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Cachaça

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Every country has their national alcohol: France has cognac and armagnac, Italy has grappa, Japan has sake, Sweden has aquavit, Russia has vodka, Mexico has tequila and mezcal, Barbados has rum, and Brazil has cachaça, which is also sometimes called aguardente or by its slang nickname, pinga. Cachaça, pronounced kah-shah-suh, is made from distilled unrefined sugar cane juice, which is first fermented in wood or copper and is then boiled down several times to distill it. The process can be as short as 24 hours to several years, depending on the aging of the product. Without aging it is a clear, white spirit, whereas the aged variety which must be aged for at least one year, is usually a golden amber color due to the type of wood barrels used, which varies from producer to producer with Brazilian cedar, freijó, jequitibá and imburana, as well as American or French oak being used which gives each brand its unique color and flavor. Some of the gold cachaças are not actually aged, but have caramel or wood extracts added to round out the flavor. Because of its relative ease to produce, it is sometimes made at home, in factories, and everyday there are new artisanal producers popping up. Brazil has been making cachaça ever since the days of sugarcane plantations, and one of the more famous brands has been making cachaça since the mid 1500's. In fact, Brazil has over 4,000 brands of cachaça, but all cachaças are not the same. You will want to experiment and conduct your own "research" on your favorite cachaça.

I consider myself to be somewhat of a cachaça expert; I counted over 22 bottles in my "collection", which I have amassed over the years and used to partially complete the "research" for this article. The majority of the cachaças are made in the state of Minas Gerais. Those familiar with Brazil may know that Minas Gerais, famous for its gold and its gemstones, now know that they have an additional source of revenue as well. The state of Rio de Janeiro also produces its fair share of cachaça as does the state of São Paulo. Unlike most other alcoholic spirits, alcohol volumes can vary widely from producer to producer, especially with the artisanal varieties which ranged from the lowest alcohol volume of 28.5% volume in the aguardente de cana com coco, (coconut flavored cachaça), to some heavy hitters with 45.5% and 46.5% volume which were produced at an artisanal shop in Paraty in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The majority of them fall into the ranges of 34.75%, 39%, 41%, 42.1%, 43%, and 44% volume. Unlike the current trend of flavored rums and vodkas available on the market, with flavors of green apple, mango, black current and raspberry and the list of flavors continues to grow, cachaça still remains close to its origins, and the only flavor I have encountered in my cachaça search is the coconut version which I actually like. I hope that this cachaça "purity" continues, as I believe that some things deserve to stay close to their roots. The "Brazil craze" seems to be everywhere these days and is now spreading throughout the world with Brazilian fashion, travel, cuisine and music all taking center stage at the forefront of the international radarscope. As I travel the world, I have found the cocktail caipirinha, pronounced kai-peer-eeen-yah, the national cocktail of Brazil, on trendy hip bar menus from New York to Paris to Berlin to Rome, and beyond. The trend continues to grow, as Brazil becomes ever the hotter destination to visit each year. The next time you find yourself at home or at a bar pondering over a bar menu in search of a new cocktail to try, you might like to try a caipirinha, which is made with cachaça, fresh limes muddled with sugar and a little water, or a batida, pronounced bah-chee-dah, which is a cocktail mixed with coconut milk or other fruit juice. As they say in Brazil, "Saude", pronounced sow-ou-juh (to your health!).

The Caipirinha

3	ounces	cachaça
1	tablespoon	sugar
½		fresh lime, cut into small pieces

In a glass place the limes and sugar, and muddle with a wooden pestle or the back of a spoon. Add the cachaça and stir well. Add ice, stir and enjoy.

You may also muddle the limes and sugar in a shaker glass, add the cachaça and ice, and shake and strain into a glass over ice if you do not like limes in the bottom of your cocktail. However for me, that would be like removing the mint from a Mint Julep before serving it.

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Batida da Coco (Coconut Cocktail) – for 2 cocktails

4 ounces cachaça
4 ounces coconut milk
2 tablespoons sweetened condensed milk

Place all ingredients in a blender and thoroughly blend. Serve over ice.

Batida da Maracuja (Passionfruit Cocktail)

3 ounces cachaça
3 ounces passionfruit juice

Pour ingredients in a glass over ice and enjoy.

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