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Aniseed-flavored spirits

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Article Body:

Aniseed-flavored spirits

Some 1,500 years before Christ, these licorice-flavored spirits were valued as healing agents by the Egyptians. In the nineteenth century, absinthe, a potent aniseed aperitif distilled from wormwood, became a highly fashionable drink on both sides of the Atlantic, but intemperate enjoyment of it proved dangerous because it often led to madness or death. Consequently, early in the twentieth century, it was banned in many countries.

In the meanwhile, however, a plethora of "benign" successors developed; aniseed drinks which, in France, are known as pastis. They are based on star anise, with the essential oils being distilled and then mixed with sugar, pure alcohol, and various flavorings, such as mint, lemon balm, herbes de Provence, and licorice.

Pernod and Ricard are among the well-known brands from France (now also available as an alcohol-free drink), and anisette is a spiced liqueur. Creek ouzo and Turkish raki are also members of this big family of aniseed-flavored spirits. Ouzo is a sweet aniseed drink at 80 to 90 proof. Raki tastes dry and spicy, is not as sweet as ouzo, and is available at 80 to 100 proof.

Arrak

Similar to rum, this Asian spirit is distilled from sugarcane molasses with the addition of Indonesian red rice. Arrak is aged in oak barrels before it is bottled. The most respected variety comes from Batavia, in Indonesia, but similar drinks using a variety of ingredients, such as dates, also come from Goa in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

Cachaca

This is a Brazilian spirit distilled directly from the juice of the sugarcane. The best-known cachaga is the straw-colored, clear Pitu. It has a soft, mild aroma and is 82 proof.

Sake

Many people would not consider a Japanese meal complete without a bottle of this clear, usually straw-colored, fermented-rice spirit. Even though sake, which is the Japanese national drink, is often referred to as wine, its production process is more like that of beer. Sake tastes similar to sherry and has an alcohol content of only 16 to 17 percent by volume, or about 35 proof.

Tequila

Mexico's number-one spirit, drunk since the time of the Aztecs, is distilled from the blue agave cactus. Clear, white tequila, also called silver tequila, is bottled immediately after distillation. Cold tequila, or tequila anejo, gets its golden-brown color from several years storage in oak barrels, during which time the flavor also mellows and becomes smoother. Most brands of tequila are about 90 proof. Mexican laws specify that only tequila produced in a specific geographical area around the town of the same name can be labeled as such.

Rum Formerly the drink of bootleggers, pirates, smugglers, and slave traders rum was for centuries the most commonly traded contraband. The home of rum is in the Caribbean islands of Jamaica, martinique, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Here, as in the past – and among the atlantic coastal countries of Central and South America – rum and sugar are important exports. Yet, the varieties of rum produced on the different islands differ from each other as much in terms of aroma taste and bouquet as do the wines of California's Napa Valley, or does from Tennessee sour mash.

The exact recipe for rum production is always the distiller's secret. What all types of rum have In common, however, is their raw material – the brown, viscous molasses by-product of sugarcane refining. After distillation, rum is clear and colorless. For light rum to remain clear, it is first matured in pale ash-wood barrels for only one year and is then transferred to stainless-steel tanks for additional aging. Dark rum, on the other hand, is left to mature for years in dark, wooden casks for five to seven years, where it develops its golden or brownish color and a full-flavored body.

Caramel is also added to some brands to intensify the color. In between light and dark rum is a grade called gold, or amber, which is aged for three years. Light rum not only looks lighter than dark rum, it also has a much more delicate taste than the latter. For this reason, light rum blends intensify superbly with other ingredients such as fruit juices, liqueurs, and lemonades in cocktails,

without concealing its own taste.

Its slight flavor evaporates very quickly though, so light rum is not so well suited to hot punches and grogs.

Mezcal

Mezcal is a similar drink distilled from a different variety of the agave cactus, but it does not have the same labeling regulations. Contrary to popular belief, mezcal is the Mexican drink that traditionally contained a worm in the bottom of the bottle, not tequila.