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## Brazilian Spirit: In Search of a Purer, Nobler Cachaça

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Cachaça (pronounced ka-SHA-sa) can be found in every single boteco (bar) in Brazil for as little as 25 cents a shot. Though it is commonly referred to as a "Brazilian rum", there are in fact several differences between it and the Caribbean spirit.

While rum is distilled from molasses (which yields a higher sugar content), cachaça uses mostly the fresh sugar cane juice as a source; that difference can be immediately noticed in the nose - most cachaças smells like cane, while rum has a more sugary smell.

Several Brazilian companies mass-produce a cheaply-sold product that is aimed for the masses; some of it is labeled as "aged" but in fact has caramel added to give it color (causing worse hangovers, as one producer once admitted to me).

A lot of that has wound up on the shelves of New York bars as the popularity of caipirinha (cachaça, crushed lime, sugar and ice) grew over the last few years.

There are, however, other smaller companies who dedicate themselves to making a higher-quality product, although until recently that was hard to find outside of Brazil.

"Brazil is capable of high-quality spirits," says Olie Berlic, a former New York sommelier who took upon himself the task of introducing premium cachaças to the American market after a five-year tour-de-force that began when Berlic traveled to Brazil in search of wine.

"I couldn't find any wine producers who had a good portfolio," he said. He then set his sights on the distilled product, and set out to find companies who produced high-quality cachaça.

"I tasted over 800 brands, and tried to find the players; I was convinced that a higher quality product had a place in the market." He finally found a producer in São Paulo who had been mapping the sugar cane plantations for 20 years.

To bring it to the U.S. market, he wanted to create an original name that promoted "the sophistication and spontaneity of Brazil", Berlic said.

His Brazilian-born wife came up with the name Beleza Pura (Pure Beauty), which refers to the purity of the product and also to the beauty of the country.

"I identified regional elements, and created something fresh and clean without any additives, rich in the palate, with a long finish and overall purity," Berlic says.

In addition to his own brand, Berlic also created a portfolio of premium cachaças, such as Armazém Vieira, in Florianópolis (in the south of Brazil), which uses a fermented, wine-like sugar cane juice to make cachaça and then ages it for 4, 8 and 16 years, and Rio's Rochinha, another small producer that ages their product in Brazilian oak, which gives scotch-like notes to the taste.

Watching Berlic conduct a tasting is an educational experience - he doesn't only pour the cachaças but he also instructs the audience about each region where the liquid is produced, the aging process and mixing suggestions.

It is clear that he is in love with what he does. More recently, he introduced a 108-proof Brazilian absinthe in the U.S. market, "working with the producer to give it a younger appeal."

Berlic also focuses on giving back to the country that gave him his livelihood, and his company has partnered with the Dreams Can Be Foundation, a U.S. not-for-profit organization that works with several organizations in Brazil to benefit needy children. Berlic's company donates a percentage of the profits to them "to help the children to have a better opportunity".

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Note: This article has appeared, in different form, on the New York Press