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Holiday Drinks



Take Care

After months of ads for health drinks and functional wellness tonics, I think my Facebook feed is worried about me. Sip our detox tea for clean energy. Knock back a turmeric shot to fight the debilitating inflammation that I apparently suffer.

Even with free shipping, snake oil is snake oil. But I'm tempted. Who wouldn't want a tasty potion to do away with their infirmities? "What's this for?" I'd ask my mom of the brandy-based Hot Toddy she brought me when I was sick in bed. "Everything," she'd say with a smirk.

"What's this for?" is a question we should ask of all kinds of drinks, a reminder that they're channels for moods and stories, not just flavors. Take a Margarita to excite you. A Corpse Reviver to revitalize you. A cup of Canelazo to make you whole.

Canelazo is the hot toddy of the Andes, an aromatic and deceptively forceful drink made with cinnamon, citrus and a neutral sugarcane spirit called *aguardiente*. Depending on who's making it, the recipe may include other warm spices as well as the tawny twang of *panela* and local fruits. It tastes like a spice mill housed in the tropics, but wherever your home is, a sip of Canelazo can take you there.

"It's my way to retain the culture and share a childhood memory," says chef Humberto Guallpa, whose Taste of Origin pop-ups in New York City and across the U.S. explore his native Ecuadorian cuisine through a global lens. High in the mountainous part of Cañar Province, where Guallpa spent much of his childhood on his grandmother's farm, the setting sun ushers in frigid air.

During the harvest season, Guallpa's grandmother brewed deep pots of Canelazo for the workers in the fields, a liquid gesture of gratitude for a hard day's work that chased away the chill "and opened your appetite," he adds. He continues the tradition at his Taste of Origin dinners, steeping cinnamon, star anise, raw sugar, orange juice, and lemon peel with a purée of *tomate de arbol*, an Ecuadorian fruit that's sweeter and tangier than tomato

but plays a similar jazzy tune. "At the last dinner, people came back for three rounds," he says with a laugh. "They'd say, 'Oh my god, you just sent me back home.'"

At the Queens restaurant Casa del Chef, every meal begins with a shot of Canelazo on the house. The chef

Alfonso Zhicay simmers water, passion fruit pulp, cinnamon sticks, and anise seeds with sugar to make a tangy spiced infusion, then adds lime juice and doses each glass with a measure of *Zhumir*, Ecuador's most popular *aguardiente*. At once cozy and stimulating, it's an ideal aperitif.

Translated as "firewater," and sometimes called *guaro*, a slang term for booze, *aguardiente* is distilled from sugarcane juice and refined until relatively flavorless, though it retains a whisper of cane's grassy, vanilla bite. Colombian distillers spice their versions with anise for a kind of moonshiney *pastis*; in both countries, the spirit is bottled around 30 percent ABV. I can't say I'm a fan of drinking *aguardiente* straight, but it fits the Canelazo formula better than anything else. *Cumbé*, a new Colombian brand, may be the smoothest of the lot, thanks in part to a rest in white oak casks that mellow the *guaro*'s

heat. Zhicay suggests you could substitute with Brazilian *cachaça* or *rhum agricole*, though "you wouldn't be making Canelazo anymore."

Zhicay also grew up in rural Ecuador, sneaking sips of Canelazo when workers came in from the fields. "Before you worry about the food," he says, "making Canelazo is the first thing. You must have it to welcome your guests, and you must drink it as the right beginning for your appetite."

So what's Canelazo for? Everything that matters.

By Max Falkowitz



A glass of Canelazo at Casa del Chef in Queens, New York.