



# SPIRITS

*of the* Caribbean

Happy accidents and well-kept secrets lie behind two of the Caribbean's most distinctive exports: Curaçao liqueur and Angostura bitters

by Hope S. Philbrick



The Caribbean Sea, world-renowned for its rum, is also home to two popular spirits that were created by mistake. Curaçao of Curaçao Liqueur and Angostura Aromatic Bitters both prove that sometimes, things gone wrong can taste oh so right. Many of the details are still secret, but Wine Report reveals what we discovered during recent visits to the production facilities of these two unexpected spirituous successes.

## Curaçao Liqueur

The original idea was to grow oranges. After Spanish explorers discovered the island of Curaçao off the coast of Venezuela in 1499, they wanted to plant Valencia oranges there so they could take citrus fruit with them on their journeys home. But Curaçao's climate is very different from Spain's. "They didn't think about the soil, the sun and the dry weather that we have," says John Bradshaw, production manager of Curaçao Liqueur. Instead of delicious sweet oranges, the ripened fruit was extremely bitter and "something not even goats wanted to eat," Bradshaw says. The oranges were officially renamed *Citrus aurantium curassuviensis* ("golden orange of Curaçao"), to eliminate any association with Spain's sweet Valencia oranges, and locals started calling them Laraha oranges. Whole groves of Laraha oranges were left forgotten and rotting for decades.

Dried Laraha orange peels are brown like cardboard and stiff as Styrofoam. At some point, someone—there is no record of exactly who it was—broke a piece of dried Laraha peel, took a whiff, and discovered a concentrated orange scent that was both intoxicatingly sweet and completely unexpected, given the fruit's bitter taste.

During the 19th century, a Frenchman experimented with making liqueurs from the aromatic oils of dried Laraha peels. A recipe for dried-Laraha liqueur made its way from France to the Senior family in Curaçao, who performed further experiments using different production methods and exotic spices. Eventually, the family developed a recipe that's still used today. "We have secret ingredients," says Bradshaw, refusing to elaborate.

Though some production details remain shrouded in mystery, Bradshaw reveals that Laraha oranges grow on plantations in the eastern part of the island. Each tree yields approximately 200 oranges, or 44 pounds of dried peels. Green fruit is harvested twice a year (ripe fruit is not used because ripe peels are thinner). Peels are cut into triangular segments, baked under the sun for approximately five days, and then placed into jute bags along with a mixture of "spices and herbs that is very secret—nobody knows," says Bradshaw. Then, by way of clarification, he shrugs and says, "A few people."

The bags then hang inside a still for three days in a process that Bradshaw likens to steeping tea. “The idea with a tea bag is you want the product’s taste in the water, but you don’t want the product itself in the water. We do the same. We just put the ‘tea bag’ in alcohol that is 96 percent pure, and we cook it for three days at 150 Celsius. After making the strong ‘tea,’ we take out the bag and add rainwater.” Additional secret ingredients are placed into the still prior to distillation, a process that takes another three days. After distillation, sugar is added to the distillate before it is filtered. “It takes three days of cooking, one day of cooling down, three days of distilling and three days of filtering” to produce Curaçao liqueur, Bradshaw says. The filtered product is clear. “For cocktail purposes, we do put in food coloring,” he says. Blue is perhaps the most well-known color of Curaçao liqueur, but green, orange, red and clear are also available.

Bradshaw speaks with admiration of the special-order copper still that Senior & Co. purchased in 1896. “They made a very big investment in that kettle,” he says. “And it was a very good investment, because we’re still using the same kettle. The way they made Curaçao liqueur 110 years ago, we’re making it precisely the same way today.” It’s also produced in the same country mansion, Chobolobo.

Though the goal of all the secrecy is to prohibit anybody else from making “the” Curaçao liqueur, that hasn’t stopped imitators from trying, says Bradshaw. The Senior family made a “big, big mistake” when they called their spirit “Curaçao Liqueur,” he says. “They didn’t know that the name of an island or a country cannot be protected” as a product name, he explains. To differentiate their product from everyone else’s, Senior & Co. changed the name of their liqueur to “Curaçao of Curaçao.” Also, the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau has ruled that only Senior & Co. is authorized to use the words “the authentic” on a Curaçao liqueur label. “We’re the best,” says Bradshaw, pointing out that other manufacturers use artificial flavors instead of Laraha oil.

## Angostura Aromatic Bitters

The recipe for Angostura Aromatic Bitters, originally developed in 1824, has been a secret for even longer than the Curaçao Liqueur recipe. Exactly how that secret is protected is the main topic of discussion during a tour of the House of Angostura, located in a 20-acre complex in Trinidad.

“Five people know the recipe right now,” says Angostura tour guide Rae-Sal Stoute. “We call them ‘manufacturers.’” She explains that the five manufacturers are not allowed to travel together. “At the Christmas party, they can’t eat the same food or drink the same drinks,” because protecting the health of these five crucial employees is one way the company safeguards its intellectual capital. “They come here only when a batch is needed.”



The first step in making a batch of Angostura Aromatic Bitters is to obtain the botanical ingredients from London, England. “To keep the secret a secret from customs—of course, they’d peek at some point—what happens is we put in a lot more botanicals than what we actually need, just to throw them off,” Stoute says. Once the botanicals arrive at Angostura House, they are batched, coded and stored in large bags in the manufacturing room.

When it’s time to make a new batch, the manufacturer on call “does his weighing in a secret room, which is right above the big grinder,” says Stoute. **“He sends all of the botanicals down a chute, grinds up everything and moves it into huge baskets.”** The next step of distilling, she says, “is like making coffee, but instead of coffee beans you have the botanicals, and instead of hot water you have alcohol. Angostura Aromatic Bitters actually has more alcohol than rum; rum is 14 percent, and this is 44.7 percent.” The distillate sits in tanks for a minimum of three months, and then distilled water is added to the concentrate. “After that, it’s ready to be bottled,” says Stoute.

This highly guarded secret started out as a way to cure stomach disorders and severe fevers. Dr. Johann Gottlieb Benjamin Siegert left Germany in 1820 to join Simon Bolivar’s fight against Spain and was appointed Surgeon-General of the Military Hospital in Angostura, Venezuela. In an effort to treat the fevers and stomach ailments he was seeing among his patients, he became an apothecary and experimented with distilling herbs and plants that local Native Americans claimed could cure or treat various illnesses. After four years of experimentation, he developed a unique blend of herbs that he called Amargo Aromatico, or “aromatic bitters.” It’s not the potion’s medicinal benefits that have kept it on shelves for the past 183 years, but rather its pleasing taste and aroma. In 2000, average production levels of Angostura Aromatic Bitters reached 50 million liters.

The trick to verifying the authenticity of Angostura Aromatic Bitters is to see if it floats. “In any liquid, [genuine Angostura Aromatic Bitters] always floats to the top,” says Stoute. “A lot of people have tried to imitate it, but they’ve never gotten that one part right.”

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