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Liqueur with tea, herbs full of life

Qi Spirits creates smoky-sweet drink that can be sipped, mixed, even used in cooking

By VIRGINIE BOONE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Traveling around Scotland back in the 1980s with the Duchess of Argyle, Brian Backus discovered the subtleties of single-malt scotch.

There on a fellowship, Backus was meant to be furthering his field studies in biology. But the exposure to craft distilling was what ultimately stuck, an unintended education in a delicious world of flavors that led to a very different career indeed - one devoted to making Chinese tea-based liqueurs.

"I was blown away by the technique, the love, the care that people were taking and the variations in flavor," Backus remembered. "We were drinking crap in this country at the time. None of the upgradings of any of the spirits categories had begun. Beer was Coors, wine was Almaden in a box, vodka was Popov."

Backus, 42, who earned a biology degree and an MBA from Harvard, as well as a master of fine arts degree from USC, zigzagged from studying birds as a field biologist in Papua New Guinea to producing kids shows for Disney and later running his own media software company.

Along the way, a burgeoning interest in herbal medicine took root that would soon complement his fascination for distilling.

"We think of herbal medicine as a very Eastern tradition," he said. "It's a Western tradition as well, but the way it's expressed in the West (is through) the great herbal spirits that are made in the same craft way the single malts are in Scotland."

By herbal spirits he refers to such things as Chartreuse, Fernet-Branca, Absinthe, even, improbably, Jagermeister, most of which were originally designed to aid in digestion.

As Backus likes to point out, even Hippocrates made a medicinal liqueur from fermented honey and cinnamon called Hippocras.

"Most digestive liqueurs were created in the monasteries of France and Italy," Backus added. "None had been created in the last hundred years, much less in the United States, (so) why not update this tradition?"

Backus found further inspiration through the experiences of his grandparents: His grandfather, a civil engineer, built bridges in China from 1911 until the Japanese bombing of Manchuria some 20 years later; his grandmother was on the last train out as the bombing began. With

her were scribbles of formulas and recipes, amassed through the years, for local herbal spirits.

Herbal elixirs go way back in China. Evidence of fermented beverages is now believed to date back 9,000 years, with the recent discovery of ancient pottery jars from Henan province in northern China.

During the Chinese New Year, a medicinal liquor made from peppers and cypress leaves is enjoyed, a symbol of luck, health and long life.

Using some of his grandmother's secreted recipes, Backus started making his own herbal spirits, playing with different infusions in his San Francisco kitchen and bathtub.

"I made some undrinkable, disgusting potions," Backus recalled. "They were really good for you, but you wouldn't want to drink them."

A mutual friend put him in touch with chocolate magnate John Scharffenberger, who became a mentor, encouraging Backus to keep pursuing his idea for something new.

"I'm a huge fan of digestifs and aperitifs and I thought maybe I could help," said Scharffenberger.

It was also Scharffenberger who introduced Backus to his future business partner, Lance Winters, the co-owner and distiller for St. George Spirits in Alameda, a renowned craft producer of eau de vie, brandy, whiskey and Hangar One vodka.

"We had a lot of tastings, tasting the good, the bad and the ugly," Scharffenberger recalled. "But we steered strongly in the deliciousness direction."

Backus, Scharffenberger and Winters spent two years experimenting with different formulas and ideas, with Winters imaginatively proposing that they use tea as their base.

"It's the oldest herbal medicine on the planet and the most widely consumed herbal medicine on the planet," Backus explained.

With that in mind, they decided to call themselves Qi Spirits, since Qi, pronounced "chee," means "life force." They launched their first product, Qi Tea Liqueur, a year ago, made from Lapsang Souchong, a black tea from China's Fukian province that is smoked over cedar fires, giving it a distinctive smoky essence.

"Lapsang Souchong is a very, very bold flavor and for our first one we wanted to make sure you could really taste the tea," Backus said.

The tea is double cold-infused to extract tannins without diminishing flavor, and then separately distilled herbs, spices, flowers and such are blended in, including orange peel, honey, Tahitian vanilla and barrel-aged chardonnay brandy.

The result is a smoky-sweet liqueur that is 40 percent alcohol by volume (80 proof) but only 2 percent sugar by weight, versus the typical 20 percent to 30 percent sugar of most liqueurs.

Thus "drier" than many liqueurs, it can be sipped like a Cognac or single-malt scotch, and is equally enjoyable on the rocks, mixed into cocktails or even used in cooking - from meat glazes to creme brulée. It costs about \$40 a bottle.

"The goal was to take you on an exotic journey following the Spice Road," explained Backus, "starting at the very far east of China all the way through India, through Sri Lanka, through the Middle East and southern Europe, all the way to Morocco."

Lapsang Souchong marks the beginning of the Spice Road. This month, to represent the Mediterranean, Qi will release Qi White, a distillation of white tea, clove, ginger and exotic

citrus, including Italian bergamot, whose peel is used in Earl Grey tea.

White tea is more subtle than black, with an earthy, mushroomy taste. Made from the delicate new buds of a tea plant, it is rare and prized. It is also very high in antioxidants yet much lower in tannins than black or green teas.

Qi White's delicious essence of orange is reminiscent of Cointreau or Grand Marnier, and it mixes well in recipes calling for such orangey liqueurs.

But the real test will be Asia itself, where Qi plans to release its tea-based liqueurs soon. Toward that end they've teamed up with Michel Martell of the Martell Cognac family, in part because the Chinese are huge fans of such luxury quaffs as Cognac (in addition to high-end single-malt scotch) and so it is a market Martell can help them better understand.

For now, whether or not the Chinese will take to Bay Area-produced, craft-distilled black and white tea liqueurs is a question that remains unanswered. "It could," Backus acknowledged, "be like selling coal to Newcastle, as they used to say."

Lemon Ginger Drop

1 ounce Qi Tea Liqueur
½ ounce lemon juice
3 pieces fresh ginger
5 mint leaves
1 sugar cube

Muddle mint and ginger. Add Qi and lemon juice. Shake and strain into a sugar-rimmed martini glass with sugar cube at the bottom then garnish with lemon.

- from Qi

Rickshaw

1 ounce, Qi Tea Liqueur
1 whole lemon squeeze
½ ounce, orange juice
¼ ounce, simple syrup
¼ ounce, Triple Sec
Shake over ice and strain into a sugar-rimmed martini glass and garnish with lemon twist.

- from Bacar

Tiger Woods

1 ounce, Qi Tea Liqueur
2 ounces, iced tea
2 ounces, sparkling lemonade
- from Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen

Pour into a tall glass over ice, then mix and garnish with lemon.