

Americans Are Finally Coming Around to Brazil's Favorite Booze— Here's What the Hype Is About

Photo: Jennifer Causey; Prop Styling: Mindi Shapiro Levine; Food Styling: Margaret Monroe Dickey; Recipe: Karen Rankin

Just don't call it "Brazilian rum"

By MARY TOMLINSON

When it comes to home bartending, there's something to be said for familiarity. You have your preferred tequila and that go-to rum for a mint-muddled mojito. But there's an affordable spirit that can open up a myriad of exciting summer drinking: Cachaça.

Okay, I know what you're thinking. How do I pronounce that? What is exactly *is* that? Can I just get back to my bottle of Bacardi?

There's a reason you probably haven't heard of this South American spirit (pronounced ka-SHA-sa) despite it being the third most popular distilled spirit in the world. Most of it stays on Brazilian soil—99% of the 800 million liters produced annually, to be exact. But over the last decade, imports of cachaça to the U.S. have increased nearly twenty-fold.

So why should you add this spirit to your stock of well-known tequilas, vodkas, and rums? For starters, cachaça bears a lot of similarities to rum, as both are made from sugarcane. But while most rum is distilled from molasses (the byproduct of processing sugar), cachaça is distilled from the fresh juice pressed straight out of raw sugarcane stalks. In this way, cachaça is more similar to the rum agricole of the French Caribbean—and it reaps those same benefits of a grassier, livelier profile.

You might have already met this earthy spirit in form of the Caipirinha, a refreshing mix of cachaça, lime, and sugar that's as ubiquitous as sand on Brazilian beaches. But because the spirit has a more terroir-driven profile, it can be enjoyed by sipping

straight or by serving in complex drinks (see our grapefruit-Campari sparkler below). Plus, the fruitier flavors give it a summertime edge of the vanilla and caramel notes prevalent in rum.

As with many beverages from the New World, cachaça can't be untangled from Brazil's colonial past. It originated in the 16th century as a beverage for slaves and the poor, and the name "cachaça" comes from the word slaves used for the foam collected at the top of a cauldron of boiling sugarcane. The drink eventually made its way up to Brazil's wealthier classes, and by the early 19th century it was considered a point of Brazilian pride. Now, every June 12th, the country celebrates International Cachaça Day.

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How to Buy Cachaça

Most cachaça you'll encounter in the booze aisle will be white, also called "branca" or "clássica," and is only aged the one-year minimum. Aged cachaças spend time in barrels of native Brazilian woods such as Araúva, Balm, and Peanut, each imparting a golden color and unique aroma into the spirit.

The classic way to mix up Brazil's grassy spirit is of course the caipirinha, but aged cachaças offer enough complexity—70 identified possible aromas, to be exact—for enjoying straight. So grab a bottle—we recommend the Leblon label—and start shaking with your new summertime staple while the rest of the world catches up to Brazil's best.

Our Favorite Cachaça Recipes

Cachaça, Campari, Lime, and Grapefruit Cocktail

A bit of cachaça from Brazil and a dash of Campari from Italy, topped off with grapefruit soda from the Caribbean...who said worldly and pink couldn't fit in the same glass?

Get the Recipe: Cachaça, Campari, Lime, and Grapefruit Cocktail

Strawberry Caipirinha

Trade in that frozen daiquiri for a strawberry-tinged twist on Brazil's national cocktail.

Get the Recipe: Strawberry Caipirinha