

Curaçao Gets the Blues

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First things first. Curaçao liqueur doesn't have to be blue. Cerulean may be its most popular hue but, in contrast, say, to bleu cheese's mold, none of Curaçao's ingredients predetermine its color.

Indeed, very little about Curaçao was predetermined. Like many of the best things in life, this appealing aperitif was created by accident. When the Spanish discovered a temperate island off the coast of Venezuela in 1499, they decided to grow their famed Valencia oranges on it. Unfortunately, Curaçao's soil and climate declined to cooperate. The fruit of the trees that grew from the seeds shipped over by the Spanish turned out to be so bitter that even the island's goats snubbed it.

Then the Dutch conquered Curaçao in 1634, and the Spanish no longer had to worry about the island's disappointing citrus or its picky goats. But the trees they imported continued to grow wild in their former colony and somehow – here the details get a bit hazy – it was discovered that the sun-dried peels of the fruit, which had come to be called *laraha*, contained a

fragrant oil that could be used to concoct a palate-pleasing liqueur.

For several centuries, family recipes for the liqueur were abundant on the island, but there was no major manufacturer. Then, in 1896, the Senior family imported a copper still from the United States, ratcheted up production, and began calling themselves Senior & Co. By 1962, when the still was moved into the ornate Chobolobo mansion where it resides to this day, Senior & Co. had cornered the Curaçao market.

On Curaçao the island, that is. Curaçao the liqueur is produced in other countries, including the United States. The largest manufacturer is Holland, where the distiller Bols – established in 1575, even before the Dutch acquired its West Indies real estate holdings – boasts blue Curaçao as one of its most popular products. Much of the bitter fruit from which Curaçao is made is now grown in Tahiti.

Curaçao has also become the generic term for sweet orange liqueurs. The best known Curaçao is its triple-distilled version, triple sec, which includes Cointreau among its premium brands. Another variant is dry orange Curaçao; here Grand Marnier is the top-of-the-line tippie.

But it's only the drinks that are actually called Curaçao that come in different colors: red, green, orange, and blue, in addition to natural, or clear, in the case of the original Curaçao of Curaçao (COC), as Senior & Co.'s brand is known. Also the only Curaçao liqueur to use genuine laraha rinds, COC is not distributed in the United States, because its alcohol content varies between 30% to 32% by volume -- a vacillation that's against the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' standards governing importation.

As for how the most famous of the Curaçao liqueurs came to be blue, that's still a bit of a mystery. "Our sea is such a pretty color, perhaps it was the inspiration," ventures a host at COC's Chobolobo mansion. Those sampling Curaçao the liqueur on Curaçao the island will have no quarrel with that theory.

Bluebeard's Favorite

1 oz. blue Curaçao

1 oz. vodka

1 oz. gin

Put into a shaker with ice and add a few drops of lime juice. Strain into a

cocktail glass rubbed with lime and rimmed with rock sugar.

For additional information about Curaçao of Curaçao, see

www.curacoliqueur.com. To learn more about visiting the island, log on to

www.geographia.com/curacao/.

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