

Spirits: Middle of the road -- Caipirinha bridges mojito/margarita

Thursday, July 26, 2007

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Joseph Deck, a bartender at Kaya in the Strip District, holds a caipirinha, a mixed drink that is based on a liquor called cachaca.

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At a party the other week, one of those decorative midsummer affairs with a full pig roasting on a spit and origami hanging from the trees, a friend told me that the mojito is dead.

So sorry to hear that.

Was Mojito the name of the pig? No, he meant mojito the *drink* is dead, and that seemed plausible, 'cause I know for a fact I killed about seven of them over Memorial Day.

He explained: Rum is out, cachaca is in, and so is the caipirinha, the sweet-and-sour tonic that springs from this South American liquor.

I was suspicious. Sometimes people like to push a foreign-sounding drink on you to prove how worldly and erudite they are, and how, by comparison, you have the approximate sophistication and civilized manner of a John Candy film (not to offend the John Candy fans out there. He's truly one of America's underappreciated actors). He (the friend, not John Candy) fetched me a

sample of the caipirinha, and as I have a policy when it comes to turning away free drinks -- the policy is, don't do it -- down the hatch it went.

The caipirinha, the national Brazilian cocktail, has found a middle ground between the mojito and the margarita, and likewise between rum and tequila, the first of which is too sweet for some palates, the second of which can turn even the steeliest of stomachs after one slug too many. Why I hadn't heard about it until now, I'm not sure, but I suspect it has to do with an unfortunate affection for IC Light and my inability to pronounce anything in Portuguese besides *albacore* (thanks to a post-college diet consisting of tuna salad, tuna casserole and tuna straight from the can).

Take a sniff of the caipirinha (kai-peh-REEN-ya) , and you'll swear it smells like a standard margarita. But it's sweeter to the tongue, though stiff enough that you won't feel like a big sissy if you order one. It's a simple mix -- an ounce or so of cachaca, a full lime's worth of muddled wedges, and two teaspoons of sugar, stirred together, over ice. You also can add a few drops of lime juice, or as my friend did, add a bit of lemon-lime soda, to cut the alcohol and keep the party from getting out of hand (not that this approach had much success. A mosh pit broke out in the evening hours, but that's neither here nor there).

You're thinking, fantastic, but this is Pennsylvania -- can you get cachaca in our state stores?

The answer is yes, a couple of varieties, including the brand I tried, **Pitu Cachaca (\$14.99, PLCB #056356)**. **Pirassunga Cachaca 51 (\$15.99, PLCB #006815)** also can be found on most state store shelves. At least four more brands can be obtained through special order online, among them the **Leblon Cachaca (\$33.79, PLCB #067603)**, which won top prize in its limited category at the 2007 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Because the thirst for so-called "premium" spirits knows no bounds (see: vodka, overpriced varieties of), the last two years have seen the introduction of various premium cachaca lines, including Boca Loca, Cuca Fresca and the award-winning Leblon. In 2006, only three brands entered the cachaca category at the spirits competition. This year, there were 16 entries. People are catching on, and it seems the market is catching up. Or maybe vice-versa.

Cachaca (means "burning water" or "sour water") is rum's racier, lesser-known cousin -- at least, lesser known in America, though obviously not in Brazil, where four out of every five bottles of liquor sold is cachaca. Like rum, cachaca has its roots in sugar, but while rum is made from molasses, cachaca is made from unrefined sugar cane, fermented then distilled, and it usually isn't aged. Liquor historians say it was first concocted by Brazilian settlers in the 1500s. It was a "low" drink, consumed by slaves, peasants and presumably newspaper reporters, before improved distillation methods made the fermented sugarcane juice more palatable. The Portuguese government tried, and failed, to outlaw it. Distilleries swept across Brazil, and today, 35 million gallons are produced yearly, most of it imbibed there.

While cachaca came before the caipirinha, it's the caipirinha that Americans are more likely to know about (if they've heard of either). In Downtown Pittsburgh, Palomino serves the cocktail,

as does Dish in the South Side, and Kaya in the Strip District, among others. (Green Forest in Penn Hills used to serve one until its liquor license expired.)

"The average person knows about the Caribbean rum, but not a lot of people are familiar with the South American rum," said Todd Sholos, a bartender at Kaya, where the caipirinha has been on the drink menu since last year. With places like Seviche opening, Pittsburghers are warming to Latin and South American twists on our cocktails, Mr. Sholos said.

"And with mojitos taking off," he said, "people are more willing to try something different."

Hasn't he heard? The mojito is dead. Someone ought to break the news.

AGUA DE SANDIA PUNCH

A twist on traditional watermelon punch.

- 1 whole watermelon, seeded
- 5 limes, quartered
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 4 cups water
- 4 cups cachaca

Remove rind and puree watermelon pulp in a blender; strain into a punch bowl to catch stray seeds. Squeeze limes into bowl, adding the rinds. Add sugar, water, cachaca and stir well. Add ice to punch bowl.

-- *Saveur*

CAIPIRINHA



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A caipirinha.

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- 1 whole lime
- 1 ounce cachaca
- 2 teaspoons sugar

Slice the lime into wedges, then muddle in a glass. Pour the cachaca in with the sugar, then mix all three ingredients. Add ice. Try lime juice or 7Up to sweeten the mix.

BATIDA

- 2 parts cachaca
- 1 part passion fruit juice
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Mix all three together, with ice. Can be served over ice, or crushed in a blender, for a frozen margarita effect.

-- thinkingbartender.com

First published at PG NOW on July 25, 2007 at 4:05 pm

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