

SALUD!

Try Colombia's National Drink: Firewater

“Are you sure you want to try the *aguardiente*? It’s super strong,” said the waitress at a rooftop bar in Medellin.

“As in, ‘I’m going to go blind if I drink it’ strong? Or as in ‘I’ll fall off my chair if I drink a bottle of it’ strong?” I asked. After assuring me it was the latter, my husband Mark and I ordered a bottle.

Aguardiente is Colombia’s much-prized local hooch. You can find it in all the bars and restaurants in the country. Most bars sell it by the fifth or in fancy craft cocktails, but we wanted to try it in its purest form: the shot.

The word *aguardiente* comes from a blend of *agua* (water) and *ardiente* (burning). Basically, the name translates to firewater. Once I figured that out, I braced myself, ready to embrace the burn, expecting a moonshine kind of blaze that would leave my esophagus screaming for a firehose.

While the waitstaff eyeballed me—making me even more nervous—I stood up (just in case). I took the shot... and was pleasantly surprised. No fire.

It tasted like black licorice or Sambuca—not as syrupy, but equally as warming. I quite enjoyed it.

It’s made from fermented sugar cane



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These colorfully decorated flasks are designed to carry bottles of *aguardiente*.

that’s distilled to smooth it out. The final touch of anise gives it that robust flavor. When I took a closer look at the bottle, I read the alcohol content. It’s a relatively low 29% compared to vodkas and whiskeys at 40%.

Each Colombian department, or state, distills its own variety, so wherever you travel, there will be a favorite local brand. In fact, *aguardiente* can be found throughout South America in some form or other.

Turns out, despite *aguardiente*’s infamous reputation, its bark is worse than its bite. Mark and I continued to drink our bottle—and remained firmly attached to our chairs. —Kirsten Raccuia