



Bucket list beverages: Find culture in cocktails

By Captain and Clark



There is a tendency to think of high-adrenaline activities, global festivals and ancient monuments when talking about bucket list destinations. The culturally-specific drinks of each country and town somehow slip through the cracks when you're plotting destinations. Arguably one of the best ways to know any location is to taste the drink that makes it as unique as any castle or celebration. If you're planning a trip soon or even if you're just sticking pins in the map to dream, there is a laundry list of great and unique drinks around the world to help you plot that course.

Hungarian mulled wine

This is a bit of a gateway drink. Mulled wine is a late fall and deep winter drink prolific throughout many parts of northern and central Europe. At its core it is essentially red wine slowly cooked with a slew of spices, nuts and fruit. The end result is a steamy mug of wine that crackles with flavor and warms you with every sip. While there are as many recipes for mulled wine as there are stars in the sky, Hungary has some of the best varieties. Not to mention, they have the winters to compliment this mug of warm Yuletide delight.

Croatian Maraschino

This sweet liquor is specific to the Dalmatia region of Croatia. Made from the marasca cheery tree it has a sweet flavor and a powerful kick. The cherry taste is rich and smooth with a bright finish and a zing as an after note. It is served in tiny glasses and drank predominately after a meal when it's soft cherry flavor and powerful liquor compliment any evening or company. While it is the crown jewel of the area, it rose to fame with the Italians. In the 1700s a Venetian explorer sparked the liqueur's journey to the tables of nobility. For the last 300 years, Maraschino has been the drink of diplomats, royalty and those looking to sip a distilled flavor of history on the coast of the Adriatic.

Puerto Rican rum

The Caribbean has so many points to recommend it. Not the least of which is the high octane drink that got its start in this sugar capital of the world. Ever since the human race discovered that we could distill sugar into an alcoholic beverage, Puerto Rico has been working on perfecting the craft. The Bacardi factory is the tip of a very large iceberg on this tiny island. While Puerto Rico scarcely produces sugar any more they have only grown the rum industry since the 1600s. Today you can delve into the island's history with your taste buds. The most interesting part is that the rum distilleries have covered the whole spectrum of time, from traditionally distilled rums to more modern twists.

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Korean makkoli

Korea has a very limited spectrum of drinks to offer the foreign traveler. Drinking is ubiquitous in Korea. Every evening restaurants fill up with patrons sitting around small tables eating *anjou*, small dishes specifically designed to compliment a night out drinking. The two most famous drinks in Korea are soju and makkoli. Soju is a sweet vodka-esc liquor made from rice or sweet potato and is prolific throughout the country. Makkoli is soju's predecessor and offers a more traditional look at the country. Historically, it was made from fermenting a mixture of wheat and rice. This simple, but delicious, drink was the invention of Korean farmers. It has quickly risen to popularity in Korean cities as more and more people have begun to enjoy its soft bite and creamy taste. For a very traditional and delicious taste of Korea, consider makkoli.

Korean persimmon wine

While Korea has it's power houses of soju and makkoli to carry it, there is a subdivision making waves in central Korea. The rural valley outside Cheongdo, an area overrun with persimmons, is launching a new era of drinks. It is the genesis of the world's first persimmon wine. The wine is sweet and fragrant, but lacks a lot of the thickness and tannin that you would experience with a traditional wine. It provides you not only the chance to experience a new drink but to taste a new movement in Korea, a land known for its drink homogeny. For the true spirit trail blazer, this is an opportunity not to be missed.

Mexican Mezcal

Don't make the mistake of thinking Mexico is only pina coladas and tequila. Long before the Spanish conquest of Central America, the endemic population was making a fermented drink from the maguey plant, a form of agave. Agave is in fact not a cactus but a relative of the lily. This gives the native drink a unique flavor and feel. Once the process of distilling was brought to the land, the art of Mezcal was born. Mezcal, unlike tequila, must be 100% agave and can only be produced and bottled in Mexico -- not unlike how champagne must be made in the Champagne valley of France to be considered true champagne. Mezcal, as the oldest distilled

liquor in North America, has taken on a vivacious life of its own in the last few decades. Today you can experience the passionate heart of Mexico, bejeweled with its ancient past, in the form of this pure and soft liquor. It has all the refinement of a scotch but a smoother taste. Any trip to Mexico would be incomplete without a nod to the drink that permeates its past.

Pacific NW micro distilleries

The rest of the world has been crafting unique beverages for thousands of years. The Pacific Northwest is a little late to the game, but thanks to new legislation allowing for distilleries in the area, the zones around Seattle are making waves. These boutique distilleries are taking traditional recipes and making them specific to the coastal region of Washington. Today you can taste anything from absinthe made with traditional copper stills to whiskey and vodka made from local Washington wheat. From huckleberry wine to chai vodka, you can't make a wrong turn exploring this area.

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Venetian spritz

Glowing a soft orange, like a guiding star, this bittersweet drink has beckoned travelers to Venice for centuries. A spritz is equal parts sweet, sparkling prosecco and Select. Select is a bitter liqueur comparable to Campari. The whole drink is served on ice and garnished with an orange. It rose to its peak of fashion during the period of time in which Austrian influence ran through Venice. Today you can enjoy this bitter beverage as an aperitif, cleansing your palate before a meal or as a punctuation to a long day wandering through the corridors of Venice. It is a taste that is both invigorating and unique.

Hawaiian Mai Tai

The history of the Mai Tai is a fierce one that is contested and shrouded in mystery. While a couple different Californian bars both claim to have invented it, we can state objectively that a lot of the Mai Tai's popularity came from its headline status in the popular film, *Blue Hawaii*, starring Elvis. Hawaii has taken this claim-to-fame and popularized the Mai Tai with all things Polynesian. Some of the best versions of this sweet drink include dark rum, pineapple juice and *li hing mui* dust (a sweet powder made from dried plums). While there are as many different ways to make a Mai Tai as there are claims to its origins, it's easy to say that Hawaii has done the best job of taking the recipe and melding it with the tropical sunsets and beaches it's famous for conjuring with each sip.

Tanzanian banana beer

Tanzania has a specific drink that they are not only very proud of, but that they use for coming of age. Banana beer is a local brew made from, yes, bananas. Traditionally mashed bananas would be left in a wooden bucket with spring water until it fermented. The resulting mixture would then be served to young men at their coming of age ceremony. Today, the process remains much the same with the result being a sweet beer that tastes like banana bread. If you make the venture to Tanzania or Kenya to try this brew you'll have the option of traditional or contemporary banana beer. Either one will be an experience you'll never forget.

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