



Latin spirits have entered mainstream mixology. The Tia Mia (top) at Leyenda in New York City is made with mezcal and rum and features citrus and nut flavors. The Unknown Death (bottom) at Chicago's Mezcaleria Las Flores uses mezcal, chili liqueur and amaro to create a fiery, spicy taste.



LATIN FLAVORS

With Tequila and rum paving the way, lesser-known Latin American spirits are hitting the mainstream

BY SALLY KRAL

In the mixology community, experimenting with new ingredients keeps cocktail-making fun and challenging. Mixologists are always on the hunt for interesting spirits, and the trail often leads to other countries for inspiration.

Ivy Mix, co-owner and head bartender at the pan-Latin cocktail bar Leyenda in Brooklyn, New York, particularly enjoys working with the vast variety of Latin American spirits. “The range of flavor profiles is bigger and offers more to work with,” she explains. While Tequila and rum serve as a typical introduction to Latin spirits, lesser-known products from Mexico, Brazil, Peru and elsewhere are becoming cocktail mainstays. “First the cocktail boom kicked off mezcal’s rise, and now the trend is branching out into other Latin American spirits,” Mix says.

Mezcal’s Moment

Mezcal is hugely popular right now, with some bars featuring the spirit more heavily than its less-smoky sister, Tequila. At Mezcaleria Las Flores in Chicago, the spirits list includes only agave-based products, primarily mezcal. But the venue’s partner and head bartender Jay Schroeder says that doesn’t limit his versatility because every mezcal expression is distinct. “Diversity is what makes mezcal so interesting,” Schroeder says. “We have a wide variety of expressions, which allows us to create drinks that work with the flavor profile of the individual spirit.” His Illuminati

Handshake (\$10) features Mina Real Blanco mezcal, Old Overholt rye whiskey, Lustau Oloroso Sherry, fresh lemon juice and house-made rooibos tea syrup, served in a glass rimmed with Gran Mitla Sal de Gusano agave worm salt. “The drink brings out the spice of the rye and the citrus of the unaged mezcal,” Schroeder adds.

Ryan Fitzgerald, managing partner at San Francisco bar ABV, notes that fortified wines and Sherry work particularly well with unaged mezcals, as do citrus fruits like lime and grapefruit. His Quicksand cocktail (\$12) blends Del Maguey Vida mezcal, Maurin Quina aperitif, Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao liqueur and house-made orange bitters, while his Mexicali Blues (\$10) features Del Maguey Vida, Dolin Blanc dry vermouth, Giffard Crème de Pamplemousse Rose grapefruit liqueur, house-made chili tincture, lime juice and Angostura bitters.

John Lermayer, bartender and owner of Sweet Liberty Drinks & Supply Co. in Miami, adds that nutty flavors are commonly used as well. At Leyenda, Mix’s Tia Mia (\$13) comprises Del Maguey Vida, Appleton Estate Signature Blend rum, Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao, Orgeat Works T’Orgeat toasted almond syrup and lime juice. “Spicy and fiery flavors work well with Latin spirits,” Mix adds. Lermayer’s Velvet Sideswipe (\$13) mixes Del Maguey Vida, Ancho Reyes chili liqueur, agave nectar, and pineapple and lemon juices. Schroeder’s Unknown Death (\$10) at Mezcaleria Las Flores features Wahaka Joven Espadín mezcal, Montenegro amaro, Ancho Reyes, Tempus Fugit Crème de Noyaux almond liqueur, fresh lemon juice and simple syrup.

New York City bar Abajo at Añejo Tribeca also pairs spicy ingredients with mezcal in head bartender Will Aporih’s Feel the Burn (\$14). The drink features El Buho mezcal, jalapeño-infused Cointreau orange liqueur, lemon juice, simple syrup, house-made cucumber-basil solution and shishito pepper, served in a wasabi salt-rimmed glass.

“This new golden age of cocktails has been driven by a search for authenticity,” says ABV’s Fitzgerald. “This is perfect timing for mezcal. There was a Tequila boom and everyone fell in love with it, in turn whetting bartenders’ and consumers’ appetites for something even more artisanal and authentic. Nothing fits this bill more than mezcal.”

Cachaça’s Role

Just as interest in Tequila expanded to include mezcal, the popularity of rum has allowed another spirit to enter the mainstream: cachaça. Tyler Ott, beverage director at Ox & Son in Santa Monica, California, predicts a bright future for cachaça thanks largely to this year’s Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. “We’re going to see cachaça, the national spirit of Brazil, become much more popular,” he says. “Its smoky and vegetal notes differ from rum, making it great in cocktails.”



Unaged mezcals pair well with fortified wines. The Mexicali Blues at ABV in San Francisco blends mezcal with vermouth and citrus.

Cachaça's signature cocktail, the Caipirinha—which mixes the spirit with muddled lime and sugar—is still the most popular way to enjoy it. Jim Romdall, bar manager at Rumba in Seattle, offers this classic drink made with Novo Fogo Silver cachaça for \$11. He notes that twists on the Caipirinha that use other fresh fruits and ingredients are also trending. At La Défense in Brooklyn, New York, the Hibiscus Caipirinha (\$10) blends Leblon cachaça with lime juice and house-made hibiscus tea syrup.

Romdall adds that because of the increasing range of cachaça expressions now available, the spirit is starting to be used more experimentally. “The difference between aged and unaged cachaça is like night and day—there’s a wide array of cocktail styles depending on which cachaça you use,” he explains. Romdall touts the Brazilian spirit as a replacement for whisk(e)y in spirits-forward drinks. His Tanagerac (\$12) is a twist on the Sazerac, featuring Novo Fogo Tanager aged cachaça, simple syrup, Scrappy’s Orleans bitters and Angostura bitters, served in a Pacificque absinthe-rinsed glass. At the other end of the flavor spectrum, Romdall uses Novo Fogo Silver cachaça, coconut milk, Auntie Lilikoi passion fruit syrup and lime juice in his fruity and sweet Batida (\$12).

“With all the exciting new production methods for cachaça, we’re starting to see numerous different styles of cocktails that move the category beyond the Caipirinha,” says Lermayer of Sweet Liberty. His Bamboleo (\$13) comprises Leblon cachaça, Lustau Solera Reserva brandy, Small Hand Foods orgeat syrup, lemon juice and fresh mint. At Leyenda, meanwhile, Mix’s Shadow Boxer (\$13) blends Yaguara cachaça with Campari aperitif, Dolin Blanc, Blume Marillen Apricot eau de vie and Giffard Crème de Pamplemousse Rose.



A variation on the Sazerac, the Tanagerac at Seattle-based Rumba substitutes rye whiskey for Novo Fogo Tanager cachaça. Aged varieties of the Brazilian spirit can replace whiskey in many cocktails.

Pride Of Peru

Like cachaça, Pisco—a Peruvian spirit distilled from grapes—has gained a higher profile in recent years. “Pisco has been making its way into more cocktails,” says Pamela Wiznitzer, creative director at New York City bar Seamstress. Her Carmen cocktail (\$14) blends Portón Mosto Verde Pisco with Tissot Crémant du Jura Extra Brut sparkling wine, Nardini Acqua di Cedro citron liqueur, fresh lemon juice, simple syrup, basil and Regans’ No. 6 orange bitters, while her Promised Land (\$14) mixes Portón Mosto Verde, Pama pomegranate liqueur, Sandeman Tawny Port, lemon juice and Bonne Maman fig preserves.

Latin American Spirits–Based Cocktail Recipes

TIA MIA By Ivy Mix

Ingredients:

1 ounce Del Maguey Vida mezcal;
1 ounce Appleton Estate Signature Blend rum;
½ ounce Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao liqueur;
½ ounce Orgeat Works T’Orgeat toasted almond syrup;
¾ ounce lime juice;
Orchid flower;
Mint sprig;
Lime wheel.

Recipe:

Combine mezcal, rum, liqueur, syrup and lime juice in an ice-filled cocktail shaker. Shake and strain into a rocks glass over crushed ice. Garnish with an orchid flower, mint sprig and lime wheel.

TANAGERAC By Jim Romdall

Ingredients:

2 ounces Novo Fogo Tanager cachaça;
Pacificque absinthe rinse;
2 dashes Scrappy’s Orleans bitters;
2 dashes Angostura bitters;
¼ ounce simple syrup;
Lemon peel.

Recipe:

Rinse a rocks glass with absinthe. In an ice-filled cocktail glass, combine cachaça, bitters and syrup and stir. Strain into the absinthe-rinsed rocks glass. Express the lemon peel along the rim of the glass and use the peel as a garnish.

CARMEN By Pamela Wiznitzer

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Portón Mosto Verde Pisco;
2 ounces Tissot Crémant du Jura Extra Brut sparkling wine;
¾ ounce Nardini Acqua di Cedro citron liqueur;
¾ ounce fresh lemon juice;
¾ ounce simple syrup;
4-5 sprigs of basil, plus more for garnish;
Regans’ No. 6 orange bitters.

Recipe:

Combine Pisco, liqueur, lemon juice, simple syrup, bitters and basil in an ice-filled cocktail shaker. Shake and pour contents into a Champagne flute. Top with sparkling wine and garnish with a sprig of basil.



The Carmen cocktail (left) at Seamstress in New York City blends Pisco with sparkling wine and citron liqueur. Many consumers discover Latin spirits through twists on classics like the Hibiscus Caipirinha (right) at La Défense in Brooklyn, New York.

“Most Pisco cocktails feature citrus, effervescence, fruits and herbs, leaning toward the classic Pisco Sour,” Wiznitzer notes. Mix’s Buena Onda (\$12) at Leyenda is a twist on the Pisco Sour comprising yerba mate–infused Kappa Pisco, simple syrup, egg white, lemon and lime juices, and Bittermens Hopped Grapefruit bitters. At the Chicago bar Tanta, the Pisco Sour (\$12) features Barsol Quebranta Pisco, lime juice, sugar, egg white and Amargo Chunchu bitters. The Miami restaurant Pisco y Nazca offers numerous Pisco cocktails, many of which are classic recipes with head mixologist Joel Mesa’s own unique twists. His Pisco Punch (\$11) features Cuatro Gallos Quebranta Pisco, lime juice, house-made pineapple-papaya-clove syrup, Inca Kola lemon verbena soda and cayenne pepper.

“Bargoers are really interested in different, unique spirits,” Wiznitzer says. “They want to drink cocktails from the 1800s and find new flavors. Pisco was extremely popular in the States during the Gold Rush. Modern drinkers want to try these kinds of cocktails to understand where recipes came from and how they’re developing now.”

Rising Stars

Lynette Marrero, beverage director at Llama Inn in Brooklyn, New York, notes that grape-based spirits from South America are gaining traction with consumers. “Exotic cuisine and spirits are becoming more popular, and people are more willing to try Pisco and now singani,” she says. Singani is a 500-year-old eau-de-vie–style spirit that’s produced only in Bolivia, and film director Steven Soderbergh began importing his own brand, Singani 63, to the United States in 2014. “Singani 63 is a beautiful expression of the Muscat of Alexandria grape: floral, aromatic, clean and distinct,” Marrero explains. “It shines in delicate, spirituous cocktails. As with gin, its aromatics are to be enhanced, not drowned in heavy flavors.” Her Bolivian Marching Punch (\$13) mixes Singani 63 with Raventós Rosé Cava, house-made muña syrup, and lemon and grapefruit juices.

More than 40 New York City bars now carry Singani 63. At PDT, the All That Jasmine (\$15) blends Singani 63 with Plymouth and Averell Damson gins, house-made jasmine tea syrup, lemon juice, and egg white. At Bâtard, the Bajan Punch (\$24 for two single servings) mixes Singani 63 with Dzama Rhum, Giffard Crème de Pamplemousse Rose and Buddha’s hand fruit. At The Garret West, the Refinery 63 (\$14) comprises Singani 63, Fidencio Clásico mezcal, Bittermens Tapache spiced pineapple liqueur, house-made passion fruit syrup and lime juice.

Just as familiarity with Pisco has helped singani come into the spotlight, mezcal’s popularity has boosted other agave-based spirits, namely sotol. “Made from the plant of the same name in Chihuahua, Mexico, sotol is a smooth, creamy spirit that often has hints of smoke and vanilla,” says Ox & Son’s Ott.

Schroeder notes that when Mezcaleria Las Flores first opened, he expected the Tequila and mezcal cocktails to be the most popular, but those weren’t the only spirits getting attention. “Even more far-flung agave spirits have done very well,” he says. “Our No.-2 seller is a sotol drink.” The Magnetic Pole Reversal (\$10) features Sotol Por Siempre, Suze bitter liqueur, house-made cucumber-coriander purée, simple syrup and fresh lime juice.

At Leyenda, bartender Shannon Ponche’s sotol-based cocktail is quite popular. Called the Witching Hour (\$13), it blends Sotol Por Siempre, Von Humboldt’s Natur Wasser tamarind liqueur, Orgeat Works T’Orgeat, Dolin Blanc, lemon juice and Bittermens Celery bitters. At Death & Co. in New York City, the Freudian Slip (\$15) features Sotol Por Siempre, J. Wray & Nephew White Overproof rum, Calle 23 Blanco Tequila, Dolin Blanc, Giffard Banane de Brésil banana liqueur and jalapeño. “As Tequila and mezcal have gone mainstream, sotol is becoming a staple on cocktail menus,” Ott says. Indeed, as mixologists continue to dig deeper into the Latin American spirits category, more exciting new cocktails are sure to surface. **mw**

Sally Kral is an Ithaca, New York–based freelance writer.