

WORDS JACOPO MAZZEO

Behind the Caipirinha

Exploring the vast potential of cachaça, rum's underappreciated Brazilian cousin

If mere volume was any indication of worldwide fame, the globe's backbars would abound with baijiu and we would all be drowning our Covid sorrows in streams of cachaça – Brazil's liquid national pride. Only, we don't. Despite being one of the world's largest spirit categories by volume, a meagre one per cent of all cachaça (aka pinga) produced each year makes it to the export market. Much of this comes in the form of the unaged, silver category and is aimed at making the country's signature serve, Caipirinha.

Cachaça though, is a lot more than a one-cocktail stand. In fact, the category is amazingly diverse and, much like Martinique's rhum agricole, a tightly regulated sugarcane spirit. Cachaça can only be made in Brazil by fermenting fresh sugarcane juice and must be bottled at a strength of between 38% and 48% ABV. Styles range from the unaged prata (silver) cachaça to ouro (gold), premium, extra-premium, and reserva especial, which are aged in a variety of wooden barrels and for a length of time that spans from a few months up to several years. Interestingly for rum aficionados, sugar additions are regulated too, with only up to 6g/L allowed, an amount beyond which the liquid has to be explicitly

labeled as cachaça adoçada (sweetened). Large, industrial producers tend to column distil spirits made from purchased sugarcane, while smaller artisanal expressions are usually pot distilled and made with the distillery's own naturally fermented raw material.

With lack of regulation and transparency being a recurrent topic in the sugarcane spirits universe, what is stopping cachaça from achieving worldwide fame?

"It's only recently that cachaça has benefited from a registered trademark," explains Tony Austin of Zeca Cachaça. "For many decades it was instead exported under the 'rum' category and this was one of the biggest blockages to get individual exposure."

In addition to category confusion, Brazilian-born Rui Teixeira – who runs distribution business Pegasus Spirits and has been promoting and working with cachaça all his professional life – blames a lack of investment from Brazilian governments. "The Mexican government invested a lot of money and time building the awareness of Tequila in the UK or Europe. Now the category is one of the biggest one in the world and the prices of the brands are going up and up." >







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As a spirit, cachaça offers great possibilities for the world’s mixologists



In the UK, cachaça selections of any worth are mainly found in specialist venues. At London’s Latin American restaurant Paladar, cachaça is “one of our top three favourite spirits,” points out front of house manager Yalain Pita-Salomon. “It’s a versatile spirit – a few people drink it straight or on the rocks and we have noticed recently that some enjoy it with mixers like tonic or sodas. However, we generally recommend a cachaça-based cocktail.” Paladar’s Magico is a take on a Caipirinha using the house pour muddled with watermelon and lime slices, and crowned with a watermelon ball; O’prosti is a Porn Star Martini where gold cachaça replaces vodka, served alongside a shot of Brazilian sparkling wine; and Canchanchara is cachaça shaken with honey and lemon juice, and poured over crushed ice.

Cachaça is also at home at Camden’s Made in Brasil, a Brazilian-themed cocktail bar and restaurant whose menu boasts some 20 different expressions. Signature serves include twists on classics (e.g. Cafezinho Martini, based on the Espresso Martini, or Capi Colins, a take on the Tom Collins) and cocktails made with traditional Brazilian ingredients. The Açai Martini, for instance, is made with cachaça,

crème de mure, lime juice and açai-flavoured sorbet, an Amazonian berry that boasts ‘health food’ status. “But our speciality is Caipirinha,” underlines co-owner Renato Paziam. “We make lots of variants like chilli and raspberry, or apple and cinnamon... People don’t know cachaça, but they know Caipirinha.”

For Zeca’s Austin, however, Caipirinha’s popularity is a double-edged sword. “The problem is that all the promotion that has been done so far has been through the Caipirinha,” he says. “Bars will only stock one brand because it’s only needed for one drink so we don’t like to highlight the Caipirinha when we do promotional work. If I wait for the sun to come out or watch Brazil playing football on TV, then the category has got a very short life-span ahead.”

Paladar’s Pita-Salomon acknowledges that Brazil’s signature cocktail hinders the category’s growth. “There is a bit of a cliché about the spirit... brands have been incorporated in many restaurants but the use of this spirit remains around Caipirinhas, and bartenders aren’t confident enough to explore the diversity and great opportunities that cachaça offers to the mixology culture.”

For cachaça's supporters, emancipation from the Caipirinha is the spirit's route to global acclaim. In line with this strategy, Abelha Cachaça's Tom Stockley is committed to helping the trade appreciate how to use the category in the colder months: "We want to get bartenders to use it in Old Fashioneds and Manhattans. The Honey Trap goes in this direction, made with gold cachaça, crème de figue, Seville orange honey, orange bitters and apple juice."

Meanwhile, Yaguara co-founder Hamilton Lowe puts the spotlight on other traditional Brazilian cocktails. "Rabo de Galo is a classic. It originated in the 1950s when, following the opening of Brazil's Cinzano factory, they started mixing cachaça with Cinzano. And



there's also the Batida, a very refreshing milk-based cocktail with tropical fruits."

But cachaça has a *raison d'être* beyond the shaker, too. "There are some incredible aged ones from amazing craft producers, which are a great way to bring new customers into the category, especially whisky and rum drinkers," says Sam Wilson of distributor Amathus Drinks. Indeed, the sheer diversity of woods allowed for barrel resting or ageing (about 20 indigenous varieties plus European or American oaks) translates into a wide array of colours, flavour intensities and aromatic palates that have little to envy more popular brown spirits. Novo Fogo's Tanager, for instance, owes its unusual vivid red colour and intense aromas of winter spices, freshly cut grass, mango, peach, vanilla and toast to the maturation in Arariba (Zebrawood) barrels, while Avuá Bálsamo develops its characteristic herbaceous notes from the time spent in Bálsamo casks.

With such a varied array of flavour profiles and the added benefit of category regulations, the Cinderella of sugarcane spirits is a real rum drinker's dreamland, just waiting for the right shake to unveil its potential. *R*

Cachaça cocktails

CLASSIC

RABO DE GALO

- 50ml gold cachaça
- 15ml sweet vermouth
- 15ml Cynar
- 1 dash orange bitters

Build in a mixing glass with ice and stir until cool. Strain into a rocks glass and garnish with an orange twist.

BATIDA

- 50ml silver cachaça
- 50ml condensed milk
- 50ml pineapple juice
- 20ml passionfruit purée

Shake ingredients over ice, strain and serve in a coupette glass garnished with a pineapple wedge.

INNOVATIVE

THE HONEY TRAP

- 30ml gold cachaça
- 20ml crème de figue
- 1 tbsp Seville orange honey
- 1 dash orange bitters
- 1 dash apple juice

Stir all ingredients except for the apple juice with two cubes of ice in a rocks glass. Gradually add ice and stir. Crown with apple juice. Garnish with an orange twist.

LA DIAMANTINA

- 50ml gold cachaça
- 30ml Aperol
- 30ml pink grapefruit juice
- 15ml lime juice
- 15ml simple syrup

Add ingredients to a shaker with ice, shake and strain into a tumbler over cubed ice. Garnish with a grapefruit slice.

