

Brazil's Cachaca, No Ho-Hum Rum

By Jason Wilson

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Until last week, I had no idea that June 12 was National Cachaca Day. Did anyone wish you and yours a Happy National Cachaca Day yesterday? I bet not. I'll go out on a limb and bet that none of your friends and family members even knew about this special day -- unless, of course, they're employed by the particular brand of cachaca that dreamed it up.

That is not surprising. Cocktail geeks aside, if you mention the word "cachaca" to most people, you'll receive a blank stare. What is surprising, though, is that many of the same people will recognize the most famous drink made with cachaca: the caipirinha. Yet as the caipirinha's popularity grows, many people still have little idea what fuels it.

Cachaca is essentially Brazilian rum. But instead of the dark, heavy molasses used for many rums, cachaca is made from the juice of the first press of unrefined sugar cane. It's made in pot stills and generally not aged. Cocktail guide author Mittie Hellmich calls it "rum's fiery cousin." Harsher than rum, the average cachaca can deliver a kick similar to that of grappa or aguardente. Cachaca often has a wild edge and a vegetal or smoky finish.

In the past year, a number of premium cachacas have launched with the American market in mind: rounder, smoother cachacas such as Boca Loca, Cuca Fresca, Mae de Ouro and Leblon, which won top cachaca at this year's [San Francisco World Spirits Competition](#). In fact, the largest growth category at the competition was cachaca. Introduced in 2006 with only three entries, the cachaca category grew to 16 entries in 2007, as many as the number in the gin category. For me, though, the jury is still out on whether premium cachaca adds enough to justify the extra expense over the mass-produced brands such as Pitú.

In [Brazil](#), of course, the spirit is a part of everyday life and represents 80 percent of the country's spirit sales. "It's really a workhorse. It's very versatile," says Paulo Rosolem, export sales manager for Cachaca 61. The Cachaca 61 brand, incidentally, should not be confused with another widely available brand, Cachaca 51. Apparently, it's common in Brazil for a company to number its cachaca (usually the year of the brand's origin). There is also a Cachaca 69 and a Cachaca 71.

But how versatile is it? I enjoy a caipirinha very much. Of all the ubiquitous cocktails -- the Cosmopolitan, the mojito, the Appletini -- it's the only one that feels like a good, stiff drink. It has a simple formula: Cut one lime into wedges and muddle it together with two teaspoons of sugar in a medium glass; add 1 1/2 ounces of cachaca and crushed ice; stir vigorously. As with all classic drinks that have a simple formula, there are endlessly debatable variations. Do you cut the lime into four or eight wedges? Do you use turbinado sugar? How much do you crush the ice?

The caipirinha has led me on a search for other good drinks to make with cachaca. Not as easy as it sounds.

Case in point: I was recently at Lima, the South American-theme spot on K Street downtown, and ordered a caipirinha. As I watched the bartender dutifully muddle the lime and sugar, then add the requisite cachaca, I asked him a question: Besides making caipirinhas, what else can you do with cachaca?

He looked up from his muddling, stared at me vacantly for a moment, then shrugged. "I don't think there's really anything else," he said. "You don't really want to drink this stuff by itself."

With a little bit of experimenting, however, I've found that cachaca's bite and wildness make it an excellent mixer with fresh fruit juices. For instance, Cafe Atlantico in Penn Quarter makes a delicious caipirinha variation with crushed pineapple. Rosolem also suggests a batida, a traditional Brazilian drink with many variations involving fruit juice and coconut milk or condensed milk that can be blended or shaken.

Cachaca especially can stand up to tropicals such as passion fruit, mango or guava -- perhaps even better than rum -- adding balance to the syrupy sweetness.

As Hellmich writes: "Although they say you can power a Ford Fairlane with cachaca, I'd rather fuel a daiquiri with it."

Jason Wilson's Spirits column appears every other week. He can be reached at food@washpost.com