

# Brazil holds a special place in its heart (and its laws) for the caipirinha cocktail and its complex national spirit, cachaça

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**1 of 2** | The caipirinha is Brazil's national cocktail, a simple concoction of lime juice and sugar combined with Brazil's most

beloved local spirit, cachaça. (Tantri Wija)

By [Tantri Wija](#)

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BRAZIL HAS MANY SECRETS: the lost cities silently moldering under the canopies of the Amazon, whispered hints of Indigenous peoples as-yet uncontacted by modernity, rumors of giant boa constrictors, the intricacies of the samba, the dexterity of the feet of its soccer players, the miracle that is Gisele Bündchen; all these marvels emerge from its fecund canopy of carnivals and capuchins to astound anyone who is not from Brazil. Even their language sets them apart from their neighbors: an invisible barrier of sibilants and elided vowels that always sounds like music to me.

But one of its best-kept secrets should, perhaps, be shared more widely with the world: the caipirinha. The caipirinha is Brazil's national cocktail, a word that evokes both river monsters and moonlight dancing but actually refers to a drink prepared by muddling lime juice and sugar together and then adding a sugar-cane-based spirit to it.

The combination is simplicity itself: a concoction of lime and rum and sugar so easy to prepare that you even can ask a bartender for it at a busy open bar without getting too much of an eyebrow. And while that sounds like a recipe for a daiquiri, the secret ingredient in this cocktail is what sets it apart: Brazil's national spirit, cachaça.

Brazilian cachaça is a distilled spirit made from cane sugar, much like rum; and it comes in white and gold varieties, again much like rum; and in a pinch, you can substitute rum in any drink that calls for cachaça and end up with something you'd like to sip. It will not, however, taste remotely the same. Without cachaça, a beverage as simple as a caipirinha lacks a certain evocative, elusive quality it derives from its origin in the country that thought to combine fighting and dancing.

Unlike rum, which is made from sugar molasses, a byproduct of sugar production, cachaça is actually fermented cane juice, resulting in a greener, fruitier, more complex flavor profile than the average rum. Just opening the bottle of some cachaças releases the sweet, heady fragrance of tropical flowers, like drinkable perfume that tastes a bit like lychees.

White cachaça is generally unaged, and cheaper, while gold is aged in wooden barrels made from various Amazonian tree species that can impart their own flavor to the spirit. “Dark” cachaça, a premium product, is aged even longer. (And, buyer beware: As happens with rum or whiskey, manufacturers of cheap cachaça are not above adding caramel color to a product to suggest it has been barrel-aged.)

Cachaça is only beginning to break into the American spirits market, quietly making its appearance on finer bar shelves like a coded note passed hand to hand.

Ubiquitous in Brazil, it once was considered a drink for the lower classes, but since has become an important part of Brazil’s cultural identity. It originally was produced by enslaved peoples brought to Brazil in the 16th century, along with the sugar-cane plant itself, and is considered the oldest distilled spirit in the Americas.

It was briefly illegal, as the Portuguese were worried its popularity (and, probably, cheapness at the time) would compete with grape brandy from the motherland, but a group of cachaça producers eventually grew restless and rebelled, so the spirit has its own revolt, The Cachaça Revolt of 1660, and now it even has its own national day, Sept. 13. The composition of what can be considered a caipirinha is apparently so sacred, it is enshrined in Brazilian law.

The word *cachaça*, to the non-Portuguese ear, sounds like a romantic whisper from an invisible mouth, a promise the wind makes to the sea. But it has over 2,000 alternate local names, like *pinga*, *caninha* or the more colorful *bafo-de-tigre* (tiger breath) or *abre-coração* (heart-opener). But not all alcohol made from fermented cane juice is cachaça — to possess the name, the spirit must be produced in Brazil.

Interestingly, however, you can sip cachaça *and* purchase a technically local Pacific Northwest product. [Novo Fogo cachaça](#) has its distillery in the Amazon, but the company, and its owner, Dragos Axinte, are based in Seattle. They even produce sparkling canned versions of their cachaça cocktail products, in case you want to experience your “Girl from Ipanema” moment with the ready ease with which you crack

open a White Claw. And if that's how you like to roll, don't worry: That particular secret is just between you and your ice cubes.

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