

Travel

# Six spirits that evoke far-off destinations



Ming River Sichuan baijiu is a Western-friendly style that delivers bright tropical and floral notes that tame the "firewater." (Ming River)

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Civilization, as William Faulkner once said, begins with distillation. Long before our age of international commerce, each culture around the world made drinks with their own indigenous ingredients and techniques. Hundreds — if not thousands — of years later, some spirits have gone on to play a starring role on the international drinks scene while others remain far more popular in their place of origin. But one thing's for sure: Wherever you go, there are drinking traditions that go back generations. We put together a few suggestions for how to drink like a local in far-off destinations, even when you can't be there.

**Aquavit: King of Scandinavia** Nordic countries are easily defined by their extremes — extreme weather, scenery, minimalism. That applies to much of the native fare, too: intense rye bread, piquant pickled herring, and the ever-polarizing lutefisk, which is lye-treated whitefish. The regional drink, accordingly, is an acquired taste for some. Aquavit, a grain distillate flavored with dill and/or caraway

and a host of other botanicals, seeds and spices, is traditionally made throughout Sweden, Denmark and Norway, but it's the latter that, in February, received a European Union geographical indication, a legally enforced product identity such as Champagne or Kalamata olives. So while Norwegian aquavit is now formally defined as being made in Norway with at least 95 percent native potatoes, among other stipulations, you can still make non-regional-specific aquavit anywhere. Like Portland, Ore., for example, where Christian Krogstad, founder of House Spirits Distillery, has been distilling Krogstad Aquavit since 2007. A whiskey-maker by trade, his father's family came from Norway and lived in Minnesota, so he's known of the Scandinavian drink — and all the hearty Viking food ways that go with it — since childhood. His spirit delivers a lively loop-de-loop effect of caraway and star anise flavors that comes into stark relief when you drink it as a freezing-cold shot.

The unique flavors of aquavit allow for some startling and intriguing cocktail opportunities and a versatility you might not have expected. Krogstad mixes just as well in a highball with root beer as it does when you switch it up for the gin in a classic Bee's Knees.



Krogstad Aquavit delivers a lively loop-de-loop effect of caraway and star anise flavors that comes into stark relief when you drink it as a freezing-cold shot. (Danguole Lekaviciute/Krogstad Aquavit)

#### *[Travel around the world during Zoom happy hours with these global drinking traditions]*

**Cachaça, the soul of Brazil:** Back in the 1990s, Americans thought of tequila as bottom-shelf hooch. Typically adulterated with additives, the Mexican spirit showed up in margaritas or a shot glass, the latter of which made easily prompted a cringe. (Remember that worm? Ew.) Then the category saw a glorious reawakening. Its natural beauty came shining through, and now tequila is celebrated, sipped and savored far beyond the local cantina. And so it goes with cachaça, Brazil's national spirit. Made from sugar cane juice, early producers date to the early 1500s, preceding rum — which is most often made from molasses, a sugar byproduct — by at least 100 years. Even when you consider that cachaça has a long history in a giant, densely populated country, it's nevertheless astonishing to learn there are upward of 4,000 brands in Brazil.

Entrepreneurs are making strides these days, developing brands with long-standing producers to showcase the finer side of cachaça, once known as a harsh spirit reserved for the caipirinha in lively

settings and bracing shots in more casual ones. Working with a nearly century-old family-run distillery, Nate Whitehouse and Peter Nevenglosky developed Avuá, which comes in several expressions, including some aged in various woods, a common practice among traditional producers. Sip it neat or swap it in for the base spirit in your favorite rum drink for an earthier, grassier take on the drink. Nate favors it in an El Presidente.

**Mastiha spirit, an ancient drink for modern times:** Any Greek restaurant in the United States would likely have a choice of ouzo, the anise-flavored liquor that Greece's older generations down with fried sardines as commonly as executives pair Bordeaux with filet mignon. (Or used to, when going to steakhouses was still a thing.) But it's hardly the only spirit of the nation. In the cafes of the Greek islands, glasses have long been filled with a mastiha spirit. Mastiha, a resin that's recognized as a superfood, comes from trees that only grow on one Greek island (Chios). It's been used in alcoholic drinks since Aristotle's time and even served as the ancient world's chewing gum. (It provides the linguistic root for the verb "masticate.") Shown to aid digestion, the drink is traditionally served before or after meals. Effie Panagopoulos calls the spirit Greece's best-kept secret. Or it was, at least, until she gave the game away in March 2018 when she launched Kleos, the first super-premium brand of the traditional liqueur. Fresh and vegetal with a hint of sweet mint, you can drink it as a functional digestif or mix it 50/50 with any base spirit.



Kleos, the first super-premium brand of the traditional liqueur, is fresh and vegetal with a hint of sweet mint. (Kleos)

**Baijiu, the star of the Far East, rises in the U.S.:** What Bollywood is to the entertainment industry, Baijiu is to spirits: ubiquitous to the point that it's unavoidable in an Asian nation but barely a blip on the radar stateside. The numbers tell it best: Consider the popularity of vodka and combine that with the popularity of whiskey — all whiskies. That doesn't even begin to compare with consumption of baijiu in China. According to research group IWSR Drinks Market Analysis, in 2018 (the last year for which figures are available) global sales of baijiu clocked in at 14.6 billion bottles, almost all of which was consumed in China, typically as a shot. Global sales of vodka, meanwhile, were a meager 5.1 billion bottles, and global whiskey was 5.3 billion.

It's important to note that, like whiskey, baijiu is a big category. It encompasses drinks distilled from an array of grains. Sorghum is the most popular, but you can find products made from rice, millet, corn and more. The fermentation agent, qu, a medley of yeast, mold and bacteria, is what makes a spirit baijiu. The variable base-grains and production techniques lend themselves to a wide spectrum of products, ranging from lemony toasted rice to herbaceous and sweet to earthy and savory.

Derek Sandhaus would like to see a little more American love for the spirit. The author, most recently, of [“Drunk in China: Baijiu and the World’s Oldest Drinking Culture,”](#) and leading English-speaking expert on the stuff was part of the team that collaborated with Luzhou Laojiao, China’s oldest continuously operating baijiu distillery, to create Ming River Sichuan baijiu. It’s a Western-friendly style that delivers bright tropical and floral notes that tame the “firewater.” While typically consumed as a shot, Sandhaus says this one has plenty of uses in cocktails or, better yet, as accompaniment to a spicy Sichuan meal.



Founder and owner Philip Duff produces Old Duff Genever at one of the few remaining family-owned distilleries in Holland. (Courtesy of Old Duff)



Quintessentia Amaro Nonino is a modified version of the recipe created by Antonio Nonino, who took over the family's grappa distillery in Fruili, Italy, from his father, the founder. (Courtesy of Nonino)



**Genever — or how to go Dutch:** In Holland, the bar call is for a kopstootje, which simply translates as “head butt.” If that sounds a little daunting, just chalk it up to the infamous Dutch blunt humor. This seemingly brutal drink is nothing more than a boilermaker — the classic shot-and-beer combo. The spirit here is genever, a Dutch botanical drink commonly thought of as the precursor to gin. But, in fact, it’s more akin to what whiskey was centuries ago, which is to say a distillate of malted barley with a small bit of botanicals added, a trick whiskey-makers used to soften their fiery liquor before they started using wood barrels to do the job.

“Genever is a parent of whiskey,” explains Philip Duff, founder and owner of Old Duff Genever, which he produces at one of the few remaining family-owned distilleries in Holland. “Think of it like this: Normally you only see the descendant of a dinosaur, how things transmogrified over time. But if you drink real genever, you’re drinking exactly what ruled the world in the 1600s,” he says. It was the most-exported spirit category in the world for decades, until after the 1900s. In 1852, the ships in New York’s harbor brought over 450 bottles of genever for every bottle of English gin.

To prepare a kopstootje, a Pilsener or a saison makes the finest match for genever. The shot is famously served in a tulip-shaped glass filled to the absolute brim. Tradition calls on you to lean over and, without hands, slurp off the top of the shot (i.e. the “head butt”). Then proceed as usual, if you haven’t spilled the contents of the glass. For a drink with a bit less risk, Duff suggests swapping it in for the Old Tom gin in a Martinez, an antecedent of the martini. (Stir 1½ ounces genever, 1½ ounces sweet vermouth, ¼ ounce Luxardo maraschino cherry liqueur and two dashes Angostura bitters over ice, and strain.)

**Amaro, the bittersweet love of Italy:** One of Francesca Nonino’s most vivid childhood memories was that moment when, after a meal, her grandfather would pour a generous helping of the family’s amaro over ice, add an orange slice and offer her a deep whiff from the glass. That remembrance of taking in what she calls “alchemic perfection” — a medley of bitter-orange, lemon, mint, burnt sugar, saffron and sundry alpine herb and spices — drives her today as she learns how to distill her family’s Quintessentia Amaro Nonino, a modified version of the recipe created by Antonio, her great-grandfather, who took over the family’s grappa distillery in Friuli, Italy, from his father, the founder. (Francesca’s mother Cristina is the lead distiller today.)

The Noninos are just one example of many Italian families whose generations-old amaro is still being produced. A century-plus ago, these bitter liqueurs were made for medicinal purposes, primarily to aid digestion, but since they also happen to be delicious, it’s little surprise they’ve found a place in recreational consumption. It’s always good to have a bottle around the house for a post-feast punctuation mark. Francesca also recommends it just as her grandfather still drinks it — over a rock of ice with an orange slice.