

Ricardo Luiz de Souza

Caipirinha, that is, cachaça, Lime and Sugar:

A brief story of a relationship

*C*achaça, lime and sugar. When we talk about the history of Caipirinha, we are talking about the history of the relationship between these three ingredients, a successful, long-lasting relationship that has a legion of admirers. And to tell this story, let us go back in time and, briefly, recall the history of Cachaça and sugar.

Where do they come from? Sugarcane was originated in the South Pacific, and then was taken over a route to India, where, for the first time, five centuries before Christ, sugar would be extracted from it. From India, it migrated to the Middle East, region where the first routes connected to this product were created. From there, sugarcane arrived in the Mediterranean and was

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cultivated almost a thousand years later, in the Canary Islands and in the Atlantic. From these islands it was transported to Brazil, where it transformed northeastern region into the kingdom of sugarcane. From the 16th century on, it became the main export product of the colony.

Cachaça was created in the first decades of colonization, in the province of São Vicente, where the state of São Paulo is today. At the end of the 16th century, eight mills dedicated to its production were registered. Initially, the beverage did not have a high economic value and was made in secret by the slaves, because their masters did not like to see them drinking it. As such it continued until it became part of the popular preference – including the masters – and was, finally, transformed into an export product, included in the trade routes that involved slave traffic, since it had enormous acceptance in Africa.

The term for cachaça, “*pinga*” (drip), originated from the vapor produced by the slow process necessary to ferment the liquid, which condensed on the roof as it went up and dripped. The *pinga* would hurt when it fell on the slaves,

giving origin to another name for it: *aguardente* (junction of the words *água* – water – and *ardente* – that burns). This hypothesis is disputed, however, since the beverage that was produced by distillation was called by the European alchemists, in the 12th century, *aqua ardens*.

Still in the colonial period, there was a differentiation between the imported beverage and the national one. The distilled imported beverage from Portugal was called “*bagaceira*”, and Cachaça was the beverage produced in Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. “*Cachaceiro*” meant at the time just the trader of the beverage and later on became a term for a drunkard. The term “Cachaça” is, by the way, specifically Brazilian. Câmara Cascudo, an expert on this subject, not only guaranteed the inexistence of the word in Brazil, but also affirmed he had never heard the word in Portugal. In Spanish, on the other hand, Cachaça is a type of lee wine.

The beverage rapidly became popular and spread out through the whole country as it was being populated. In Minas Gerais – land of gold, diamond and cold weather –, Cachaça found a fertile soil for its production and consumption. The *inconfidentes* even elected it as a sort of national beverage, a symbol of the Brazilians, to be consumed instead of Portuguese wine, considered the beverage of despots. Domingos Xavier, for example, one of the leaders of the Rebellion, owned a distillery and satiated the participants of its meetings with Cachaça from his own production. And, going a bit further in time, we can recall that the revolutionaries of 1817 in Pernambuco also wanted to transform Cachaça into a national symbol, as a response to one more attempt from the obstinate Portuguese to forbid it.

In this sense, the beverage was used to baptize the Port of Paraty, and *pinga* became its synonym. Or was it Paraty that baptized the



*Caipirinha.
Rio Convention & Visitors Bureau (Embratur)*

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Cachaça? The order of the factors is not so important. The fact is that distilleries were built around the port by the Portuguese. The Caminho Novo (New Trail), connection between Minas Gerais and the sea, facilitated the ascension of Cachaça to the mountains, which already had several distilleries and small Cachaça mills that proliferated as a symbol of more sophisticated Cachaças. Production soon spread throughout the province of Rio de Janeiro, reaching Campos dos Goitacases, a traditional sugar producer. The beverage was so important that the region became a stage for the Cachaça Revolt, in 1660, when rebels took over and governed the city of Rio de Janeiro for five months, protesting against the prohibition of producing and selling *aguardente*.

Cachaça was normally produced in small mills – called *engenhocas* – and its consumption was predominantly linked to the lower classes of the colonial population. In Minas Gerais, for example, the large production of *aguardente* in the 18th century was due to the consumer market of gold mining communities, but another determinant factor was the unique location of the mills in Minas Gerais: with no access to the external market, they specialized their production in small scale local trade.

After the Independence, a continuous productive cycle was maintained, which has turned Minas into the major center of production. Therefore, the existence of *engenhocas* in the interior of Minas Gerais was attested by several people who traveled throughout the region during the 19th century. Richard Burton mentioned the existence of one of them in Jaboticatubas, and Count Castelnau mentioned another one near Juiz de Fora. Saint-Hilaire defined cachaça as “the country’s distilled beverage”.

Thus, like tobacco, cachaça became a trading commodity in slave traffic, including the product in an economic circuit that went beyond the domestic level, turning many *engenhoca* owners that produced *aguardante* to foreign trade.

Nevertheless, a dichotomy was created. The large sugar mills were directed to the foreign market and *engenhocas* – mostly illegal and lacking the appropriate machinery to produce sugar and the money to purchase them – dedicated themselves to the production of hard raw sugar and cachaça, products aimed mainly for the internal market.

It is worth mentioning that cachaça and wine were not the only alcoholic habits of the colonial period. For example, *aluá* – African name for a fermented beverage of corn of indigenous origin – was popular. And even the consumption of cachaça developed some varieties like the *cachimbo* or *meladinha*, cachaça with honey.

Alcoholic beverages were also consumed as medication on several occasions. It could be used as a fortifier, if taken in the morning or in situations that required a large physical effort, or as a protection for the organism, in specific situations.

Economically, cachaça was considered a less noble product than sugar, because it was aimed, predominantly, for local consumption

and, when exported, its destination was Africa, not reaching the desired European market. Although not very noble, it withstood in the market and became increasingly popular.

As for the relationship between cachaça and wine, in the colonial period, another dichotomy was created that still exists in the alcoholic habits of Brazilians. Wine was served at parties and traditions, like the *coreto*, festive gatherings where the salutations were sung accompanied by drinking. Thus, it is a beverage traditionally related to solemn occasions and to the elite, contrary to cachaça; altar wine became, in this sense, a proverbial expression.

From then on, cachaça became an uncomfortable competitor for Portuguese wine, encouraging the Crown to forbid its production. The first measure to forbid it dates back to 1639, which is clear evidence of the popularity of the beverage. However, such measure was not successful. Sensing that the prohibition would never be enforced, the Portuguese Crown preferred to give in to the enemy and explore it through several taxes, such as the tax created to help rebuild Lisbon after it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1765 and the literary subsidies created, in Minas Gerais, to finance the payment of royal professors.

The beverage was later recognized as a fortifier and, even more, was considered a vital food for the slaves, which fact was acknowledged even in reports written by employees of the Crown. Thus, cachaça and its varieties, such as the *pinga* with lime and honey, were used from very early on as a sure medication for the cold and the flu, following the rooted popular custom and the popular pharmacopoeia that, from the beginning, conveyed to the beverage – consumed of course in small doses – therapeutic functions.

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In relation to caipirinha, it originated when the slaves, these great inventors and tasters of Brazilian cuisine, decided to mix cachaça with fruit juices that, like lime, were completely ignored by the white elite. It had as a predecessor the lime *batida* (drink), also of slave origin, and became complete when they added sugar and lime peel. However, the origin of the term “caipirinha” is still unknown. There is no historical connection between its consumption and the *caipira* himself, inhabitant of the interior of Brazil, traditionally associated with the regions of Minas Gerais and São Paulo.

Nor is it known where the habit of making *batidas* with cachaça was originated, caipirinha being only one among many, although it is the most famous and, undoubtedly, the most characteristic one of Brazil. Coconut, cashew and passion fruit are also used, besides other varieties like *leite de onça*, made from cachaça and cocoa cream. All these drinks have predecessors, like *jinjibirra*, made with sugarcane juice and fruits, nicknamed “beer of the poor” and found in the



Aged cachacas. Christian Knepper (Embratur)

Northeast until the beginning of the 19th century. In Minas Gerais, in the same way, the consumption of a punch made with cachaça, bitter orange and sugar became popular.

What is, after all, a caipirinha? According to the definition in the Decree N° 4.800, of 2003, it is a “typical Brazilian beverage, with alcoholic level of fifteen to thirty-six per cent in volume, at twenty degrees Celsius, mixed exclusively with cachaça, with the addition of lime and sugar”.

Born from the hands and creativity of the slaves, caipirinha acquired, over time, an international status. Nowadays, it has been included by the International Barmen Association among the seven classical cocktail drinks of the world, being very much appreciated in countries like Germany and the United States, countries with a considerable consumer potential and alcoholic tradition.

In these markets, Brazil seeks to occupy its position having, currently, around 30 thousand producers of cachaça of five thousand different labels. The annual production reaches 1.3 billion liters of which 900 thousand are industrial and 400 thousand are from distilleries. Exports reach 70 million liters, destined to over 70 countries.

Caipirinha, however, is still essentially a homemade drink, although there is a market for industrialized caipirinhas. But tradition goes that each one should make their own, for self consumption or for friends, or that, in bars or restaurants, the barman prepares a dose for each customer. The drink is also associated to special, festive occasions and is not connected to daily consumption, as is cachaça. To prepare a caipirinha is, therefore, a festive ritual, although it is not for everyone: it is necessary to know how to prepare it, and the task is always given to someone who is considered an expert on the matter.

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Traditionally, the drink is seen as a lighter and more socially accepted drink, which unveils a curious situation: an appreciator of caipirinha is not always an appreciator of cachaça, which is considered too strong. Therefore, caipirinhas and batidas are, in general, festive varieties of cachaça. That's how they are considered, that's how they are consumed.

Ricardo Luiz de Souza

Doctor in History, University of Minas Gerais.
Professor, University Center of Sete Lagoas (UNIFEMM). Author of *Identidade nacional e modernidade na historiografia brasileira: o diálogo entre Silvio Romero, Euclides da Cunha, Câmara Cascudo e Gilberto Freyre* (National identity and modernity in Brazilian historiography: a dialog between Silvio Romero, Euclides da Cunha, Câmara Cascudo and Gilberto Freyre). Belo Horizonte, Autêntica Press, 2007; and dozens of articles published in academic journals among which “Cachaça, vinho, cerveja: da colônia ao século XX” (Cachaça, wine and beer: from the colony to the XX Century). *Estudos Históricos*, n° 33- Rio de Janeiro - FGV, 2004