



# Breaking

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The cane spirit, cachaça and its signature cocktail, Caipirinha, have traveled a long road together, but is it time to cut the cord? **Nushi Wijewardena** looks at the plans for independence.

**T**he first foreign shipment of Brazil's national cane spirit, cachaça, took place in 1968. It was sent to Germany, intended to feed the growing Brazilian population in the country. At the time, no one envisioned that the drink would go beyond the Brazilian population taking root in the west, but today it is rubbing shoulders with some of the most chic drinks in the industry at some of the most stylish venues in the world.

The trouble is, cachaça is showing up in disguise. Despite the fact that the Caipirinha, cachaça's signature cocktail, is being made almost as often as the rum cocktail, Mojito, in mature markets,

consumers are not always aware of what they are drinking when they order one. "The majority don't know that Caipirinha is made with cachaça," Sagatiba brand ambassador Tom Pooke told *The Drinks Network*.

The on-trade agrees. "Rarely do consumers know what is in their drink if they haven't made the effort to find out. Most people have difficulty pronouncing the word Caipirinha, let alone cachaça, so I would be surprised if they knew they were drinking it," says newly-opened London bar Barrio North.

This creates something of a paradox for cachaça. Demand for the drink outside Brazil has been growing, but is

it because of a desire for cachaça, or just a desire for a sugar- and lime-based cocktail? The question facing cachaça when it rarely shows its face alone: how does it know it is being liked for itself and not just for its popular accompaniments?

One look at the boom of non-cachaça variants of the cocktail suggests that it is the sugar and lime ingredients that are so popular. Caipirinhas made with rum, or, even further away from cachaça, vodka, are being made just as often as the original cachaça Caipirinha and they are proving just how little consumers care about the spirit in their cocktail. "Online blogs with recipes for the perfect

# Cachaça

Caipirinha say 'two-parts vodka' instead of cachaça," says Christian Castren of Ypióca Cachaça. "I always respond and say 'You've just made the perfect Caipirovka, not the perfect Caipirinha.'"

But Castren is quick to explain: "This is due to the level of education and exposure, not because they don't like cachaça." Since the grain spirit is what they have at home anyway, consumers will more often reach for the vodka when making cocktails, and then they stick with what they know. In this way, the cachaça has a lot in common with gin, which gradually lost its place to the Martini due to the dominance of vodka.

So how can cachaça break away from its dependence on Caipirinha without destroying its healthiest market to date, not to mention its avenue into the west? According to the trade, the answer is first and foremost in making higher-quality Caipirinhas. Barrio North claims to make exceptional, classic Caipirinhas that drive consumer interest.

Phoenix Rappa-Kelly, partner of US-based Cuca Fresca exports, which has recently launched a new Brazilian line of premium cachaças into US and international markets, says the emergence of smoother and more versatile premium brands has seen cachaça go beyond the Caipirinha. "Mixologists who are looking to be at the forefront of a growing trend of consumers' desire to try new, different cocktails, now use cachaça in all kinds of cocktails," Kelly-Rappa told *The Drinks Network*.

Parts of western and southern Europe have ridden the Caipirinha wave long enough to be familiar with the spirit. "Today,

the awareness is quite high in some countries like Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Austria. This is thanks to large companies and brands promoting cachaça and constantly telling people that it is a sugar cane spirit made in Brazil," says Castren.

Kelly-Rappa agrees and says introducing premium sipping cachaças, which are carefully aged in wooden barrels to give them a new level of complexity, allows cachaça to stand alone. "US consumers are developing a deeper appreciation of what a high quality cachaça tastes like, familiarising themselves with the new taste profiles of premium cachaça; and age varietals are becoming popular," she says.

## Comfort zone

However, despite all the talk of the drinks market's fast pace of change, it is also painfully evident that old habits die hard. People may be interested in knowing that cachaça is a distilled cane spirit from Brazil; different from rum in that it is sugar cane juice rather than molasses that is distilled, and that it even has an aged variation that is widely-consumed in the drink's native country. This is fascinating information for the consumer, painstakingly bestowed upon them by the skilled bartender. But more often than not, they will cherish the knowledge and then bounce safely back to the well-known Caipirinha when nothing else is handed to them.

This is why bartenders need to get creative. Barrio North boasts around 15 cachaça-based drinks, all created on-site by its team of bartenders. Ypióca carries out cachaça



Steve Luttmann, Leblon CEO

seminars in which bartenders are taught to handle the spirit in cocktails. "You can virtually muddle and combine any slightly citric fruit or berry and then give it a zesty finish using different kinds of herbs (basil, rosemary and mint, for instance). Ginger- and lychee-based cocktails are also becoming popular. As I say during my training seminars, the only limit is your

imagination," says Castren.

In the US, cachaça brand Leblon has clients that are creating what it calls 'bar chef' cocktails with culinary-inspired recipes. "We are also seeing cachaça used as 'twists' on classic cocktails," Leblon chief executive officer Steve Luttmann

## "Consumer awareness of cachaça is growing."

told *The Drinks Network*. "For example, Rosa Mexican uses Leblon in a Brazilian Margarita."

It is interesting that tequila's mainstay cocktail the Margarita is mentioned, for the parallels between cachaça and Mexico's national spirit tequila go a long way. Cachaça may have more in common with molasses spirit rum, but it looks like cachaça is following tequila's path into the global drinks industry.

Much like cachaça, tequila started life as a purely domestic and largely

Cachaça was first shipped abroad in 1968 by producer Ypióca. It was sent to Germany where it was consumed by Brazilian immigrants. For much of its history, cachaça was considered a workers drink that was only drunk in local bars and in Brazilian homes. Today it is seen in many style-bars around London, New York and throughout western Europe.



blue-collar drink that was being drunk extensively and almost exclusively in its home market. Outside Mexico, particularly in the US, it slowly made a name for itself as the ingredient in the popular cocktail the Margarita. Soon, the Margarita became the US' favourite cocktail, although consumers rarely understood exactly what they were drinking. Then, late last century, the drink gained some independence and stood alone, as a shooter. It ventured out of the Americas and into Europe and, this century, after consumers got over their hangover from shooting the drink, they slowly started to sip it, like they do in Mexico. Tequila still has a long way to go in establishing itself as a respected category, but it is definitely well on its way.

The cachaça industry has been watching this transition with interest. Just like Mexico, Brazil is a country with a strong personality that is recognised internationally. It has a significant emigrant population scattered around the globe, which acts collectively as an ambassador of all things Brazilian. Caipirinhas are made all over the world

Cachaça was invented in the 16th century by the first Portuguese settlers of Brazil. Workers at local sugar mills discovered that sugar cane juice, cooked and left standing, would ferment and turn into a mild alcoholic beverage. The product, named cagaça, was consumed by slaves, as a cheap substitute for the Indians' caum. Soon someone had the idea of distilling it, and thus cachaça was born.

Currently there are more than 4,000 different brands of cachaça available in Brazil. Early in its history it was consumed mainly by Africans, peasants and members of the working class. As is often the case, elitists considered it unsuitable for exclusivist bars and tables. However, the finer points of the product gained wider and wider appreciation, and it is now a very popular drink, considered by some to be in the same class as whiskey and wine. In the country's largest cities there are many bars that specialise in cachaça, called cachaçarias, offering hundreds of different brands, some of them very expensive. The most prized brands are produced in Minas Gerais. The Brazilian government and producer associations have recently acted to promote the export of cachaça.

– some well, some embarrassingly badly; and this puts them in a similar position to where the Margarita was last century.

And thanks to the benefits of hindsight, cachaça can learn from some of tequila's mistakes. Perhaps tequila's greatest challenge is recovering from some of the bad press it received over

the years and diluting its image as an express route to inebriation. Cachaça hopes to follow tequila's success, and due to new attitudes towards responsible drinking, cachaça needs to leapfrog over tequila's shooter phase.

The spirits market has also matured massively since the days when tequila was going for the big time. Consumers

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DRINK RESPONSIBLY

# Cachaça



Cachaça is now being used in all kinds of cocktails.



Creating the trademark birds for Cuca Fresca cachaça.



today are better travelled, more experienced and more concerned about what they consume than they were a decade ago. Cachaça fits well into this environment. If it is provenance, purity and quality that are required, most cachaças on the

international market tick all the correct boxes. The spirit is also entering the international market at a time when all things Latino are becoming increasingly popular. Rum and tequila have already done much of the hard

Brazil in its look while also flanking the backs of bars with Latin flair.

So how long before consumers start to really embrace the spirit of Brazil and consume cachaça as they do in Brazil? Many say there is a long way to go. It is difficult to imagine consumers slowly sipping aged cachaça when they still haven't got their head around the white spirit outside the Caipirinha. Kelly-Rappa agrees that while it will take an excellent calibre cachaça for consumers to make that leap, the growing trend of all things Brazilian, the emergence of a variety of premium cachaças, and the on-trade boasting full cachaça menus, is encouraging consumers to appreciate cachaça on its own.

Cachaça needs to play its cards carefully. Travel too far down the Caipirinha route and it could find itself strapped tightly on to a single cocktail that is also being made with different spirits. Divorce the drink entirely from its traditional partner, however, and it could be that the market dissolves. It also has to tread cautiously with its packaging. If it is too simple and merges in with the rest of the industry, it could end up losing its Brazilian character. Too flashy and it stops looking like the common man's drink that it is. Cachaça certainly seems to be on the road to success, but it needs careful handling and guidance if it is to branch out into major markets. ■

work for cachaça, creating a market that is ready to explore the new world. If tequila can retail for more than \$1,000 a bottle and fine rum at \$1,200 a bottle, the market has obviously opened its eyes to the quality that can be produced by this part of the world.

The cachaças that do catch the eye, therefore, are those that not only win the taste contests but also show some authenticity in their packaging. Just like tequila, no matter how high-end the product, it should retain its local touch; so cachaça needs to embody

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