



The Rebirth of a Pre-Prohibition Liquor

By Clay Risen

One man's quest to bring high-end, Peruvian-made pisco back into the bars of the United States



PiscoPorton.com

Of all the potent potables knocked flat by Prohibition, none has taken longer to climb back up to the bar as pisco, the clear, brandy-like Peruvian liquor. For a half-century before the Noble Experiment, it dominated the West Coast drinking scene; picked up by California-bound sailors after rounding Cape Horn, it practically built San Francisco, whose bars overflowed with sours, punches and shot after shot of straight pisco.

Yet by 1933, the journalist Herbert Asbury could describe it in near-mythic terms: Pisco "must have been something to write home about," he wrote in *Barbary Coast*, his profile of the City by the Bay. And yet, he reported, "so far as I could learn, no recognizable pisco brandy has been seen there since Prohibition. The speak-easy bartenders had never heard of it." Even today, despite a doubling of imports in recent years, pisco remains a rarity outside Latin-flavored bars.

Johnny Schuler would like to change that. Schuler is the master distiller of Portón, a relatively new

pisco that has quickly cornered the premium market in the United States. More importantly, perhaps, he is also the father of the modern pisco industry in Peru -- and its most zealous advocate, at home and abroad. He writes books. He hosts a TV show. If he hasn't met with every bartender who has ever even considered buying a bottle, he's close. Once, when a disgruntled restaurant owner in New Jersey called Portón's Lima office to cancel his account, Schuler was on a plane within hours and sidling up to the restaurant bar the next morning. He won back the account. For his effort, in 2007 the Peruvian Congress awarded him a Medal of Honor.

Schuler, who at 64 years old has the aged suavity of a Telenovela patriarch or a Bond villain, is a relatively recent convert to pisco. The son of a restaurant owner, he grew up, he said, behind his father's bar, aware of pisco in the dim, slightly condescending way that an American foodie might look at baloney. "It was the thing you had in the speed rack," he said.

It didn't help that, by the early 20th century, Peru's larger pisco makers had grown so dependent on American consumers that Prohibition wiped many of them out. And as Peru's economy grew after World War II, the new middle class inevitably turned to higher-status drinks like whiskey, rum and brandy. (Land reforms that pushed Peru's farmers into cotton and other crops hit struggling vineyards, too).

Still, pisco production persisted among small, rural distillers, who churned out a few dozen gallons a year for their families and friends. And while the market for the drink may have disappeared, the traditions and regulations didn't. By longstanding law, Peruvian pisco has to be distilled in copper pots from one of eight grape varieties, then allowed to mellow for at least three months. The distillations can be blended -- called "acholado" -- but nothing can be added, not even water. Acholados and "puros," or unblended piscos, can be equally good, but many discerning drinkers prefer a third category, called "mosto verde," which is made from grape juice that has only been partly fermented, so that it keeps some of its natural sweetness. (Portón is a mosto verde.)

Schuler knew next to none of this when, in the late 1980s, he accepted an invitation to a pisco tasting. By then he was a successful Lima restaurant owner and a macher on the local wine scene. He didn't expect much, but the tasting floored him. "The first few piscos were crap," he said. "But the fourth, I took a whiff, and my life changed." The next day he scoured the city's liquor stores and came home with 50 bottles. He spent the following months on weekend trips to visit the producers of the ones he most enjoyed. He stocked them in his restaurants, and he organized competitions, promotional tours, and his own tastings around the country. By the early 2000s, what had been a moribund artifact of rural Peruvian life was once again a national treasure.

Still, almost all the pisco made in Peru was consumed domestically. Because it came exclusively from small producers who had little marketing experience and often even less interest in growing commercially, there simply wasn't the sort of economy of scale that would make exporting worthwhile. Plus, there already was a pisco on the international market -- only, it was made in Chile. Though pisco has been made in Peru for hundreds of years and is named after a Peruvian port, the decline in national production through most of the 20th century allowed Chile and its massive wine industry to horn in on the market. Today Chile and its two dominant pisco distillers, Capel and Control, produce about 50 million liters, compared with the 7 million liters produced in Peru. If you've had pisco in the United States, chances are it came from Chile.

There are few things that will get a Peruvian as heated as a discussion about Chilean pisco; the very idea, to them, is anathema. When I asked Schuler about it, he inhaled deeply and pushed back his shoulders, like he was about to dress me down for insulting his mother. He ran through all the things that made Chilean pisco inferior: Capel and Control's industrial-style production methods, the lack of regulations regarding additives, even the use of barrels to impart color and wood flavors. Chilean pisco, he said, shouldn't even be called pisco, because most of it would never meet Peru's exacting standards -- and Peru was making pisco long before Chile. "These are two different products," he said. "Chilean pisco is usually caramel-colored, cognac-ish. We believe the beauty of pisco is in its primary strengths, its terroir and its grapes."

That's not to say there aren't good Chilean piscos out there, a fact that Schuler readily acknowledges. Two Chilean brands, WAQAR and Kappa, won double gold medals at the 2012 San Francisco World Spirits Competition, with WAQAR named best in class (Portón also won double gold). Still, if Schuler had his way, pisco would be an internationally recognized regional appellation, like scotch or bourbon or champagne, exclusive to Peru. (In bilateral terms, it is; you can't sell Chilean pisco in Peru, and vice versa.) The problem is, Chile's larger economy and powerful wine industry -- which relies on pisco production to soak up its excess grapes -- mean that the country pretty much gets what it wants; as a case in point, its recent free trade agreement with the United States explicitly recognized pisco as a product of both Peru and Chile (which caused all sorts of problems for American alcohol bureaus, whose regulations say pisco has to come from Peru).

But Schuler is unperturbed, in part because in 2009 he took a boat ride to Eleuthera Island, in the Bahamas, with Bill Kallop, a billionaire Houston oil investor. Kallop knew Peru and pisco well and saw the opportunity to create an export-focused, premium brand. "I never planned to do it commercially," Schuler said. "But I looked at the U.S. market and I realized there wasn't enough pisco being made locally to compete."

Kallop invited him on a trip aboard his yacht, where he offered to back Schuler in developing a pisco aimed at breaking open the foreign market. Schuler couldn't resist. He bought the ruins of a distillery built in 1684, which still has a working gravity-fed grape press, and named his new product after the estate's most notable feature, a massive stone door (Portón means "gate" in Spanish). At the same time, he and Kallop invested \$35 million in a new facility next door, complete with glass-lined tanks for aging the pisco and, in rafters above the stainless-steel fermentation tanks, plants to soak up the carbon dioxide emitted from the fermentation process. Portón owns four vineyards, but also buys grapes from a stable of 40 small farms.

This year Schuler plans to produce a million cases of Portón, 80 percent of which is slated for export. "In one year we've become the largest exporter," he said. He's placed it in videos with Shakira and behind the bar at restaurants in New York and L.A. He's tirelessly crisscrossed the Atlantic, getting Portón into an unending list of competitions (and winning more than 30 medals in the process). Eventually, he says, he'd like to start producing labeled vintages, a natural choice, since each batch of Portón is slightly different -- though each abounds in fruits, flowers and spices on the nose and a warming, viscous tingle on the tongue. For an 86-proof, unaged liquor, it's deceptively smooth, a quality Schuler hopes will give his pisco an edge over other less flavorful clear quaffs. (That means you, vodka.)

Given the wider range of alcohol available these days, it's unlikely that pisco will ever reach the dominant status it once held over San Francisco nightlife. But there's a good chance you'll see it behind more and more bars over the next year, especially Portón. Taste it when you find it -- and if you don't like it, don't be surprised if Schuler shows up before the night is through, imploring you to give it another try.

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