

First Sip: Aguardiente in Colombia

By Karen Catchpole - October 30, 2013



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This is the first installment of a new TLK series; join us as we get to know Latin American spirits, one sip at a time.

Colombia is a country of wide socio-economic divides with little shared between the upper and lower classes. **Aguardiente**, the official national drink of Colombia, is one big exception that bridges the gap.

The word *aguardiente* comes from the Latin phrase meaning hot water or fire water and is used to describe regional alcohols around the world. In Colombia, the term refers specifically to a distillation of sugar cane molasses, anise essential oils, and water used to create an alcohol that is similar to pastis, sambuca, and anisette.

There are more than 10 different brands of aguardiente in Colombia, all made with their own unique recipe. Some contain more anise, some are sweeter, some are thicker. In 2012, Fabrica de Licores, which makes *aguardiente*, rum, and other liquors, recorded sales totaling \$529,000,000 (yes, that's more than half a billion dollars). And 80 percent of that came from *aguardiente* sales alone.

The love of *aguardiente* is sentimental, regional, and jingoistic. Drinking *aguardiente* is like taking in the essence of your own personal Colombia and daily life is lubricated with the stuff. A modified egg nog, spiked with *aguardiente* instead of rum, is popular in Colombia around Christmas and the most appropriate and appreciated hostess gift or celebration gift is often a bottle of *aguardiente*, not wine or champagne.

I somehow managed to spend three months in Colombia before taking my first sip of *aguardiente*. I'd seen plenty of other people drinking plenty of *aguardiente*, including thousands of riders slowly, proudly getting hammered in the saddle during the massive horse parade that takes over the main highway into Medellin during the city's annual *Feria de las Flores*. Never mind that the horse parade was supposed to be dry this year – this is *aguardiente*!

My chance to try *aguardiente* finally came at La Boa bar in central Medellin, a closet-sized hang out famous for playing tango music (though there's certainly no room to dance to it) and for plastering the walls with pictures of Che Guevara.

With Che looking on, I raised the shot glass to my lips. *Aguardiente* is almost always drunk straight out of a particular style of shot glass with a flared mouth accompanied by sliced limes. I took a tentative sip of *aguardiente*, afraid that the crystal clear liquid was going to be thick like cough syrup or strong like Greek



ouzo. It was neither.

Despite my fear, that first sip was delightful with a subtle anise flavor that was not overwhelming and the easy consistency of water. *Aguardiente* is surprisingly light and refreshing and at 29% alcohol it won't sear your gullet or make you scrunch up your mug (sambuca, by comparison hovers around 42% alcohol). I'm beginning to see why many Colombians own a portable *aguardiente* shot glass with a built in string that allows them to wear it around their necks during particularly festive occasions.

Now, it's your turn to give *aguardiente* a shot with this classic Colombian cocktail.

Aguardiente Sour

- 6 ounces aguardiente
- 2 ounce lime juice
- 4 ounces orange juice
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 egg white lightly mixed

[Get the full recipe.](#)

