



Caipirinha Capers



By Barfly

When Barfly says “*cachaça*” (pronounced ka-SHA-sa) to Americans, they hear “*cucaracha*” and flinch, holding up a shoe threateningly. Or demonstrate a badly done “*cachucha*.” Or respond with “God bless you.” When Barfly says “*cachaça*” to Brazilians, they say, “*ay, caipirinhas!*” And “where?” And “how many?” And “where?”

That’s because Americans think that *cachaça* is a cockroach or a dance related to a fandango or a sneeze. Brazilians, on the other hand, recognize it as the blood that runs through their veins: their national sugar cane spirit, and the primary ingredient of the *caipirinha* cocktail, which is essentially a muddled lime-sugar-liquor concoction – a mojito without the mint (a relief for Barfly, who despises salad in drinks).

Call *cachaça* a light or white rum – this is how it is labeled by the U.S. government, as there is no separate category for this spirit. Barfly considers this just plain wrong, however. Rum is generally considered to be made from molasses, a syrupy byproduct of sugar cane, which is left over after the crushed cane has been boiled to extract the sugar crystals. *Cachaça*, on the other hand, is fermented and distilled from first-pressed sugar cane juice. Quality stuff is then aged in wood. There’s nothing “by” about it.

And, until recently, in South Florida – and, admittedly, in Brazil, where it’s also a drink of the working classes – there’s been very little that’s good about it. In fact, metaphors to kerosene and other such intensely aromatic fuels have often been employed. So Barfly almost can forgive the comments referencing

vermin. But tolerance will end with the high-end product, as well as the accompanying education, that’s flooding our oh-so-receptive market.

All right, “flooding” might be a bit of a strong word. *Brazzil Magazine* estimated in a 2006 article about Frisco Fish, a brand launched in the United States in January of that year, that “the production of *cachaça* in Brazil is comprised of over 4,000 small manufacturers, many producing artisanal types.” *The Globe and Mail* of Canada wrote in 2003 that “there are more than 5,000 brands,” then, elsewhere in the article, commented that, “according to the Brazilian Program for the Development of *Cachaça*, there are more than 30,000 producers scattered across every region of Brazil, the majority of which are small, artisanal distilleries.”

The number of premium *cachaça* producers breaking in here over the last and next year? Four.

In addition to Frisco Fish, they are Boca Loca, Cuca Fresca and Leblon. What they have in common, aside from being cutely alliterative, is their aggressive presence. Leblon, for example, with its motto of “Live Love Leblon,” has boldly declared 2007 the “year of the *caipirinha*.” If you go by the flag-colored marketing campaigns, each and every one claims to be the first, only or finest branded, hand-crafted, aged-in-French-oak *cachaça* to ever be imported into the United States, though Cuca Fresca is indeed unique in its development of a Brazilian *Cachaça Liqueur*, flavored with natural cinnamon. They’re all hammering at the Latino regions – foremost South Florida, followed by Texas, New York and Southern California – chipping away at the upscale tequila crowd (move over, Padrón) and going for the obvious Brazilian lifestyle symbolism. The name Leblon hails from a beach in Rio de Janeiro, Cuca Fresca means “cool head,” Boca Loca means “crazy lips” and Frisco Fish is so-called because, well, Barfly honestly couldn’t tell you.

Barfly minds neither the similarities nor the competition. Who is not delighted when several quality liquors show up rather simultaneously on

our shores? And Leblon CEO Steve Lutton, recently hosting a cocktail competition in the penthouse suite of the Pelican Hotel on Ocean Drive to promote his *cachaça*, is correct: From Martini Bar in South Miami, where Boca Loca holds forth, to Goli! The Taste of Brazil in Delray Beach, which features Leblon and other spirits on a rolling cart, where the drinks are shaken to order – try the passion fruit-strawberry version for something as tart-ish as a Brazilian bikini – *caipirinhas* do seem to be the order of the day.

You’re not required to drink them day in and day out, however, don’t be afraid to substitute *cachaça* for any other clear spirit. This lightly sweet cane liquor is a wonderful substitute for harsher vodka, heavier rum and more powerful tequila. And you can feel free to move away from the traditional lime-lemon flavor profile of the *caipirinha*, as well. Trust Barfly, who was fortunate enough to judge the mixologists’ results at the Pelican: The winning cocktail, the Amarena Black Cherry *Caipirinha* by Michael Lynch and Manny Nieves of Table 8, had a pleasing Dr. Brown’s black cherry soda zing to it. Not very Rio, perhaps, but then it’s hard to take the *cachaça* out of Brazil without also taking a little of Brazil out the *cachaça*.

Oh, and *gesundheit*. ■

