

# On the Pisco Trail

A journey to Peru to investigate Pisco's history and future

By Dale DeGroff

The trail for this world renowned brandy began in Lima on a South American summer day in March. Our trip led us to Cuzco - one of the highest cities in the world - and at 11,500 feet, Diamox altitude pills and Cocoa tea are highly recommended! At the beginning of our journey we paid homage to the pre-Colombian civilizations of the region. Cuzco was the capital city of the Incas and the gateway to the elusive and holy city of Machu Picchu.

The trip continued to the Pisco distilleries near Lima. Pisco production is permitted in the departments of Lima, Ica, Arequipa, Moquegua and in selected valleys in the Department of Tacna, but most production takes place in the department of Ica. The majority of the distilleries are located in the Ica valley, which is about 100 kilometers inland and runs north to south following the Ica River.

## Pisco's Troubled Past

To tell the story of Pisco, it is necessary to understand the Reform of 1968. The Military Junta of 1968 ended the rule of President Belaúnde and suspended the constitution. The Junta leader Juan Velasco Alvarado expropriated land from wealthy farmers and nationalized petroleum holdings. His intentions, however noble, were disastrous for the country. The cooperative communities of farms and schools and medical facilities he attempted to establish were never realized. Poor farmers who were never trained or provided with the necessary resources to work the land efficiently practiced nothing more than sustenance farming, replacing what had been productive fields. Production ceased in the big valleys at a time when Pisco production was poised to increase by ten-fold because of investment in equipment and a growing international market.

## Que es Pisco?

Pisco, a historical category of brandy is produced from distilled wine. Grapes were brought to the Vice Royalty of Peru in 1553 from the Canary Islands and thrived, fueling a prosperous economy of export wine to Spain. Brandy distilling began when the king of Spain barred the cheaper imports



Pisco stills in San Isidro



Trip host Diego Lorete de Mola (left) and Carlos Ferreyros at Bodega San Isidro, preparing to do a Pisco tasting





from the colonies to protect the Spanish producers in 1641. Today, the Quebranta grape is favored by most of the Pisco makers in the south, and produces a subtle herbal and floral style of Pisco appropriate for the Pisco Sour. The grapes most common in Peru are the Quebranta, Common Black, Molar, Torontel, Albilla, Moscatel, and Italia – the most aromatic.

Pisco is distilled in pot stills, and a local still called the falca is used by many traditional makers. The falca does not have the onion top or the swan's neck seen in most

use small machinery to crush the grapes and then press with the traditional prensa, crafted from a tree trunk. Some makers still crush the grapes by foot with 8 hour stomping sessions from midnight to dawn that are fueled by live music and plenty of drink. The participants don rubber boots, have a couple quick shots and rotate in the troughs of grapes to the beat of the music for two hour intervals. It's a real fiesta!

### It's all in the Blend

The most common Pisco blend is called Acholado, and varies widely from producer to producer. The only constant is that most use at least 50% Quebranta with the remainder being Torontel, Albilla, Italia, and Moscatel. Italia Pisco, the most aromatic style made in Peru, is lovely in cocktails with tropical fruits. Another important Pisco style is the *mosto verde*, or green must style. The fermentation phase is shortened, and by the end, as many as 25 types of alcohol are present. The result is a distinctive green style Pisco.

Two producers creating these styles and putting this spirit category on the map are Bodega San Isidro and Bodega La Caravedo. La Caravedo operated by Rodrigo Peschiera Mifflin is an all organic production facility that practices sustainable agriculture. Rodrigo worked in Napa and Sonoma Valleys with Clos du Val, St. Andrews Vineyard, and Gloria Ferrer, and is repairing earthquake damage and distilling at the same time. Rodrigo produces Pisco Puro de Uva Quebranta, (100% Quebranta grape Pisco), Pisco Mosto Verde de Uva Quebranta, and Pisco Acholado.

Bodega San Isidro is easily the most progressive property in the valley with the most successful marketing program outside of Peru. The partners, Carlos Ferreyros and our host, Diego Loret de Mola, are dedicated to raising the quality and consistency not only

of their output, but also of the category as a whole. Some of the Piscos we tasted at the distilleries were different when tasted from bottles purchased locally at a store. There is a bit of stretching of product with grappa, cane influenced spirits and spirits from non-Pisco grapes varieties. Diego has encouraged the other makers to create a consistent product that could promote the category overseas.

During our trip we also visited with Jose Antonio Olaechea at his family operated Hacienda Tacama winery and distillery. We had the good fortune to spend a couple of hours with his father, Don Manuel, and the family. Don Manuel spoke of the high hopes all makers in the valley had for Pisco's future just before the reform. We assured him that through the perseverance and hard work of this new generation of growers who are reclaiming the land and making it productive once more, it is clear that a rosy future for Pisco lies ahead. ■

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traditional European stills. Instead, the vapors rise in the pot and rush down a wide pipe called the cannon into a coil submerged in a pool of water that is the condenser. Falca stills are often only copper on the bottom where the heat's source is and the body of the still is ceramic. Pisco is only distilled once, and by law must rest for three months, however most quality Pisco rests for up to a year in ceramic, plastic, or stainless containers.

Extracting the juice from the grapes varies widely with the artisan distillers; some

### PISCO LOUNGE COCKTAIL

*(Created by Jorge La Torre Muñoz, bartender/consultant in Lima, Peru)*

2 oz. BarSol Quebranta Pisco  
1/2 oz. Fresh Passion Pulp and Seeds  
2 Fresh Strawberries  
1 oz. Simple Syrup  
Fresh Orange Juice

*Cut strawberries in small pieces and add them to a highball glass and muddle with passion fruit pulp and simple syrup. Add BarSol Quebranta Pisco and fresh ice cubes; top with fresh orange juice and stir.*

### ASPARAGUS 3-21 COCKTAIL

*(Developed for Carlos Ferreyros as the house drink for his asparagus farm in Ica Valley Peru)*

2 oz. BarSol Quebranta Pisco  
6 pieces Fresh Asparagus (previously boiled and blended to obtain concentrate without fibers)  
1/2 tablespoon Olive Oil  
1/2 tablespoon White Vinegar  
Salt to Taste  
1/2 oz. Fresh Lime Juice  
6 Very Small Scallops (previously marinated with chopped red onion, hot red peppers – called *rocoto* - and fresh lime juice)

*Add all ingredients into a high ball and fill up with ice. Stir well to chill. Add a cold, previously boiled asparagus as garnish.*