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Why You Should Explore The World Of Peruvian Pisco

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Spirits
I write about wines and spirits and the hidden corners of the world

A selection of premium Peruvian Pisco in a Lima supermarket
PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

Pisco is the national spirit of Peru. Historically, it was an unaged, clear grape brandy. It was first produced about 400 years ago in the Ica Valley south of Lima. That makes it the oldest grape-based distillate in the Americas.

Peruvian Pisco must be produced from any combination of eight grape varieties grown in five specific regions of the country. A similar beverage called Singani is produced in Bolivia. Chile also produces a sprit called Pisco, although its production process is slightly different.

Technically, Pisco is a type of grape brandy. It differs significantly from other brandies, however, both in how it is produced and in its unique aroma and taste profile.

Pisco has a surprisingly long history in the United States. During the California gold rush, ships going around Cape Horn would stop in Lima to pick up supplies. The prospectors brought Pisco with them to San Francisco where, until Prohibition, it was one of San Francisco's best-selling spirits. The Pisco Punch was the city's signature cocktail.

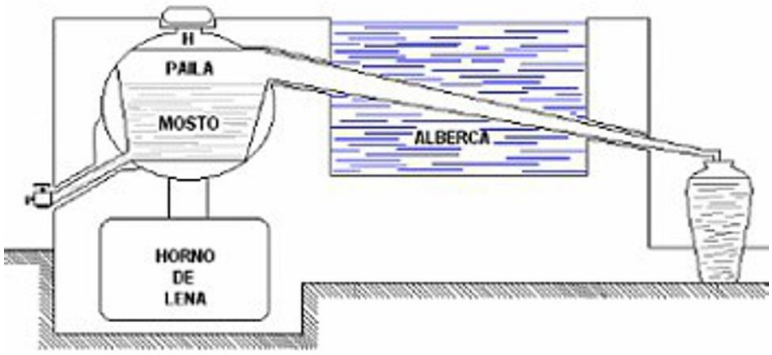
Recently I sat down with Jose "Pepe" Moquillaza (JPM), one of Peru's best known Pisco producers and former Director General of the Pisco regulatory agency, the Consejo Regulador D.O. Pisco, to talk about Pisco, its origins and its production.

JM: Why does Pisco taste differently from most brandies?

JPM: The olfactory and taste compounds in Pisco are very different from those found in brandy.
First of all, historically Pisco was produced without the use of wood aging.
A second, important factor, is the use of a Falca as opposed to a Alambique for distillation. The Alambique or pot-still system permits reflux/rectification, the redistillation of the spirit that condenses in the neck of the still. This creates a lighter spirit, and also eliminates some of the flavor and aroma compounds in the distillate.

Jose "Pepe" Moquillaza
PHOTO, COURTESY JOSE "PEPE" MOQUILLAZA

The Falca cannot rectify. A greater proportion of the flavor compounds are retained in the final distillate.



A traditional falca used to distill Peruvian Pisco

DIAGRAM, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

Moreover, the Falca can be difficult to use at higher elevations. At lower atmospheric pressures, the boiling point of the must changes so you need a different distillation protocol. Otherwise, given that it lacks a neck, at higher altitudes the distillate is prone to foaming and spills over into the condenser.
There are other significant differences:
The alcohol grade of Pisco is not changed by adding "reducing water." It's bottled at the same strength it comes from the still.
Pisco is only distilled once in a Falca. Most brandies are distilled in a column still. Cognac is distilled twice in a pot still.
Brandy can use any type of must, stabilized, chilled, etc. Pisco must use fresh must and natural/wild yeasts. The use of dry/commercial yeast is not permitted.

Grapes intended for Pisco production grow in small 5–8-acre parcels. Small producers dominate. Some sell the fruit; others process their fruit into must/Pisco. A few large producers have 500 or more acres of vineyards and are vertically integrated. The largest Peruvian distiller, however, does not produce more than a million 750 ml bottles.

There's no clonal selection, nor uniformity in the vineyards. Ungrafted rootstocks are the norm. Rootstocks/varieties have not been classified nor researched.

A vineyard in Peru where grapes intended for Pisco production are grown. The wood is intended to heat the falca used for distillation

PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

Fields are generally gravity irrigated using runoff from the Andes. The Peruvian coast is largely desert and has no significant rainfall. The desert climate keeps the disease pressure low and minimizes pesticide use. The official production zone runs from Lima to Tacna. Soils vary considerably, and so do the Piscos they produce.

JM: Historically Pisco was unaged, but aged varieties are becoming more common. When did aged Piscos start and how does aging modify the flavor of Pisco?

JPM: Traditionally, some Pisco was aged depending on the maker's perspective of taste, but this was not stated on the label. In the last century, it could be aged in the haciendas for up to 2-3 years, blended if necessary, and labeled with the actual year of bottling.

Bear in mind, however, that aging would have been in steel, plastic containers, concrete vats or clay *tinajas*, large, 500-liter capacity clay vessels interred in the ground. Historically, Pisco was not aged in wood. However, that has changed in the last decade, as there are some producers aging certain Piscos in barrels, following the Chilean lead.

After the 1990s, a new packaging norm "minimum 90 days aging before bottling" became the rule, and most industrial producers complied. However, that's the minimum. There are no other designations for the length of aging, like XO in Cognac or Añejo in Tequila.

Pisco's development, what I refer to as its "molecular integration," typically peaks at two-years of age. That's when the markers of freshness, floral, and fruitiness are at their peak.
Continued aging makes volatile compounds evaporate/change and makes the spirit dryer on the palate. Secondary aromas of dried fruits and grains develop and the spirit becomes smoother and more nuanced.

Amphora-like clay vessels used to hold Pisco while it is maturing.

PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

After 6-7 years of aging, you obtain further silkiness and complexity. After 10 years, it is breathtaking. We bottle our piscos over 10 years, and *mosto verdes* over 6 years. The results are impressive. You do not drink; you kiss the glass.

JM: There are 8 grape varieties used to make Pisco. Most of these varieties are of Spanish origin. They have been grown in South America for centuries and have undoubtedly evolved over the years. Can you make Pisco with any grape variety or is there something about these specific varieties that give Pisco its special character?

JPM: The accepted varieties have great sugar concentration resulting in more alcohol. The grapes are white or gray, no red grapes are used.

A traditional Pisco distillery in Peru

PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

The original colonial imports were Negra Criolla (Listan Prieto) and Mollar Cano/ Mollar. Quebranta was a cross of these two varieties. Albilla is the Palomino Fino from Jerez (Listan blanco), which reached us from the Canary Islands. Our Muscat came from Malaga, Spain, and is characterized by higher acidity. Italia came in the late 19th Century. Torontel came in the 20th century from Spain and Torontes via Argentina. Both varieties have the same ultimate origin. Our Moscatel is

believed to be Moscato Rosso or Hamburg, but this has not been confirmed yet. Uvina may have come from France.

Quebranta, Negra Criolla, Uvina and Mollar are considered “non-aromatic” while Italia, Torontel, Moscatel, and Albilla are considered aromatic. However, all Piscos had a profound aroma profile regardless of the designation of the grapes.
Some industrial producers use some Red Globe grapes to make “Pisco” or to increase their blending volume. The cost per kilo is much lower. This allows them to compete based on cost in bars. These types of Pisco are mostly used for cocktail purposes (pisco sour, chilcano). These Piscos will not hold up when tasted neat. The taste profile is quite different.

As a rule, Pisco-type beverages made from grape varieties other then the eight designated above will lack the aroma and flavor complexity typical of Pisco.

JM: The origins of Pisco have been hotly contested between Peru and Chile. What’s a Peruvian perspective on Chile’s claim to have developed Pisco?

JPM: The port of Pisco was founded in 1572 as the city of Santa Maria, Magdalena de Pisco by Spanish missionaries. They kept the original quechua name of Pisco and added a Saint’s name. Whereas the town Pisco-Elqui in Chile changed its name from La Union several centuries later.
After the end of Prohibition, the West Coast market wanted to again import Peruvian Pisco.

Mollar vines in Socsi vineyard, Lunahuaná valley, Peru

PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

Chilean producers wanted part of the Peruvian business but couldn’t comply with the USA requirements of origin and were turned down. A Chilean political leader, Gabriel Gonzalez Videla, who later became president, officially changed the town’s name on February 1st, 1936, - with the intention that “the

Chilean liquor would be considered “native” to Chile and be exported to the world without any legal problems.”
There is no question, however, that Pisco originated in Peru. According to the historical record, Francisco de Caravantes brought grape vines to Peru in 1543. In the desert climate of the Southern coast the vines produced very high levels of sugar. The resulting wines were not acceptable, so they tried to produce liquor. The “Aguardiente de las Indias” was transported to Spain in ceramic containers. This was the forerunner of Pisco.
There are records dating back to the 16th century, both in Peru and in Seville (Archivo de Indias), which mention these exports long before there is any mention of spirits produced in Chile.

JM: Are there any other South American countries that produce Pisco? How is Chilean Pisco different from Peruvian Pisco?

JPM: There are no other countries that produce Pisco. The *denominazioni* di origine (DO) for Pisco is exclusive to Peru.
Bolivia produces Singani. It’s similar to Pisco and uses a comparable production process. Chile uses pressed wine, pomace and skins, not free flowing juice - sort of like Grappa or Orujo - to produce their version of Pisco.

JM: What foods does Pisco best pair with?

JPM: Most high alcohol spirit is difficult to marry with food. Pisco works well at the end of a meal, or it can be had as an aperitif or cocktail. It also works well when cooking. I believe it is a spirit for important moments, it should be integrated into your life more than with your food and merits its own space.

JM: What Piscos would you recommend to a North American consumer to best illustrate the diversity of styles in Pisco?

JPM: First of all, you should taste specific grape varietal versions of Pisco neat. Then the “acholados” or blended Piscos. Reserve the “mosto verde” until you are familiar with the previous styles. It’s like playing chess with different levels of practice.
For Pisco, you distill a “dry” must (young wine) and for “mosto verde” you distill a “semi-dry” or “semi-sweet” must.

Mosto verde is a type of Pisco where the fermentation is stopped prior to “full” fermentation of the must or peak alcohol content. Therefore, the alcohol of the final distillation is lower, generally around 36°, instead of 40-42°.

A 10 YO Pisco made from Quebranta grapes.

PHOTO, COURTESY DANIEL RUZO

You should try Porton and La Caravedo - both are high quality products. Ocucaje, Queirolo (Intipalka), Tabernero and Tacama are industrial-scale producers, with the latter holding a technological/quality lead.

Intipalka is the premium line of wines and Pisco from the Queirolo family. They have invested heavily in the Pisco industry over the last two decades. The Barsol line is a Peruvian Pisco - owned by Chilean interests, and they bundle it with other Chilean spirits.

JM: Thank you.

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