# Preface

"Chupacabras—that's a great name for a beer!" exclaimed my colleague, delighted by the association with the Latin American folk creature who infamously attacked animals, sucking out their blood and leaving them for dead.

I was at La Biznaga with University of Arizona historian William "Bill" Beezley and several participants from his summer Graduate Field School in Modern Mexican History, which was held for many years in Oaxaca, Mexico. The restaurant was a popular destination for both locals and tourists seeking to eat and imbibe outside of the usual offerings. Even in 2011, Oaxaca had not yet exploded into the gastronomic hot spot it is today, and La Biznaga's menu—featuring ingredients such as dried hibiscus flowers, goat cheese, and dried cranberries sprinkled atop recognizably traditional Mexican fare—was both novel and refreshing.

Chupacabras, a Mexican craft beer, stood out on the menu among the usual Mexican beer suspects: Corona, Victoria, Indio, Dos XX, and Montejo. The provocative name and promise of something other than a typical lager-style beer was enough to convince me to try it. The American pale ale–style brew, produced by the Cupacá Brewery Company, far north in Mexicali, Baja California, had traveled nearly as far as I had to get to Oaxaca, a reminder of the artisanal brewing movement's extensive reach.

As our beers were delivered to the table, Bill mentioned that a friend and colleague of his at the University of Arizona, David Yetman, produced the Emmy Award–winning PBS series aptly named *In the Americas with David Yetman*, which featured a number of episodes based in Oaxaca.

He began describing his vision for an episode on craft beer, showcasing different microbreweries around the United States. As the daughter of fifth-generation hops farmers, I had some thoughts on the matter.

"You should go to the source. You really need to visit the Yakima Valley in Washington state, that's where most American hops are grown. Breweries are interesting, but most people have no idea about where the hops actually come from."[1]

I explained how the demand for craft beer had many hops farmers rethinking their market strategies. Back when I was a child, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, most of our family farm's output was destined for Anheuser-Busch (maker of Budweiser) and Coors, which dominated the US beer market at the time. Home brewers in Chico, California, eventually launched Sierra Nevada Brewing Company in 1979, and a decade later the Boston Brewery opened, introducing Americans to its Samuel Adams brand. Nevertheless, while both were front-runners in creating consumer demand for craft beer, until the 1990s and even 2000s, most US consumers outside of home brewers and major urban centers had limited familiarity with beer other than national brands (e.g., Budweiser, Coors, and Miller) or mass-produced regional brands such as Pabst Blue Ribbon or Rolling Rock. In my home state of Washington, if you ordered a "local" beer at a bar, you would likely be served an Olympia or Rainier, neither of which would be considered a craft brew by today's standards. At the industry's low point in 1978, the United States counted fewer than one hundred breweries nationwide, with only forty-two brewery owners (Herz 2014).

Things would not stay this way. The microbrewing movement started to gather steam in the 1990s. And while the industry has experienced peaks and declines since then, the Brewers Association (n.d.) calculates that there were 9,709 breweries operating across the United States in 2022, compared to 2,670 just a decade earlier. These figures include large, non–craft breweries, but the overwhelming growth is among what the Brewers Association classifies as "regional craft breweries," "microbreweries," and "brewpubs." The burgeoning craft sector has decidedly shaped, and even changed, the number and types of hops grown. The new era of craft beer connoisseurship demands both novelty and variety. Case in point: whereas in my childhood my father would have grown the five or six hop varieties typical of the Pacific Northwest (e.g., Chinook and Cascade), today my sister, who has taken over the business to become one of the few women growers in the industry, is growing nearly sixty different varieties, including those that are gaining popularity in the

craft brewing world (e.g., Bravo, Citra, and Mosaic). Recently, she even bred a new hop variety, cleverly named Bru-1, that has been sought out by craft brewers along the West Coast for its subtle pineapple notes.

"Craft beer—it's not unlike what's happening here in Oaxaca with mezcal," said Bill. "You should write your next book about that."

He flipped open the restaurant menu to show me an entire page of the various mezcals on offer. In addition to the unspecified *mezcal de la casa* (house mezcal), the list comprised mezcals differentiated not only by brand but also by region and agave type. This was not the first time I had heard of mezcal—a distilled agave spirit—but it was the first time I had noticed it prominently featured on a city menu in this manner, described with place of origin and agave varieties used.

Like so many products of arguably humble origins, mezcal, it seemed, had made its way onto the radar of tourists and tastemakers alike, not unlike the city of Oaxaca itself. It was clear that mezcal's introduction into the global foodscape would have profound impacts for those people and places within its orbit. At the same time, mezcal was a proxy for the type of place Oaxaca was becoming—a thriving food and arts destination that drew tourists from all over the world. And so, I decided to take my colleague's advice. I began laying the foundation for this project in 2011, allowing me to witness the mezcal industry's explosive growth over the course of a decade, which, depending on one's vantage point within the industry, may be a good or bad thing. And while I reserve judgment on this point, it is clear that mezcal's popularity is not about to fade any time soon. There is a popular Mexican saying that goes, "Para todo mal, mezcal, para todo bien, también," roughly translated to English as, "For everything bad, mezcal, and to celebrate all good as well." It may not be long before mezcal becomes a go-to drink—for good times and bad—for consumers not only in Mexico but around the world.

# Mezcal in Oaxaca