

The Original Cuban Cocktail | PUNCH

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In Cuba, there's an old adage: *Sin azúcar no hay país*. Translation: Without sugar, there is no country. Hiking among the decrepit remains of mills, barracks and plantations in Cuba's Valle de los Ingenios, a UNESCO World Heritage site near the colonial city of Trinidad, it's apparent just how vital sugar once was to the country's national identity. At its peak as Cuba's principal sugar region, the valley had over 50 working mills requiring an engine of 11,000 laborers. It's also here that the Canchánchara cocktail was created, its formula a reflection of Central Cuba's agricultural and emancipatory heritage.

Virtually unknown off the island, the Canchánchara is made with *aguardiente de caña* (the first distillation of sugar cane), honey, *limón crillo* (also known as Mexican lime or key lime) and water. Its invention is attributed to the *mambises*, guerrilla fighters in the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and the War of Independence (1895–1898).

“It's the original Cuban cocktail,” says Julio Cabrera, co-owner of Miami's Café La Trova (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/what-were-into-right-now-march-2019/>), a new Cuban restaurant and bar in the Little Havana neighborhood.

“The drink is named after the leather-covered flask that the *mambises* carried on their saddles. They would drink it before battle and as a morning toddy to ward off cold, hunger and fatigue.” Cabrera, who grew up in Cuba, where his father owned a bar, has built a career in the tradition of *cantinero*, or Cuban-style bartending. The Canchánchara, he says, “never gained the same recognition as the Daiquiri (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/daiquiri/>) or Mojito (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/mojito/>) because it wasn't created by a

bartender or a bar, nor promoted by a liquor company.” He explains that it also didn’t benefit from popularity in Havana during Prohibition, when Americans flocked to the island to skirt temperance.



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La Chancleta (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/la-chancleta/>)

The Canchánchara combines aguardiente de caña, honey, lime juice and water.

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Travel guide Dennis Valdés Pilar, who hails from Trinidad, says the Canchánchara has always been intertwined with his city’s identity and culture. “It incorporates the region’s history of slavery and struggle for independence,” he says. For slaves working 18-hour days in the cane fields of the Valle de los Ingenios, the drink acted as a restorative tonic in the same way that switchel did in the American South.

According to Pilar, slaves historically consumed beverages from *jícaras*, squat vessels made from the dried fruit of calabash trees, which are now typically made from clay. Though ice was not part of the Canchánchara's original recipe, today the drink is stirred or shaken and served over ice in a *jícara* sans garnish, except for perhaps a slender bamboo straw.

When the Soviet Union, Cuba's longtime ally, collapsed in 1991, the island's sugar empire declined; today cane is grown only for domestic use and is supplemented by imports. And for a time during the late 20th century, says Cabrera, the Canchánchara was lost to Trinidad, even as it achieved some popularity in Havana. Happily, the cocktail has experienced a revival in its birthplace.

Despite the simple formula, there's considerable variation amongst Cancháncharas, ranging from delightfully viscid to cloying or watery. Most Cuban bars now use *plata* rum instead of aguardiente (Cabrera attributes this to availability), and the drink may be made with pure honey or honey simple syrup. In Trinidad, a UNESCO-designated site where horse carts nearly outnumber cars, the most popular spot for a Canchánchara is Taberna la Canchánchara. Formerly a residence in one of the city's oldest buildings, it's a rustic bar with stone floors and heavy wooden beams. Since 1994, locals and tourists have come to sip the namesake cocktail on the shady patio and purchase bottles of Santero Aguardiente de Cuba. At Restaurante El Criollo, a *paladar* (privately owned restaurant), an excellent Canchánchara rich with fragrant local honey can be had while overlooking Trinidad's cobbled streets and pastel-hued, 16th-century colonial buildings.

In Cabrera's version, called La Chancleta (Spanish for "flip-flops"), he uses local sunflower and orange blossom honey syrup laced with ginger juice for aromatic zing. "I add just enough to the cocktail to flavor it, rather than make it viscous," he says. "It's too hard to get dissolution if you use honey straight." Cabrera uses Yaguara Cachaça Ouro because its profile is similar to Cuban aguardiente. Alternatively, he likes Clément Première Canne Rhum Blanc Agricole.

Perhaps it wasn't touted by Hemingway or created in a famous cocktail bar in Havana, but like so much vital to the persistence of Cuban culture and memory, says Pilar, "[the Canchánchara] has the power to take you to the past. Its magic is rooted in our struggles and ancestors."

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