

# THE DRINK: PISCO

RYAN CROSBY DE-MYSTIFIES THE “NEW” SPIRIT THAT HAS EVERYONE ABUZZ.



The clear, un-aged (and quite mixable) brandy is considered the first spirit to be distilled on the American continent. It's initial stateside popularity originated in San Francisco during the Gold Rush era, before it vanished into obscurity during Prohibition. That is, until now.

Pisco has become a huge source of pride for the country of Peru over the last ten years, as the product has vastly improved in quality while the country recovered from years of political unrest. In short, this spirit's history is complicated. First, there is the controversy around the etymology. The name is arguably derived from a variety of places, the region/town of Pisco, the Incan word of Pishko or Pishku for the small regional bird that the region was named after or the clay vessels that the liquor was transported in, which were known as Piskos. Second, there is an international debate between Peru and Chile concerning ownership of the Pisco name. Peru's solid bragging rights come from the geographical city of Pisco is the only place it can be made (much like Cognac or Champagne), while Chile has two regions where it can legally be made, arguing Pisco is a descriptive name for the spirit. One thing is certain: “Pisco really is the intersection of wine and spirits, right?” says Duggan McDonnell, distiller of Encanto Pisco.

“WE PICK GRAPES, WE MAKE WINE AND WE DISTILL IT. IT'S SINGLE DISTILLED WINE.”

- DUGGAN MCDONNELL

## Vine to Bottle

Politics aside, for this piece I decided the focus is Peruvian Pisco, which has strict requirements to meet before it makes it to bottle. In Lima, I meet up for a tasting with local Pisco expert, Jorge Miguel Jiménez Garavito. He explains the distillation process with the finesse of a poet and speaks of how the Peruvians gather the eight regional grapes with the passion of a chef. Simple in concept yet complex in execution, the spirit legally must be from the region of Pisco, be brought to proof without adding water or sugars and, unlike brandy, is aged in glass or stainless steel to prevent additional flavoring, which is also not allowed. This is why the alcohol content wavers in the low 40 percentile, between type and brand. There are four varieties of Pisco that are produced. Puro, the most sought after and mixable, is made from one grape, often referred to as Quebranta in reference to the common varietal. There are the Aromaticas (garnacha) or Italia varietals and Mosto Verde, in which the distillation starts before the fermentation is over. Lastly, Acholado is a blend of grape varietals.



## History and Legend

To get to the essence, Jorge and I stop by the famous English Bar at lavish and historic **Country Club Hotel**, in Lima's upscale San Isidro district, to experience the original recipe for the national drink of Peru, the Pisco Sour. The bartender is Roberto Melendez, who has been carrying on the original recipe for generations. He is focused and deliberate as he meticulously combines the Pisco with the distinctly tart Peruvian lime juice, egg white and a lengthy, well-timed shake. He pours the frothy, cream-colored cocktail over ice, after it cascades effortlessly down the bar spoon, he adds the touch of bitters to finish. Melendez, as well as the country of Peru, is proud of their national drink. As for myself, I find a new favorite drink.

The second notable recipe is the Pisco Punch, immortalized in the Kipling classic From Sea To Sea. The spirit had been available in San Francisco during the increased trading spurred on by the California Gold Rush, and the recipe combines an Aromatica Pisco, typically Italia, with pineapple and lime juice. Created by Duncan Nicol at The Bank Exchange in San Francisco during the late 19th century, the original recipe vanished when the bar was shuttered and its creator died during the Prohibition era.

Although these two are the most popular recipes, a purist Peruvian may insist that the best way to drink Pisco is neat, over the course of a long celebratory dinner with friends and family. Garavito offers his favorite mix, “I rather enjoy a refreshing ‘Chilcano de Pisco’ made of Pisco Pura Italia, ice cubes, ginger ale and a twist of lime. [It's] easy to make and delicious!” Mind you, the ginger ale they serve down in Peru is more pure in form than its U.S. counterparts, much like their national treasure, Pisco.

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## TASTING NOTES

EASY TO FIND IN THE U.S., HERE ARE A FEW STELLAR BOTTLES TO TRY.



### PORTÓN PISCO

This Mosto Verde-style Pisco is made from grapes at Hacienda La Caravedo, which has a Pisco distillery dating all the way back to 1684. They let it rest for a full year in glass silos before it is bottled.



### ENCANTO PISCO

Encanto, which translates to “field of enchantment,” is mixology guru Duggan McDonnell's inspiration to reintroduce Pisco back into America after his days of bartending in San Francisco. Out of the gate, the brand (whose co-founder was named Leader of the American Cocktail Revolution by Food & Wine) won Medalla de Oro, the award for the Best Pisco of Peru.



### BARSOL PISCO

This award-winning brand has been a leader in the renaissance of Pisco since 2002. They offer their take on each of the four types of Pisco, harvesting their grapes from the Ica Valley.