

cachaça

Pronounce it k'SHAH-sa, with a little drama, like it was the name of an adventure park ride.

Summer in the southern hemisphere is literally hotter than summer in the north, as anyone who's ever been to the beach in Brazil will tell you. One staple of Brazilian beach culture is cachaça, a relatively new-to-the-USA spirit from Brazil that is introducing itself with a new mixed drink, the caipirinha (KYE-p'reen-ya), destined to be the next mojito. One of the main differences between cachaça and rum is that cachaça is made from sugar cane syrup instead of molasses. The result is a drink that is much lighter and brighter than even white rum. Cachaça occupies a nice space on the South America spirits spectrum: it's wilder and more fruit-forward than rum, but not as wild as something like tequila.

By JONATHON ALSOP

The caipirinha actually represents the second wave of zippy, fruity, sexy drinks like the mojito. There are a hundred variations - lemon caipirinha, grapefruit, blood orange, pomelo, any fruit that will give you juice and zesty oil from the skin - since it uses the same classic South American technique used to make a mojito: muddling. The caipirinha is composed mostly of lime juice with a little sugar, and this is a perfect enriching match with the lemon-lime character of cachaça.

"People are coming to me with cachaça," said Bubba Kassal, CEO of Crown Wine & Spirits, a huge retail chain in south Florida. "It's cachaça, cachaça, cachaça, coming out of the woodworks!" Cachaça came ashore in the US, so to speak, in southern Florida, and much of the Brazilian beach vibe translates comfortably to Florida's beach culture. The premium cachaça brand Leblon especially staged an energetic launch all over the state. The caipirinha's proliferation in Florida gives us a hint of what we'll see in the northeast, if not this summer then next. Kassal thinks the expansion of cachaça

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in the US is based on better marketing, not more cachaça. "Cachaça has been around forever," he said, "and now we're seeing brands like Cuca Fresca and others that have mastered the American marketing." The market for cachaça is maturing quickly, he said, and today there are specialty cachaça labels that are already going mainstream with their marketing and advertising. "Cachaça is appearing in other drinks now," Kassal said. "When it's in a strawberry daiquiri, it becomes a cachaça strawberry daiquiri. That's a sign of where the trend is going."

Cuca Fresca (an idiomatic expression that means "cool head", as in a relaxed person) is a brand that was created for the US market and launched last year, first in Florida, and now in the northeast. "The producer, Aguardente Caribena, has been making cachaça for five generations now," said Phoenix Kelly-Rappa, partner in Cuca Fresca. "They use all artisanal methods with no mass production. The sugar cane is grown organically, though it's not certified organic, and the cachaça is processed there on the farm, double distilled and triple filtered." They believe the distillation in traditional copper pots accounts for the purity of the product. "We believe in using the highest quality sugar cane. It's never burned, as some sugar cane is. That's one of the things that makes Cuca Fresca extremely smooth. It has a fresher, spicier taste to it, much lighter than rums from the Caribbean that are made from molasses."

Although cachaça is new to the US market, it is a drink that in Brazil goes back centuries. "Cachaça was originally made on plantations by slaves," said Kelly-Rappa, "and it has always been the people's drink. It's something that's relatively easy to make from something the people had a lot of: sugar cane. Making cachaça became very widespread, and today it's the national spirit." Amazingly, cachaça is the number three distilled spirit on the planet behind vodka and the vodka - like soju from Korea. Cachaça is ahead of gin, rum, scotch, and other spirits on the world market. Somehow, we're only hearing about this phenomenon now. "Some of the products that have been in the US in the past have not been quality cachaça. They were very harsh and not of good quality and that hurt cachaça and put people off," Kelly-Rappa said. "Today there are premium cachaças available, and it's getting a good introduction by the caipirinha. Premium cachaça comes from production methods, from single batch production, blending techniques and barrel aging."

This same respect for traditional production is expressed in a partnership Cuca Fresca recently signed with the Rainforest Foundation. "We're going to be donating a portion of all our proceeds to them and the projects they're doing in Brazil," Kelly-Rappa said. "We wanted to give something back to the country, and we're very thrilled about that. This is the first time they've partnered with an alcohol beverage company, but they were very impressed with the authenticity of our product and decided to do it." Spirits sales are up in the US more than 20 percent, according to Kelly-Rappa, and "interest is really high in drinks with fresh, intense, interesting fruit flavors like the caipirinha. It's a very lively, young drink that people love."

In Massachusetts, Cuca Fresca is distributed by L. Knife and Son in Kingston, and Roman Dombrowski, vice president, sees a great future in cachaça. "It's been a long time since a whole new product was introduced in America," he said. "Last time was tequila, sometime in the '60s. People like Cuca Fresca have the marketing right, and it will be successful." Right now, at the very beginning of the cachaça launch, most of Dombrowski's sales are to Brazilian restaurants and markets that carry a richness of South American products. "Brazilian communities are very strong around Boston, and they want their traditional national drink. It's natural," he said. Dombrowski sees cachaça

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breaking in to mainstream bar menus. "There are lots of exotic drinks that are made with cachaça," he said. "When you see the classics being made with cachaça that's a larger market."

Leblon is another premium cachaça that stands by a defiant motto: "Live, love, Leblon!" The web site liveloveleblon.com is a 24-hour party zone, and you get the feeling the real world of Leblon is not far behind that. "I'm a wine guy," said Gerard Schweitzer, partner in Leblon. "I've always been closer to wine culture than anything else. Cachaça is much more akin to wine. The fresh cane juice that's fermented is called 'le vin,' or the wine. From here, the process is very similar to cognac production." So similar in fact that the Leblon goes into French cognac casks for 90 days of barrel aging. Some cachaça is aged in barrels made from exotic native trees like balsam, almond, brazilwood, and many more. "Some cachaça is aged in barrel for six years, ten years, even more," Schweitzer said. "The character of the wood becomes very strong at that point and you start to get intense anise aromas." Schweitzer and his partners got into the cachaça business unexpectedly when one of them returned from a vacation to Brazil with a brainstorm, a brainstorm that may have come after drinking vast quantities of cachaça. "We saw that cachaça was still really a peasant drink, like tequila was and vodka was 30 years ago," he continued. "There was an opportunity to create a super-premium cachaça that no one had considered."

Based on their research, all the biggest white spirits - gin, vodka, tequila - have gone through a recent period of iconic super-premium brands, all except rum. "Nothing in rum has really grabbed the sophisticated palates of what we call 'cocktail nation', until cachaça. We asked ourselves what we could do with our cachaça to help." One of the Leblon partners is Brazilian, and the plan was hatched on the beach in Rio. "He had great contacts in the cachaça world," Schweitzer said, "and we decided right then to make a premium cachaça for all the world to see, so they could experience how great it can be." Schweitzer said the world is looking anew at Brazil: music, fashion, leisure, and food. He is determined to have cachaça out front when people re-discover Brazil. "Cachaça is a category that's raised itself above the other newcomers," said Schweitzer. "People are taking cachaça to the next level, infusing Leblon with various fruits. Pineapple seems to be a favorite, but you can use cherries, peaches, anything."

Meia Lua (my moon, or idiomatically, my dream), di Salinas, and Beleza (beauty) de Minas are three cachaças distributed in Massachusetts by Rio's Wine and Liquors. Debbie Adler, vice president, says they're feeling the demand for this drink. "There's definitely been a surge," she said. "If you go to Conti Liquors in Framingham, I'd guess there are 40-something cachaças on the shelf." What makes cachaça different, Adler said, is that it is flexible. "You can have it straight or mixed. Some people compare it to rum like that, but it's unique," she said. "Sweeter and smoother than rum, and a fresher flavor." Adler said the city of Salinas in south-central Brazil is "the Napa Valley of cachaça", and the source of the three cachaças they sell. "Other great cachaça comes from Salinas, not just ours," she added. "But this is the area where the farms are, where the sugar cane is grown and everything is made. There are industrial cachaça producers, but not here." As to the future of cachaça in the northeast and North America in general, Adler said, "Cachaça needs to be discovered by America. People ask if it's the next big thing, and in some ways, it's the big thing already worldwide, we just need to discover it here."

I'm not much of a mixed drink fan, or a distilled spirits guy. I'll have the occasional scotch or a glass of sourmash while I'm reading Faulkner. But I have completely fallen in love with the caipirinha ever since I had my first sip last fall in Argentina.

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CAIPIRINHA

2 oz. cachaça

1 lime, quartered

2 tbsp. superfine sugar

Place the quartered lime in a 10-ounce rocks glass and add the sugar.

Muddle lime and sugar together in the bottom of the glass.

Fill the glass with ice.

Add cachaça and stir.

BRAZILIAN MOJITO

When your parents know about something hot and new, that pretty much means it's not hot and new anymore. Everybody knows the mojito, but a big dose of cachaça makes last year's breakthrough drink new again.

2 oz. cachaça

1 lime, quartered

2 tsp. superfine sugar

3 fresh mint leaves

Club soda

Place lime, mint leaves, and sugar in a highball glass and muddle together in the bottom of the glass.

Add crushed ice and cachaça.

Fill the rest of the glass with club soda and stir.

Garnish with a slice of lime.

POMEGRANATE CAIPIRINHA

Pomegranate is the rising star of the food world right now - note the ubiquitous pomegranate glazed everything on menus these days. Cachaça and pomegranate make a great match, going up the ladder of success arm in arm.

2 oz. cachaça

1 1/2 oz. pomegranate juice

1 lime, quartered

2 tbsp. superfine sugar

Place the quartered lime in a 10-ounce rocks glass and add sugar.

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sugar.

Muddle lime and sugar together in the bottom of the glass.

Fill the glass with ice.

Add cachaça and pomegranate juice and stir.

Garnish with lime.

CACHAÇA COLA

My daughter calls me "50s Dad" when I drink this modernized version of "rum 'n' coke" while wearing Bermuda shorts. The citrusy lift of the cachaça really improves this classic.

2 oz. cachaça

Cola

1 lime, quartered

Pour cachaça into a highball glass filled with ice.

Top with cola and squeeze in lime quarters to taste.

Garnish with a lime slice.

After coming home and making elaborate caipirinhas, some in labor intensive sugar rimmed glasses, I am finding myself drawn to the simplest recipe today. Gold cachaça is so smooth and approachable, I sometimes have it on the rocks with a big squeeze of lime whenever I'm too lazy to break out the muddler and make a proper one. Here's the secret technique for great caipirinha: before you cut the limes, roll them around vigorously on the table top, pressing down and softening them up to release some of the juice while it's still inside the fruit.