

Staking its claim as the longest running distillery in the Americas, Hacienda La Caravedo (Caravedo vineyard gate top; Caravedo worker and stills below) in Ica, Peru, produces several pisco labels.



PISCO

LOOKS TO GO MAINSTREAM

The South American brandy is building its way to prominence, fueled by the rise of creative cuisines and high-end cocktail bars

BY ZAK KOSTRO

Among casual drinkers, pisco—a brandy produced in the winemaking regions of Peru and Chile—flies somewhat underneath the radar compared to other internationally consumed spirits like whisk(e)y, Tequila, or even mezcal. But retailers, bartenders, and pisco producers say that’s changing as the spirit flourishes in bars and restaurants



PHOTOS COURTESY CARAVEDO PISCO





around the world, driven by increased interest in artisanal spirits, craft cocktails, and an overall rise in Peruvian cuisine.

In terms of volume, pisco is still a very small category. On average, Chile produces around 35 million liters of pisco a year, according to Rodrigo Flores, brand ambassador for Pisco Chile, which represents the country's producers. Less than 5% is exported, mainly to the United States—which accounts for a third of exports—as well as the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Argentina, China, Poland, and Russia.

Peru, meanwhile, produces significantly less but has the upper hand in terms of exports, producing an average of 5 million liters of pisco annually and exporting between 10% and 13% based on volume, according to the Houston office of PromPerú, the Peruvian export and tourism commission. In 2020, around 40% of Peru's total pisco exports went to the U.S. Other top export countries included Spain (9%), France (8%), the Netherlands (6%), Chile (5%), Germany (3%), the UK (3%), Switzerland (3%), and Belgium (3%).

For years, Peru and Chile have disputed the birthplace of pisco, although dozens of countries recognize the spirit as both Peruvian and Chilean in origin. Production differs depending on where it's made. In Peru, where pisco can be made from eight separate grape varieties, the spirit falls into three main classifications: puro is made from a single grape variety; acholado from a blend of different varieties or different piscos; and mosto verde from crushed grapes (musts) that aren't fully fermented, thus retaining some of the natural sugars. Mosto verde tends to be more expensive because it requires more grapes during production.

Peruvian pisco must be distilled—only once—in copper pot stills, and distilled to proof, typically between 38% and



Llama Inn in Brooklyn, New York (top), is one of many bars that highlights pisco cocktails on their menu. La Mar in San Francisco also offers guests both new and classic pisco cocktails (above).

encouraging these younger drinkers to seek out other clear spirits and they're discovering that pisco is very accessible.

For the pisco-curious, education is readily available thanks to bars and restaurants making the spirit a focal point on cocktail menus. One of those places is Llama Inn, opened in 2015 by restaurateur Juan Correa and chef Erik Ramirez in Brooklyn, New York's Williamsburg neighborhood. "We've always looked to highlight pisco in a way that felt comfortable and approachable to guests," says Lynnette Marrero, bar director at Llama Inn and at Llama San, Ramirez's Peruvian-Japanese restaurant in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. In addition to pisco-based riffs on classic cocktails, each establishment also includes an interesting pisco sour, according to Marrero. At Llama Inn, the Flying Purple Pisco utilizes puréed purple potato, giving it "a beautiful frothy creaminess," she adds.

Another U.S. city propelling pisco's rise is San Francisco, where the spirit began returning to bars in the 2000s on the heels of the cocktail revival. The city is steeped in pisco history, fueling

48% alcohol by volume (abv). By contrast, Chilean pisco can be distilled multiple times and does not need to be distilled to proof. Additionally, Chilean pisco can be made with 14 different grapes and is categorized by abv—Pisco Corriente o Tradicional contains 30% to 35% alcohol, Pisco Especial 35% to 40%, Pisco Reservado 40%, and Gran Pisco clocks in at 43% or higher. Chilean pisco, unlike Peruvian pisco, can be aged, usually in American or French oak or Chilean raulí wood, but must rest at least three months in a nonreactive vessel.

Profits Rebounding

As with many industries, the pandemic wreaked havoc and erased profits, but multiple producers say they're rebounding as bartenders around the globe innovate cocktails beyond the pisco sour, inspiring drinkers to seek out a bottle at retail. In some ways pisco could be seen as disadvantaged, pitted against better-known spirits on a bar's back shelf.

"Brandy as a category overall is still such a small percentage of liquor sales on-premise," New York City-based beverage consultant Pamela Wiznitzer says. "Pisco, however, has gained popularity in the last decade due to an increase in travel to Peru as well as a millennial and Gen Z desire to diversify their tastes." She adds that the rise of Tequila and agave-based spirits as a category is



Both Chile and Peru produce pisco (grapevines pictured at top), with Chile leading production and Peru dominating in pisco exports. Restaurants like San Francisco's Mochica (above left) have long supported the spirit and use it regularly in cocktails like the Pisco Sour (above right).

modern interest, notes Yuri Chauca, lead bartender at Peruvian hotspot Mochica in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood. "In the Bay Area specifically, pisco has been around for many years," Chauca says. According to Chauca, the first shipment of pisco to San Francisco came in the late 1800s with the arrival of Peruvian immigrants looking to strike it rich in California's gold rush. Now, San Francisco bartenders are "trying to bring it back—not only the spirit itself, but also as part of the cocktail culture," he adds.

Cultural Visibility

Thirst for the spirit is on the rise as more Peruvian restaurants open across the U.S., says Thomas Medl, general manager at San Francisco ceviche destination La Mar and North America operations director for Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio's international restaurant group, Acurio Restaurantes. "When we opened here 13 years ago, there were barely any Peruvian restaurants," he notes. "Now, almost every neighborhood has one." La Mar offers El Cholito, which blends Cuatro Gallos

pisco, fresh-squeezed cucumber and jalapeño juices, lime, and apple cider, served over cucumber-jalapeño ice with a Tajín spiced rim, along with classics like the pisco sour and punch.

But in many places, vibrancy and visibility in bars and restaurants has yet to fully translate to a robust retail presence. "Pisco is a small category, but it's actually growing nicely in our stores, especially in California," says Jeff Feist, category lead for spirits at BevMo. "One brand, BarSol, kind of leads the rest of them, but several others like Caravedo, Alto del Carmen, and Kappa also do fairly well." Despite being a niche category, pisco punches up, Feist adds. "Customers that like pisco are very loyal, and we probably have a bigger selection than any other large chain on the West Coast, which helps us attract some of those customers," he says.

Elyse Genderson, vice president and fourth-generation owner at Schneider's of Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., credits the craft cocktail boom with boosting demand. "Our store specializes in fine wines and craft spirits, and where pisco fits into that is the massive mixology and craft spirits growth

PHOTOS COURTESY (TOP) LLAMA INN; (CENTER) LA MAR; (BOTTOM) MOCHICA



Peruvian brand BarSol pisco (CEO Diego Loret de Mola left; pisco pot stills right) has long been a category leader. BarSol survived the Covid-19 pandemic thanks to consumers who shifted from drinking pisco cocktails in bars to making their own at home.

we keep seeing year after year,” Genderson says. She also notes that customers seek, “something authentic, artisanal, and small-production that’s not owned by a big company. I think all of that contributes to pisco’s success.”

In fact, Diego Loret de Mola, co-founder, director, and master distiller at BarSol Pisco in Ica, Peru, notes that locked-down drinkers during the pandemic buoyed BarSol through otherwise devastating times. “Before the pandemic, we thought pisco was an on-premise product,” relying on bars and restaurants for “up to about 60% or 70%” of sales, he says. During the pandemic, however, “a lot of product moved into the off-premise side and that loss we had in the on-premise was recovered by e-commerce sales of up to 40%. We realized pisco had become a pull-strategy category instead of push-strategy—people were now seeking and ordering it.”

It’s pisco’s artisanal production methods that set it apart from bigger categories, says Johnny Schuler, general manager and master distiller of Hacienda La Caravedo, also in Ica, which produces the eponymous brand as well as Pago de los Frailes and Toro Santo, and claims to be the longest continuously operating distillery in the Americas. Most pisco producers are not owned by big international companies, Schuler notes. “We’re family-owned,” he says. “We only have about 40 hectares, 80 acres of planted vines. We produce 500,000-600,000 liters annually, which is very small. We hand-harvest all our grapes, hand-clean the land. We don’t use pesticides or herbicides—we use a shovel to turn it over to kill the weeds.”

Alex Hildebrandt, co-founder of Suvo pisco—a nascent player in the Peruvian pisco category, having launched in the summer of 2021—says opening drinkers’ minds and palates to the spirit is more important than jostling with other brands or arguing over origins. “We’re forecasting demand only for the U.S. and Peru in 2022,” Hildebrandt says. “The majority will come to the U.S., but it’s very important to us that some of our pisco remains in Peru for

Peruvians to enjoy. We remain open to the possibility of other international markets, but we want to focus on properly growing the pisco category together, with other pisco brands and producers.”

Other key pisco players include Chile’s Waqar; the Kappa brand, founded by seventh-generation Marnier Lapostolle family member Charles de Bournet; Cooperativa Agrícola Pisquera Elqui Limitada, known less formally as Capel; and Compañía Pisquera de Chile, which export director Juan Carlos Munita says is the country’s “biggest pisco producer” and owner of such brands as Control C and Mistral, known for its line of aged piscos. For Peru’s Macchu Pisco, meanwhile, “business is booming” across the U.S., CEO Melanie Asher says, adding that international markets are opening in the Bahamas, Australia, Hong King, France, and the UK.

Pisco price tiers vary but could be considered accessible to even frugal spenders. BarSol’s puro Quebranta expression, for example, retails for as low as \$25 a 750-ml., its acholado for \$30, and its mosto verde Torontel expression for \$40 or more. Waqar founding partner Juan Carlos Ortúzar says tiers in the U.S. are “over \$40” for ultra-premium brands, \$30-\$39 for premium, and less than \$30 for a “standard” pisco. Waqar retails for “around \$40.”

Despite its diminutive stature on the global spirits stage, Caravedo COO Tony Matchus insists he’s “super-bullish” about pisco’s future, suggesting it could be just a matter of time before the category takes off—although when that might happen remains decidedly uncertain. “I’m doing what I’m doing because of my love for Peruvian pisco,” Matchus says. “It’s kind of like the little engine that could. When you look at it from a macro, geopolitical standpoint ... it seems every time pisco is getting ready to take off, something devastating happens. It makes a complicated landscape for big companies to buy in.” Until then, “we’re doing a lot of hard work,” Matchus adds. “Every bottle we sell means something to us, and at this point we’re doing it out of pure passion.”



Suvo pisco is new to the category, having launched last summer. The brand’s management expects U.S. demand for pisco to grow.

