

# The Case for Cachaça

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Why do we  
need to make  
“the case” for  
cachaça?

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## Why?

- Cachaça is often misunderstood, mispronounced, and under appreciated
- It is one of the most produced spirits in the world
- It has an extensive history that may predate New World rum
- It is NOT rum (though it is similar)
- It is not just for Caipirinhas

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## Defining Cachaça

Cachaça is a sugarcane-based spirit, made exclusively in Brazil. It must be bottled between 38%-48% ABV and may not contain more than six grams of sugar per liter.

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# Pronouncing Cachaça

## **Ka-sha-se**

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MOULIN À SUCRE.

Making the Case:  
History

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## Making the Case: The History

- First European explorers land in Brazil around 1498
- Portugal claims the land upon the arrival of Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500
- Colonial interest was low until the mid 1500s until land in Brazil was used to reward Portuguese nobles
- Changing markets in Europe would drive further development

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## Making the Case: The History

- Sugar accounted for over 90% of Portugal's exports
  - The market for sugar in Europe exploded and demand was rampant
- The Portuguese relied at first on indigenous populations for slave labor
  - Government approved *bandeirantes* hunted and captured native peoples
- By the mid 1600s, enslaved Africans became the main source of labor
- Cachaça became a byproduct of this industry and was used to supplement enslaved worker's diets
  - Upper classes considered it rough and despicable
- Portugal attempts to ban the production of cachaça in 1646, but this is largely ignored so a tax is ultimately levied

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16<sup>th</sup> Century Engenho

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## Making the Case: The History

- By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sugar market declines
  - Mining for gold and precious metals overtakes interest in sugar
  - Caribbean sugar production surges
- In 1822 Brazil gains independence after three centuries of Portuguese rule
  - Cachaça, long the drink of the working and peasant classes, becomes intrinsically linked to Brazilian national identity
- Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, outsiders describe cachaça as an “inferior rum”

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## Making the Case: Production, Styles, and Aging

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## Making the Case: Production

- Fresh pressed sugar cane juice is fermented for up to a week
  - Juice is pressed within 24 hours of cane harvest
  - Cachaça refers to the foam that formed on boiling sugar cane
  - Yeast is typically naturally occurring (within the sugarcane juice) but some distillers use their own cultivated yeast strains
- Artisanal distillation occurs via copper pot stills, usually traditional Portuguese pot still
  - Bubble plates in the stills allows for distillation to occur in a single run
- Industrial distillation occurs via large column still
- Unknown number of distilleries in Brazil (at least several thousands)
- Production tops **one billion** liters a year

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## Making the Case: Production



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## Making the Case: Styles

- **Industrial cachaça**
  - Mass produced at large facilities via column stills
- **Artisinal cachaça**
  - Produced in traditional pot stills
- *Adoçada* – sweetened with 6-30 g/l sugar
- *Envelhecida* – 50% wood aged
- *Premium* – 100% wood aged (minimum 1 year)
- *Extra Premium* – 100% wood aged (minimum 3 years)

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## Making the Case: Aging

- Cachaça is typically rested in stainless steel contains or neutral wood barrels
- Aged artisanal variations use imported oak or indigenous hardwoods
- Brazilian hardwoods include *amburana*, *jquitiba*, *ipe*, canarywood, *grapia*, and others.
- Various hardwoods impart different flavors (such as cherry) and color to the aged spirit
- Various sizes of barrel may be used

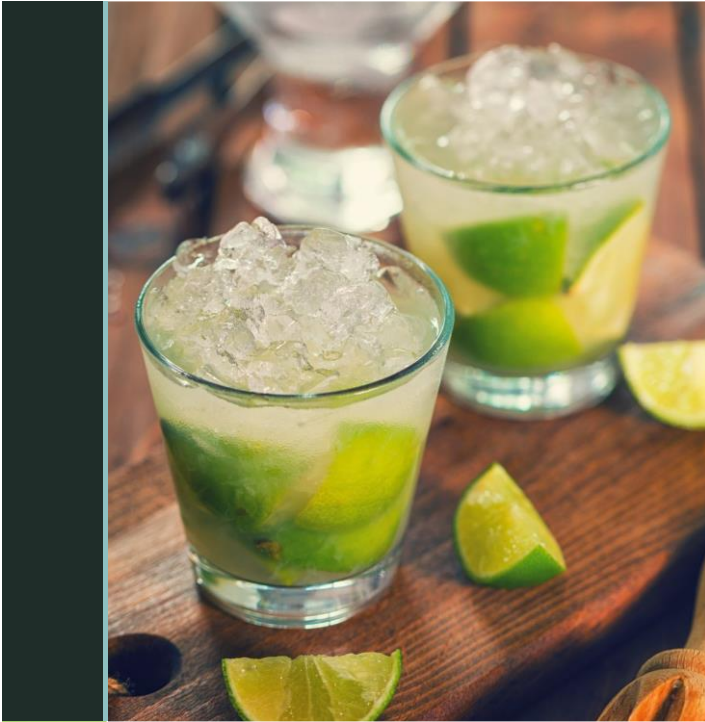
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## Making the Case: Aging



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## Making the Case: Uniqueness

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## Not Rum?



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## Making the Case: Uniqueness

- Flavors and aromatics are distinct owing to the use of fresh cane juice
  - Grassier, fruitier, and lighter than most rums
- Majority of rums are produced from molasses
- It has more in common with *Clairin*, however it does not contain the spiritual component that *clairin* has in Haiti
- Flavor profile is excellent for cocktails and the spirit stands out against syrups and juices

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## Caipirinha



Kai-per-eeen-yah

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## Making the Case: Beyond Caipirinhas

- Cachaça can be as versatile as rum in cocktails
- Lighter, unaged cachaças pair exceptionally well with fresh juices and citrus
  - Swap Bacardi with Leblon in a daiquiri and you'll get beautiful floral notes buttressed by lime and sugar
- Aged cachaças can be used in more spirit and bitter forward cocktails
  - A Brazilian Old Fashioned replaces bourbon with premium or extra premium cachaça

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Making the Case:  
Environmental  
Importance

## Making the Case: Environmental Importance

- Cachaça's use of native hardwoods links the future of the industry to the future of the environment
- Deforestation, over clearing, and over logging not only threatens native species and biodiversity, but the ability to age cachaça in a traditional manner
- This has reached record levels in the past five years affecting both the Amazon Rainforest and the Atlantic Forest

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## Environmental Importance



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## Making the Case: Environmental Importance

- Producers like Novo Fogo are leading true sustainability efforts investing millions in planting native hardwood trees
- “The Un-Endangered Forest” project was started by Novo Fogo in 2018
- Other producers, such as Cana and Avua, have joined in these efforts as well

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## Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

- Typical consumers have no idea what it is
  - Portuguese can be intimidating to English speakers
- Lack of concerted marketing
  - Most marketing in US is driven by individual producers with designs on expanding exports
- Market availability
  - 99% of cachaça production is consumed within Brazil
  - Of the 1% exported, 90% goes to Europe
  - Less than .1% of the total cachaça production is imported to the US
  - Total exports to USA typically total around \$10 million (Scotch tops out over \$1.5 billion)

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So What is the Case  
for Cachaça?

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# The Case

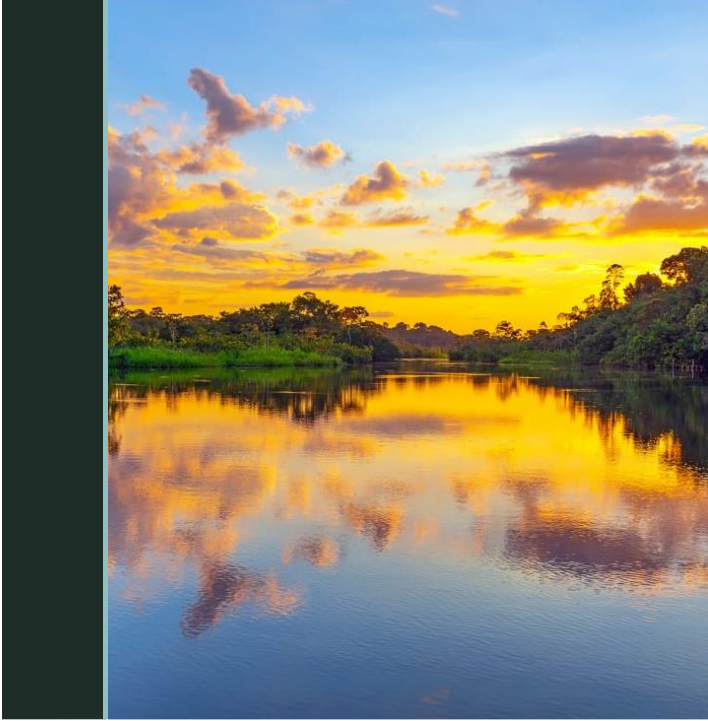
- Exceptionally long history
- Directly linked to the state of the environment in Brazil
- Distinct flavors and aromas allow it stand apart from other spirits
- Unique aging imparts a true sense of place
- Inexpensive
  - Not a cost-prohibitive category to try out
- Refreshing to drink or use in cocktails
  - Not just caipirinhas!

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## The Case for Cachaça: Sources, Resources, and Further Reading

- You Know Rum – But What is Cachaça? By Natasha Gelling, Smithsonian Magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/you-know-rum-what-cachaca-180951700/>
- The Oxford Companion to Spirits and Cocktails edited by David Wondrich with Noah Rothbaum, 2023 (cachaça entry by Frederick H. Smith)
- Certified Specialist of Spirits Study Guide written by Jane A. Nickles, 2023
- Novo Fogo The Un-Endangered Forest—project provides breakdown of woods used for aging and reforestation efforts led by Novo Fogo: <https://novofogo.com/about/trees/>
- 20 best Cachaça cocktails Difford's Guide: <https://www.diffordsguide.com/encyclopedia/433/cocktails/20-best-cachaca-cocktails>
- 10 Fiery Cachaça Brands For Sipping & Caipirinha's partial list of brands available in the US (in certain markets): <https://drinksgeek.com/best-cachaca-brands/>

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Adeus!