín. ‘This mezcal matches the light intensity of the cigar; it doesn’t have too much of a smoky note, more of a spicy, peppery character.’ Wong went for the oakiest of the flight: ‘Ilegal Añejo is the most immediate match; when I first tasted it, I didn’t expect it could go well, but eventually the cigar really enhanced the woody and smoky notes in the mezcal.’ Lastly, Lajca suggested Pensador, ‘because of the butteriness and the spice, which I find in both products, so they really complement each other’.

PHOTOS: SEB HIGGINS



### ROMEO Y JULIETA SHORT CHURCHILL

With the cigar's volume tuned up, our tasters' pairing suggestions featured more aged spirits. 'The earthy notes of Pensador went really well here,' commented Collins, 'but Illegal Añejo was perhaps the best match, with its vanilla and peppery notes.' McGhee suggested Illegal Añejo too, while Pala and Sossa both indicated Los Danzantes Reposado as their top choice. They felt that the vanilla and woody flavours in both mezcal and cigar enriched each other perfectly. 'It's a balanced mezcal that shows more of a tequila profile, so not much smoke, but more buttery and vanilla, which I also find in the habano,' said Pala.

For Wong and myself it was the lighter Koch Espadín. 'It's unique,' said Wong, 'and makes the whole experience rounder, creamier, it almost brings a touch of sweet spices which I didn't find when tasting the mezcal on its own.'

### PARTAGÁS SERIE D NO.4

This was the fullest of our smokes and

there was consensus among much of the panel that Los Danzantes Reposado made for the ideal pairing. Collins said that the cigar brought out the sweetness in the mezcal successfully, helping to make such an intense smoking experience a more balanced one, while Wong thought that Los Danzantes Reposado was 'a very complete spirit in itself and that's what you need for such a full-bodied cigar.' She pointed out that Koch Ensemble was a good pairing too, as she believed that the spirit wasn't as characterful as the other expressions, but that a puff of Partagás Serie D No.4 was enough to bring its personality into focus.

Collins agreed, explaining that the pairing highlighted the mezcal's dark flavours of black olives and balsamic vinegar, and a pleasant citrus freshness. Pala and Gergely Horvath's suggested pairing was instead Koch Tepextate: 'It's got green fruit aromas to it,' explained Pala, 'but also a peaty smokiness that's almost comparable to an Islay whisky.' >>

## THE MEZCALS

### Alipús San Andrés

'Ripe nose of banana, honeysuckle, tropical fruits and grapes. Then there's some added complexity of smoke, vanilla, grass and pepper. My favourite of the flight,' GH.  
47% abv, RRP £55.10/70cl, Amathus Drinks, [amathusdrinks.com](http://amathusdrinks.com)



### Pensador

'Citrus-led mezcal, with notes of orange and lemon and an earthy character on the back of the palate,' GC.  
48% abv, RRP £39.50/50cl, Meanwhile Drinks, [meanwhiledrinks.com](http://meanwhiledrinks.com) >>





**Koch Espadín**

‘The nose is intense, citrusy, with scents of aromatic herbs, chalk, spice and earth. The palate is smoky, saline yet smooth. A very long finish,’ AS.

47% abv, RRP £39.95/70cl, Spirit Cartel, spiritcartel.com



**Koch Ensemble**

‘Intriguing nose of black olives, cocoa, balsamic vinegar and banana. The palate is waxy, displaying ripe tropical fruits and hints of smoke. A real treat,’ JM.

47% abv, RRP £48.54/70cl, Spirit Cartel, spiritcartel.com



**Meteoro**

‘This is not an aromatic style. The nose is wood- led, it has a medium-body, good creamy texture and elegant, fresh finish. Balanced, rich but not overwhelming. Very pleasurable,’ MW.

45% abv, RRP £49.95/70cl, Nickolls & Perks, nickollsandperks.co.uk



**Derrumbes Zacatecas**

‘A typical, quite complex mezcal. It has a captivating soy sauce, seaweed freshness, complemented by aromas of cucumber, marzipan, cardamom, white pepper and strong balsamic notes of eucalyptus and mint.

Very exciting,’ JM  
42% abv, RRP £50.75/70cl, Speciality Brands, specialitybrands.com



**Koch Tepextate**

‘The nose here is of wet wood, forest floor and cream, with some lemony scents and a delicate smokiness. The palate is smokier, showing flavours of caramel and black pepper,’ AS.

47% abv, RRP £66.45/70cl, Spirit Cartel, spiritcartel.com



**Los Danzantes Reposado**

‘A smooth, tequila-like golden mezcal with aromas of caramel, camomile, lemon zest blossom and vanilla. The palate brings an added complexity with flavours of coriander and just a hint of smoke,’ DP.

43% abv, RRP £69.15/70cl, Amathus Drinks, amathusdrinks.com



**Los Danzantes Añejo**

‘Lemon in colour, this has a delightful yellow fruit character to it, a balanced smokiness and a savoury character. It’s mildly smoky on the palate, and creamy with a light herbal and savoury finish,’ AL.

46% abv, RRP £71.93/70cl, Amathus Drinks, amathusdrinks.com





**Illegal Añejo**

'Yellow plums on the nose and a touch of madeira-like oxidative character. Very interesting, elegant and round spirit. It's smooth and balanced on the palate, displaying a very delicate smokiness. Impressive,' MW.  
40% abv, RRP £87.95/70cl, [Speciality Brands, specialitybrands.com](http://SpecialityBrands.com)



**Romeo y Julieta Short Churchill**

Romeo y Julieta is now one of Cuba's most recognisable cigar brands and this medium-strength expression, named after cigar devotee Sir Winston Churchill, is a testimony to the habanos' long association with Britain. The flavours here are balanced and aromatic, led by notes of coffee, chocolate and vanilla.  
£21.80, [Hunters & Frankau, cigars.co.uk](http://Hunters & Frankau.com)



THE CIGARS

**Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No.2**

This light-flavoured cigar is approachable as it's subtle and refined. The flavours are of wood, cream and cocoa, then a gentle pepperiness as the smoke approaches the end.  
£22.10, [Hunters & Frankau, cigars.co.uk](http://Hunters & Frankau.com)



**Partagás Serie D No.4**

This full-strength cigar is the best-selling habano in the world. It has a leathery start, enriched by earthy and cedary notes, then there's a transition into a deep, peppery, roasted richness towards the end.  
£21.80, [Hunters & Frankau, cigars.co.uk](http://Hunters & Frankau.com)



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