

# imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

QUENCH

## All Bark, No Bite



For a twiggy Dominican elixir, island roots grow deep

CATALINA SANTOS DRANK A SHOT OF MAMAJUANA, a rum-based infusion of herbs, roots and barks, every night for decades. When the effects of old age finally set in at 90, the Dominican grandmother needed sleeping pills and her doctor advised cutting out alcohol altogether. Just a few months later, she passed away, and while it can't be proven that it was the mamajuana that kept her thriving into her elder years, Catalina's routine is to Dominicans what drinking wine is to the French and what knocking back pints of ale is in too many cultures to count: an age-old, unceremonious tradition. It's a bulwark of Dominican culture.

Like most customs, this one is handed down through generations. Luis Rodríguez is a bartender at Puerto Plata's Casa Colonial Hotel, where the genteel lobby bar offers an orchestra pit-caliber view of the palm tree-dappled beach along the Atlantic. Rodríguez, a burly man, proudly tells me that he has his parents' bottle of mamajuana, to which he continuously adds rum to replenish what's depleted. It's more than 20 years old.

That tonic is different from the mamajuana he keeps at the bar. Making mamajuana involves macerating several dozen herbs, roots and barks in rum, typically Brugal Añejo, from the island's largest distillery. Then time and alchemy kick in. In keeping with island sensibility, the practice is pretty informal, so each bottle tends to be distinct to the person making it. To start a mamajuana batch, Rodríguez preps the dry mix (he bought his mix during a trip to the countryside) with hot water for 10 minutes, drains it, then adds about an inch of honey and measure of red table wine, and fills it with rum, leaving the dry ingredients steeping in the bottle. In three days, it's ready to drink. The rum absorbs the bitter elements of the mini jungle for the first few fills, hence the honey. After at least a month, when roots and barks are cured, he adds raisins as an alternate, subtler sweetener. "Every time you drink some, add rum," he says. "If it's too bitter, add honey. My mamajuana at home doesn't need any more honey. After 20 years, it's super-cured."

Rodríguez pours me a shot of the musky-sweet elixir from a bottle containing a dense tangle of what's generally referred to as "sticks and twigs," all of which come from the island's forests and

farms. The pungent smell suggests a thicket of chamomile, clove and cinnamon growing in mulch. It has a light syrupy quality that isn't cloying. While the dry mixture is sold at sidewalk carts in major cities, Dominicans will tell you how someone in the family drove to the countryside years ago to pick up a mixture at a bodega, presumably to get it closer to the source, but largely, it's tradition.

When tourists ask for—or, better yet, about—the drink, they're usually met with a mischievous grin. The inquiry is apparently a sign that you don't recoil from tomfoolery, as many non-islanders are wont to do. You quickly learn (usually in hushed tones) that according to legend, mamajuana "increases potency." The euphemisms are legion.

From polished resorts to shadowy, gritty late-night clubs to the confines of people's homes, housemade mamajuana is served everywhere in the Dominican Republic. Yet its origins are as mysterious as the drink is ubiquitous. What is known? The name comes from *Dame Juana*, a Spanish iteration of the French word for the English demijohn bottles in which it was stored hundreds of years ago. Common wisdom says that the recipe dates back to the Taino Indians, who resided on the island when Christopher Columbus famously docked there, but according to Jacques a'Campo, president of Kalemhu, one of the first mass-produced mamajuana brands in the Dominican Republic (it arrived in the U.S. in May 2009), rum production didn't start there until the 18th century, 200 years after the Taino population waned. However, the Tainos did make a similar drink called *mabi*, a blend of sticks, twigs and barks that was alcohol-free and strictly for medicinal use, according to a'Campo.

For many Dominicans living stateside, Kalemhu is a welcome discovery. At El Corde Steakhouse, which has two locations in Washington Heights, a Manhattan neighborhood with a large Dominican population, customers can share memories of home while enjoying the native flavor of mamajuana. Like it's done for generations, the herbal tonic still serves as a remedy of sorts, mending the homesick hearts of Dominicans living abroad.

— Liza Weissstuch