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Straight out of Brazil

The caipirinha has tongues wagging across the land | BY KELLY E. CARTER

Move over mojitos. Caipirinhas, like all things Brazilian, are taking over. It isn't enough that Brazilian models seem to have taken Victoria Secret hostage or that Brazil's soccer team is routinely one of the best in the world. Now the South American country is demanding attention in the spirits category as well.

The caipirinha (kai-pee-reen-yah), the national drink of Brazil, is the latest craze at upscale bars and restaurants from Miami to New York to San Francisco, and even in Europe.

"Caipirinhas are huge because Latin flavors are hot right now," says Naren Young, a cocktail specialist in New York City. "The mojito has been a juggernaut over the last five years but, as with everything, people are now looking for something else but still with a sexy exotic edge. The caipirinha fits that image perfectly."

Brazilians have been enjoying them on the beaches in Rio and Sao Paulo state for decades, but the cocktail really became popular during the heyday of music great Jobim and bossa nova in the 1950s and '60s. What's in a caipirinha? Mainly *cachaça* (ka-SHA-sa), the Brazilian rum-like spirit made from fresh sugar cane, plus muddled lime wedges and sugar.

"The beauty of the caipirinha, however, lies in its simplicity. It may only have three ingredients, but the art lies in balancing those three ingredients so neither the sweet, strong or sour dominate," Young says.

In this case, the strong refers to the *cachaça*, which dates back to the 1500s when sugar mill workers and slaves drank it. The refined turned up their noses at the spirit, much as most people would the lowest form of tequila. But over the years *cachaça* has improved greatly. Sure, Brazilians still use the cheapest versions as fuel for their cars, but for the most part today's *cachaça* is aged longer and is more palate-pleasing than the harsh, fire-water brands that turned off consumers years ago. Now *cachaça*, like so many other products, has gone upscale with premium brands such as Leblon, which is distilled and fermented in Brazil then aged three months in vintage cognac barrels in France; Mãe de Ouro, which is

aged in oak for one year; and Agua Luca, which is filtered 12 times. All typically retail for \$22 to \$30.

A testament to *cachaça*'s growth was evident at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, which drew 700 spirits from 52 countries in March. While only three *cachaça* were entered in 2006, this year saw 15 entries "and they were really good," says executive director Anthony Dias Blue. "Nine of them got very high medals. The caipirinha is leading *cachaça* into the market."

At hot spots like the W Hotel's NineThirty in Los Angeles, Evolution at the Ritz-Carlton in South Beach and Auerole in New York, bar chefs and master mixologists concoct yummy *cachaça*-infused cocktails that sometimes previously called for vodka, tequila or rum. "The great thing about the caipirinha is that it's so versatile and works with so many different flavors," says Young, whose favorites are spiced mandarin, dark cherry, kumquat/saffron and mango/chili.

"All very simple to make," he says, "but so complex on the palate."

Cheers!

Caipirinha Recipe

- 2 oz. of Leblon cachaca (or another brand)
- 1 lime
- 1 1/2 - 2 tbsp superfine sugar or simple syrup (to taste)

Slice the lime into thin slices. Place in a 10 oz. rocks glass and add sugar on top. Muddle well with a muddler (or something suitable). Fill the glass with ice, then *cachaca*. Stir for about 10 seconds (important) OR shake. Garnish with a lime slice and a cocktail straw.

(recipe courtesy of Leblon)

