

latino all-Stars

Pisco: Peru's Special Spirit

Like many of the world's venerable spirits, pisco has weathered its fair share of hardships. Those who have tried it probably would not put this rather misunderstood spirit in the category of "great," but pisco has a fascinating and turbulent history, including times that threatened its very existence. There are many spirits professionals across America who are unsure of exactly what pisco is, and for bartenders who have had the pleasure of working with pisco, another point of confusion lies with its origins.

Origins Debate

To this day, debate still rages as to which country, Peru or Chile, first produced pisco. There is overwhelming evidence that points to Peru, the most obvious being that the town of Pisco and its eponymous port are located in Peru. Pisco was first produced during the time of the Spanish viceroyalty in the sixteenth century. At that time, both Peru and Chile were part of this Spanish reign, with borders that were not defined as they are today. As the spirit developed, there was no hindrance to transporting vines and cultivating new vineyards in what



The complex character and flavor of Peruvian piscos derive from distillation in traditional copper alembic stills.

What Is Pisco?

Essentially, pisco is a clear grape brandy, which in the best brands has a somewhat fruity and floral nose; a round, often buttery palate; and, generally, a dry finish.

Even though both Peru and Chile produce the spirit, there are marked differences between the two. The first distinction is the raw materials. Peruvian piscos are more aromatic than their Chilean counterparts because they use completely different grapes. In Peru, eight grape varieties can be used (four aromatic and four not aromatic), while in Chile they tend to use only three grapes, all of which lack pronounced aromas. Peruvian-style piscos, therefore, are more complex and fragrant on the nose.

Second, the brandy is made using traditional copper alembic (pot) stills in Peru; as a consequence, more flavor is retained. In Chile, pisco is made in a vertical column still. A third key difference between the two countries' piscos is that following column distillation, Chilean pisco is diluted with water to reduce the alcohol content to between 30 and 55 percent. Alembic-processed Peruvian pisco is distilled to final proof—one of the few spirits in the world to be made this way. Without dilution, more character and flavor remain in the finished product.

Chile produces over 90 percent of the world's pisco, mostly on an industrial scale. Volume, not necessarily quality, is the Chilean pursuit. As a result, Chilean brands have a much greater presence in overseas markets than those from Peru. Pisco in Peru is mostly made by small artisan distillers, who exercise much tighter control over every stage of production.

The Consejo Regulador del Pisco, a government entity set up in 2006 by Peru's pisco producers, oversees the production process of individual distillers, much like the Consejo Regulador del Tequila stringently monitors Tequila in Mexico. This new regulatory body will help improve the overall quality of Peruvian pisco.

is now Chile and to undertaking the inevitable production of pisco. Inhabitants in both areas thought of pisco as their own.

The first pisco grapes were brought to Peru from the Canary Islands in the sixteenth century by Francisco Caravantes. They thrived in the region, and the quality of the wines produced from these grapes was so high that they began to be exported to Spain. This trade was banned in 1641; the loss led local farmers to distill their surplus grape must into a spirit that eventually became pisco.

The popularity of pisco in North America and Europe intensified in the late 1700s as shipping traffic increased from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean via Cape Horn. Traders stopped at the port of Pisco to pick up supplies, including the Peruvian brandy, and continued on their journeys up the coast to North America and back to Europe.

When the Gold Rush hit the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1850s, thousands of miners from Peru and Chile headed north, hoping to make their fortune and taking their national spirit with them. The steady stream of boats heading to San Francisco also meant a steady stream of pisco. Within a short time, Americans, too, had developed a liking for the spirit, especially mixed in the most popular drink of the time, pisco punch, and in what later became the classic pisco sour.

Peru's spirit became the most popular spirit on America's West Coast between the Gold Rush era and Prohibition. After

Repeal, it regained its popularity, with pisco houses opening up in San Francisco, but now it shared its success with the rums of the new Tiki movement, led by pioneers Trader Vic and Don Beach. If Peru's military coup d'état of 1968 had not put a swift end to pisco's golden age, pisco could well have been in the same position as tequila is currently. Today, though, under a more favorable political climate, pisco is fighting its way back to popularity, led by curious, passionate, and creative bartenders.

Image Upgrade

Like cachaça, pisco is trying to shake an image problem. Historically, pisco has been a drink favored by sailors, the working class, and the poor—certainly not a spirit produced for refined enjoyment. But over the past decade, several entrepreneurs have been buying back and improving Peruvian vineyards and are producing some wonderful artisanal expressions of the spirit.



Caravante

By Vincenzo Marianella, bar manager and head bartender, Providence, Los Angeles, and cocktail consultant (mymixology.com)

"Caravante was the first person to bring grapes to Peru. I love pisco's flexibility; it is very easy to mix and brings so many subtle flavors to cocktails."

2 oz Pisco
½ oz Veev Açai Liqueur
¾ oz fresh lemon juice
¾ oz Bossa Nova passionfruit juice
½ oz simple syrup
2 dashes Regan's Orange Bitters
1 egg white

Combine pisco, liqueur, juices, simple syrup, bitters, and egg white in ice-filled shaker. Shake very hard, and strain into wine glass.

Count Chocula

By Tad Carducci, principal tippler, Tippling Bros., LLC, a metropolitan New York-based beverage consulting company

"In good pisco, much like with grappa, I usually get a very deep cocoa flavor, like a grand cru chocolate. I wanted to experiment and try to pull that element out, without it being overbearing or too sweet. Enter the crème de cacao. I used the dark stuff to add a bit more color. The Aperol lends a bitter orange-peel component, which brightens up the cocoa flavor and also works with the earthiness. The bitterness also ensures that the cocktail will finish dry and work as an aperitif. The pisco's the star, and everything else works in combination to make sure it shines brightly."

1 oz Pisco
1 oz Aperol liqueur
½ oz Cinzano Vermouth
½ oz Marie Brizard Crème de Cacao
Flamed lemon-zest garnish

Combine pisco, Aperol, vermouth, and crème de cacao in ice-filled mixing glass. Stir and strain into chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with flamed lemon zest.

The global cocktail renaissance also has come at a perfect time for pisco to experience its own revival. As an increasing number of Peru's 235 brands are marketed abroad, bartenders around the world are finally getting a taste of what has until now been considered quite exotic and extremely difficult to find. There are some wonderful brands now available in the United States,

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