

SUGAR CANE MADNESS

While the major rum makers are busy churning out a myriad of fruit varieties, hoping to catch the flavor phenomenon in a bottle, many entrepreneurs are putting their money down on the Brazilian sugar cane spirit called cachaca.

While technically a rum, cachaca mainly differs from most other sugar cane spirits in its source of fermentation; instead of using molasses, a sugar-making by-product and the precursor of most rums, cachaca is made from sugar cane juice alone. That doesn't necessarily mean the product possesses higher quality; in fact, in Brazil, cachaca's reputation is often that of a cheap and potent firewater, unsophisticated and raw.

But many of the cachacas recently imported are customized for the North American market, with greater attention paid to crafting smooth, slightly sweet products without the "burn" most Brazilians expect from their favorite brand.

In the past few years, new

brands — Beleza Pura, Boca Loca, Cabana, Cuca Fresca, Fazenda, Leblon, Sagatiba — have been pushed by small companies looking to get an edge in what they hope is the next big spirits market. Targeting high-profile bars and nightclubs for the most part, these brands are jostling for space and press attention and, ultimately for some, a pick up by major firms. So far, the big spirits companies have stayed away, but recently, two brands — the relative newcomer Agua Luca and old standby Pitu — signed deals with national suppliers, with Agua Luca hooking up with Heaven Hill, and Pitu joining the small spirit portfolio of wine-driven Winebow. (Ypoca, another brand with an established presence in the U.S., is imported by Henry Preiss, and

P-51, one of Brazil's most popular brands of cachaca, is handled by Sazerac.)

The driving force behind the mini cachaca boom is the Caipirinha, a simple cocktail made with muddled limes, sugar and cachaca that has become a popular summer refresher in many bars and restaurants, especially those with a Latin connection.

As with Mojitos and other 21st century cocktails, versions with fresh fruit added have become very popular in bars and restaurants, as the drink is easy to make well, and is a pleasant, Daiquiri-like refresher. And the cachaca entrepreneurs aren't simply pushing the cocktail concept; one of them, Excalibur Enterprises, importer of Beleza Pura and a host of aged cachacas, has launched a pre-mixed Caipirinha for retail.



Boca Loca and Cuca Fresca are two of the increasing number of cachacas now in the U.S. market.