

Sweetening the Spirit 102 - Compare and Contrast – Rum and Strawberries

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

A cordial can be made many different ways but every part of it will change your flavor. Let's take a look.

History

In order to get a cordial, you must first be able to distil alcohol.

Muslims rediscovered the secrets of distillation from the classical world. The word al-kohl in Arabic refers to kohl the mascara that they and the Egyptians would wear for beauty and protection from the sun. The word is used to describe the mascara of wine [1]. Alcohol was discovered by Jabir Ibn Hayyan and then further refined by Al Rasi [2]. In later medieval times, alchemists referred to the distilled essence of something as the "spirit" of that thing. Hence, why we called distilled alcohols spirits.

There is evidence that the Muslims knew of, and at least one of them drank, something akin to a grain alcohol. The poet Abu Nuwas wrote many poems in praise of alcohol and in one of them, he refers to a wine, "the color of rainwater but is as hot inside the ribs as a burning firebrand" [3]. Rainwater would be clear and a fire burning sounds quite a bit like a high proof alcohol. Non-drinking Muslims did use alcohol for their make-up and perfumes, in their chemical and alchemical experiments, and medicines.

So, we have distilled alcohol in the 9th through 11th centuries at least. Mostly likely, there was a brandy-like substance and a high-proof neutral alcohol. I say "most-likely" because the European names of these substances do not come into being into much later.

The first "cordials" were most likely medical compounds and not necessarily drunk recreationally. Muslim medicine used alcohol (yes in spite of the Koran) and often used sugar. Sugar was known to soothe the stomach and relieves the harshness of many flavors. As the song says, a spoonful helps the medicine go down. There are several Arabic pharmaepaedia still in existence that describe the medicines that were used.

Making cordials

In Illinois in particular, and possibly many other states, home distillation is not legal. And may not be safe. So, I use commercially available alcohols. For "period" cordials, you are looking at brandy, clear alcohol (many use Vodka instead of everclear), wines, and gin (Verena assures me she has documentation that Gin is period). Other cordials can be made with rum, tequila, whiskey, and almost any other distilled alcohol you care to think of.

Rum, as we know it, is not period. Rum is made from molasses which is outside of our period. However, there is something called Brazilian Rum or cachaça that may be period. Cachaça is made from sugarcane juice. In Brazil, it is documentable to ~1550 (my thanks to Margret MacLeod). There are potential

sugarcane liquors from India or China. Marco Polo makes note of being served a “very good wine of sugar” while in Persia on his travels [4]. This is likely similar to cachaça.

So, for this experiment I am doing two things. First is the same pineapple rum cordial in dark rum, white rum, aged golden rum, and cachaça. The idea is to see how these different “rums” change the flavor. I also wanted to see what cachaça tastes like and determine what kind of rum it might replace to make a period cordial.

Second I have taken strawberries and made the same cordial in vodka, gin, and brandy. I have a pretty good idea about this one but again as a teaching tool, it is to demonstrate how changing the alcohol, now very different from each other, changes the flavor of the cordial.

Why would you use one liquor over another? Vodka is used as a neutral spirit. The intent is that the flavor of the thing itself is what you are after. This is good for any type of flavor but particularly good for subtle flavors. Brandy is a particularly strong flavor. It is good for other strong flavors or when you are looking for an accent. Brandy also imparts a rich and full flavor to a cordial. Gin can be divisive. People either really like it or hate it. For cordials, you want a gin that is not already flavored. Gin is good for citrus and botanicals. That is not to say that you can’t do anything with anything. Some surprising flavor combinations work in spite of these suggestions. So, these are just suggestions.

References

[1] Iain Gatley, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 72

[2] Iain Gatley, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 71, p.72

[3] Iain Gatley, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 72

[4] Barbara Holland, *The Joy of Drinking*, p. 71.