

PUNCH

Bringing It Back Bar: How to Use Batavia Arrack

Every bar sports marginal bottles that elude even the most seasoned drink-makers. That is, until someone dusts them off and uses them in a new way. In "Bringing It Back Bar," we shine a light on overlooked bottles and devise recipes to take them from back bar to front shelf. Up now:

funky Batavia arrack.

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photo: VAN OOSTEN



It's not uncommon to find history repeating itself in the drink world: Ironic cocktails of old are being dressed back up, punches have found a new place in the current cocktail revival and many of the world's oldest and most storied spirits are making a comeback.

Such is the case for Batavia arrack, a funky, molasses- and rice-based spirit that originated on the island of Java. Named after Java's 17th-century, Dutch-colonized capital, Batavia arrack is among the oldest known distilled spirits, and one that pre-dates even rum (which would later supersede its predecessor in popularity and play a part in pushing Batavia to the back shelf).

Trade routes brought the spirit to the Western world, where Batavia arrack enjoyed a period of great popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries, establishing itself as an essential ingredient in punch—also a colonial import from the same region.

By the late 1800s, though, new import taxes and the increasing popularity of rum nudged Batavia arrack out of fashion, and by the time World War II broke out, almost all production of Batavia arrack in Indonesia halted while the region fell under siege. It wasn't until 2007, when importer Haus Alpenz started bringing Batavia arrack back into the U.S.—with the guidance of punch expert and cocktail historian Dave Wondrich, he settled on the van Oosten brand—that the spirit began making appearances on cocktail menus once again. Whether through introduction via punch, old bar manuals or tiki-obsessed compatriots, bartenders have embraced the spirit's unique flavor.

“Batavia arrack is similar to a vanilla bean or a chunk of fresh horseradish. By themselves, their existence seems erroneous. How could something that tastes like that be useful in any way?” says Guillermo Bravo of New York's The NoMad Bar. After a few failed encounters with the spirit, Bravo was lured into taking shots of the stuff at a Tiki Tuesday event at Featherweight in Brooklyn, where, whether from maturity or simply the charm of time and place, he finally got it. “It was like understanding that obscure band your too-cool friends are obsessed with. Something in my palate and brain just clicked,” he says, “and I appreciated the onslaught of vegetal leather, fermented apricot and that fuel-soaked clove taste.”

Though on its own it skews divisive, in conjunction with other flavors, it can be transformative. “I use Batavia arrack like a spice,” Bravo says. “It succeeds greatly in small amounts if the cocktail is subtle. If the cocktail has a lot of character, Batavia arrack can provide a heavier underlying palate.”

In his Jakartian Peardition, it does the latter, providing a foundation for pear brandy and sherry, whose warmth is complemented by spicy cinnamon syrup and tart citrus, effectively turning a “bright, summery” drink into something warm and fortifying.

Other bartenders have been immediately struck by Batavia arrack's close similarities to rum. Patrick Williams, beverage director at Denver's Punch Bowl Social, says, “It is closest to rum agricole in comparison,” but with a “malty” finish, making it a good, slightly unexpected substitute in classic drinks. Williams likes to use it in his riff on the Hemingway Daiquiri, the Hemingway in Europe, in which he contrasts those round, funky notes with super-tart grapefruit syrup, fresh lime and the sweetness of maraschino liqueur.

Porchlight head bartender Nick Bennett, a big fan of the spirit, shares the rum sentiment: “The first time I ever really came across Batavia arrack was while I tended bar at the (now defunct) rum-based bar El Cobre,” he says. “So, it will always be associated with rum in my head, which isn’t too far from the truth. It is, essentially, a funky Indonesian ancestor to rum.”

That principle in mind, Bennett created the Seven Seas Swizzle, which combines the spirit with bittersweet green tea-infused cane syrup and bright lime, for a riff on the Queens Park Swizzle (one of Bennett’s favorite cocktails) via Indonesia and the Far East.

Batavia arrack remains, undoubtedly, a more divisive spirit than others that are simply misunderstood, forgotten or pigeonholed. But used strategically—whether in punches, as a rum replacement or as an unexpected seasoner akin to aromatic bitters—it can be a powerful tool in the cocktail-maker’s arsenal, albeit one with repercussions.

As Bravo puts it: “This is only recommended if you can endure the hangovers.”

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