

-Native Roots
Farm Foundation
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Trendy or Primitive? Appropriation of Native Plants in the Americas

by: Isabella Vazquez



My Parents



Los Angeles, CA



My research focuses on three plants: Agave, Huitlacoche, and White Sage (We'wey in Chumash), which are all native to regions of Mexico and the Southwestern United States. I grew up in Los Angeles and have Indigenous ancestry, so these plants are familiar to me and hold great significance in my family's cultures.

My research compares traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge with how our capitalist society has extracted Agave, Huitlacoche, and White Sage for profit. I hope this zine provides you with guidance and helps you be intentional about your relationships with the plants around you.



Puebla, Mexico



My Native American and Indigenous Student Association Family

Agave

Agave has been used by Indigenous communities in Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. for ceremonial rituals, clothing, footwear, and building materials. In Mexico (Aztec) culture, the Agave plant's center, its heart, has been made into a fermented beverage called Octli (Nahuatl). It is central to religious rituals and used as a method to induce vomiting and cleanse the body. Working with Blue Agave, Spanish colonizers renamed Octli "Pulque" and utilized fermentation and distillation to create tequila.





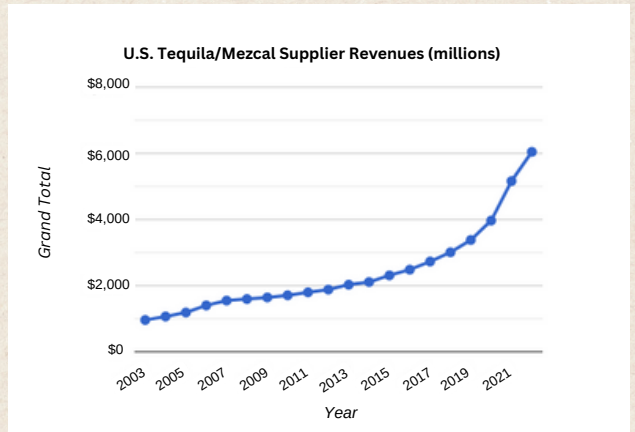
Appropriation in the Tequila Industry



The U.S.'s proximity to Mexico and its deeply rooted Hispanic culture have led to investments and consumer interest in tequila. The annual gross revenue of U.S. tequila and mezcal suppliers grew by 528.5% between 2003 and 2022.

Celebrities are taking advantage of the tequila market's success and investing in their own tequila brands. Many of these companies have abandoned traditional Indigenous cultivation practices such as nurturing wild vegetation that has adapted to the region, selective harvesting, and producing new plants from cuttings. Instead, Blue Agave is being mass-produced and harvested before it has the chance to mature and bloom. This threatens the plant's biodiversity as well as the animals that rely on mature plants for food.

Blue Agave
hearts



Source: Distilled Spirits Council



Huitlacoche (Nahuatl)

high in fiber
and protein!

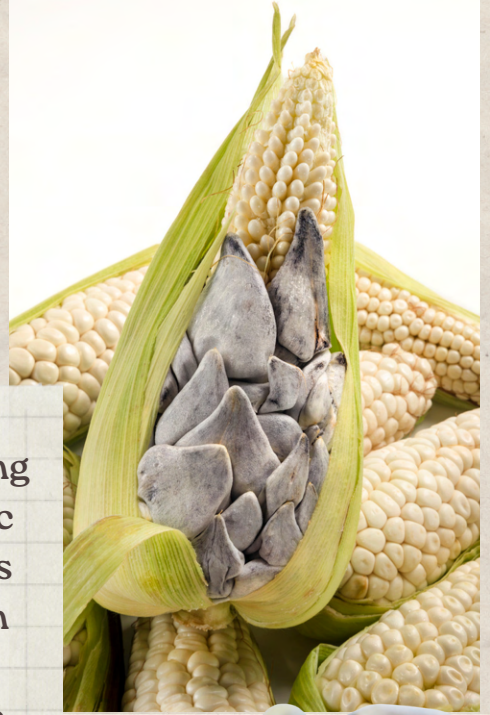


Huitlacoche is the result of the fungus *Ustilago maydis* spreading on the ears and stalks of organic corn. This natural process turns each kernel into a dark, swollen gall.

Indigenous communities in the Southwestern U.S., such as the Hopi, use Huitlacoche for ceremonies, medicine, and food. In central Mexico, Huitlacoche is considered a delicacy.

It is also nutritious and contains fiber and the amino acid lysine.

Lysine helps the body absorb calcium, converts fatty acids into energy, lowers cholesterol, and is essential for strong bones and connective tissues.



smoky
mushroom
taste!



Rebranding Huitlacoche



In the U.S., Huitlacoche has been characterized as a disease. However, in recent years, chefs, farmers, and food bloggers have begun to "discover" its nutritional benefits and culinary uses. They have rebranded Huitlacoche to make it more palatable and trendy for Western consumers by calling it Corn Caviar, Mexican Truffle, and Corn Truffle.

Normalizing Huitlacoche, with a Eurocentric name, erases its history. This rebranding stifles Indigenous languages and fails to recognize Indigenous relationships with the fungus.

We'wey (Chumash)

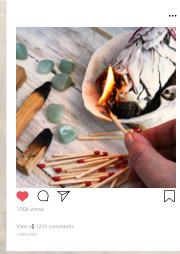


The southwestern region of California and Baja California are White Sage's only native range. Nevertheless, this plant is used by Indigenous communities across the Americas.

In the Ojibwa medicine wheel, which represents the cycles of life, White Sage is one of four sacred plant medicines. White Sage has also been used by the Cahuilla Band of Indians, Chumash, Kumeyaay, and Mahunato for food, spice, shampoo, deodorant, cold remedy, cough medicine, and smudging.

Smudging is the act of burning White Sage leaves for purification before ceremonies and teachings, to remove negative energy, and for meditation.

Spiritual Appropriation

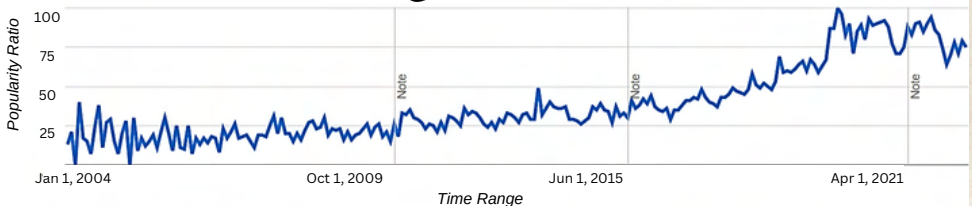


The federal government banned Indigenous people from practicing their cultures, including smudging, until 1978. But, no legal action was taken against predominately white hippies who appropriated Indigenous practices.

Today, interest in White Sage has skyrocketed. Predominately white influencers and celebrities have capitalized on interest in purification and wellness trends that have grown out of Covid-19 and social media crazes.

White Sage's popularity has also contributed to the creation of an unregulated black market. Businesses are hiring seasonal workers to illegally poach the plants from Indigenous communities' traditional gathering spaces, like the North Etiwanda Preserve in Southern California.

"White Sage" web search data



What can you do?

1

Educate yourself about where plant products come from, how they are gathered, and how they enter the market

2

Buy from and support Indigenous-owned businesses that use respectful harvesting practices

3

Connect with native plants in your area and learn about the relationships local Native communities have with them

Huitlacoche Quesadillas Recipe

(serves 8-10 quesadillas)

Huitlacoche quesadillas are a favorite dish in my family. My dad grew up in Puebla, Mexico and this recipe is a nostalgic part of his childhood that my family and I enjoy recreating.

Ingredients:

- 32 oz Huitlacoche in a jar
- 3 diced tomatoes
- 2 diced green chilis
- 1 diced garlic clove
- A bundle of diced Epazote leaves (Cilantro can also be used as a substitute)
- ~1 tbsp of caldo de pollo powder/chicken bouillon
- ~2 teaspoons of ground black pepper
- ~2 tbsp of olive oil
- 8-10 handmade or store-bought corn tortillas
- ~10 ounces of Oaxacan cheese

Directions:

1. Wash and remove roots, dirt and other debris from the Huitlacoche with a vegetable colander, then pat dry and place to the side
2. Place ~2 tbsp of olive oil in a pan on medium heat until oil shimmers
3. Place diced garlic and onion in the pan for roughly 3-5 mins or until golden brown
4. Add diced tomatoes and chilis into the pan, then stir to combine
5. Add caldo de pollo powder/chicken bouillon and ground black pepper, then stir
6. Stir occasionally for 5 minutes, then fold Huitlacoche and Epazote leaves into the mixture
7. Taste and add additional bouillon and pepper if needed
8. Stir for 5 additional minutes
9. Place a corn tortilla on a griddle on medium heat, then place Huitlacoche mix and a handful of Oaxacan cheese on one side of the tortilla
10. Using a spatula, carefully fold the tortilla into a half-moon.
11. Flip the quesadilla one or two times, until the cheese has melted nicely

This recipe is adapted from a YouTube video by Vicky Receta Fácil



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