



IN SEARCH OF COLOMBIA'S ANCIENT BEER

Words

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On the edge of Bogotá's historic Candelaria district near the misty green

slopes of Cerro de Monserrate, Plaza Chorro de Quevedo has long been a meeting place for students, bohemians, artists, musicians, drifters and drinkers. When I visited the square on an overcast, drizzly afternoon, a stand-up comedian was performing in front of a whitewashed church, a mid-20th-century replica of the colonial-era original that once stood on the site. A dozen people listened, sheltering under umbrellas, doing their best to ignore a woman in a canary-yellow tracksuit, who lay spreadeagled on the paving stones, belting out a Spanish-language version of Rock the Casbah.

The bars surrounding the plaza, once the centre of an indigenous Muisca settlement before the Spanish founded the modern city of Bogotá here in 1538, advertised two-for-one deals on mojitos and Cuba libres. Street carts sold obleas, thin, circular wafers filled with combos of caramel, grated cheese, jam and sprinkles. A police officer armed with a baton and a muzzled Rottweiler leaned against an archway topped with a sculpture of a juggling unicyclist, the entrance to Calle del Embudo ("Funnel Street"), a narrow, cobbled passage lined with street art and drinking dens. Nearby, a man with a full-face tattoo gently strummed a guitar beside a mural of an indigenous woman, her eyes to the sky, the sun rising in the background.

‘WOMEN CHEWED THE CORN, WHICH ‘GAVE BIRTH’ TO THE FERMENTATION’

It is easy to lose yourself in the spectacle of the Plaza Chorro de Quevedo, but I was there to try an ancient drink that has endured centuries of vilification, propaganda and prohibition. Before long, a young woman sidled up and offered me a plastic Coke bottle half filled with a cloudy, viscous, orangey-yellow liquid. “Chicha?” she asked.

Typically made from fermented corn, chicha has been drunk across Central and South America – from Mexico in the north to Chile in the south – for millennia. Some academics believe the drink dates back as far as 5000 BCE. Traditionally, human saliva kicked off the fermentation process, explained Robert Villegas González, a historian, sociologist and “chichero” (chicha expert). “Making chicha was a job for women,” he said. “They cut up the corn, soaked the pieces in water, chewed them, and spat them into a clay pot.” Enzymes in the saliva turn the starches into sugar, which is then converted into alcohol by yeast or bacteria during the fermentation process, which can last eight days or more. (Modern chicha often omits the chewing stage.)

In Colombia, chicha is usually made from corn or, to a lesser extent, cassava, but elsewhere in Latin America ingredients such as quinoa, potatoes, bananas and apples are used, with non-alcoholic versions also available. It is often described as an acquired taste. The corn version I tried had a milky consistency, a slightly sour tang, and packed a stronger alcoholic punch than expected.

It would be difficult to describe the scenes in the Plaza Chorro de Quevedo as anything approaching sacred, but for indigenous cultures such as the Muisca, chicha was much more than a drink. It was used in religious rituals and festivals and at events such as weddings, where the couple would drink chicha to ensure a marriage filled with fertility, happiness and wealth. “It was a complementary concept. It was believed the sun was male and his masculine energy made the corn grow. The women then chewed the corn, which ‘gave birth’ to the fermentation process,” said González.

For visitors to Colombia, it is worth trying chicha for the distinctive taste alone. But I was soon drawn in by the drink’s tumultuous 500-year history.

Chicheria LAS BENDITAS BEBIDAS ANCESTRAL TRADICIONAL



**'CHICHA BECAME
A SYMBOL OF
RESISTANCE'**





When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in what is now Colombia, they quickly developed an interest in chicha, its fermentation process and rituals. But it didn't take long for negative attitudes to take root. "Chicha was always made and sold by indigenous women," said González. "They had a certain economic power because they were earning money, and were [often] single, free, unmarried. That didn't fit in with the sexist attitudes of the time." For the Spanish, chicherías – bars-cum-community hubs where chicha was drunk, often from communal bowls passed around a group – increasingly came to be associated with poverty, vulgarity and vice.

These bars were also seen as a potential threat to the brutal colonial system. "The chicherías were in the poorer, indigenous areas and were frequented mainly by indigenous people," said González. "The Spanish created laws against the congregation of people in these places. They thought it was dangerous when indigenous people gathered together because it could reinforce their identity at a time when the Spanish were trying to impose their culture on the country. They feared chicherías were places to discuss politics, even insurrection." The Catholic church soon got involved, threatening to excommunicate anyone who frequented a chichería.

These attitudes continued after Colombia won its independence from Spain in the early 19th century. Yet the clampdown largely failed. While retaining its sacred links for many indigenous people, chicha increasingly became the drink of the wider working classes. "It became a symbol of resistance," said González.

At the turn of the 20th century, there were around 800 chicherías in Bogotá and more than 50 million litres of the drink were consumed every year. Over the following decades the grinding poverty and lack of opportunities faced by working class Colombians, particularly those from indigenous backgrounds, were increasingly hard to ignore, even for an out-of-touch political elite. Yet rather than address the underlying social, economic and racial structures, the authorities blamed chicha for Colombia's ills.

The government imposed higher taxes and tighter regulations on chicherías, driving many underground. Underscored by persistent racist attitudes against indigenous Colombians, it also launched a fierce propaganda campaign depicting chicha as unhygienic, unhealthy, uncivilised, and a barrier to progress, as well as a cause of stupidity, sexual proclivity and physical weakness. Children were warned about chicha in schools and doctors toured working class neighbourhoods, claiming the drink was linked to syphilis and could even cause “chichismo”, a pseudo-disease that reputedly led to violence and insanity. Posters with images of bloody knives and men behind bars alongside slogans such as “The prisons are filled with chicha drinkers”, “Chicha brutalises you”, and “Don’t drink fermented beverages” became a common sight.

The demonisation of chicha chimed with the business aspirations of Leo Siegfried Kopp, a German immigrant who founded Colombia’s first brewery, Bavaria, in 1889. Alongside the efforts of the political authorities, Kopp and his fellow brewers launched advertising campaigns that portrayed beer as modern, wholesome, healthy and European, in sharp contrast to ancient, indigenous chicha. One Bavaria advert featured a Germanic-looking woman holding a frothy glass of lager beside the slogan “No more chicha”. In another, a man cheerfully helps a young boy with a mop of blonde hair to guzzle from a stein of beer.

These campaigns had a significant impact on public attitudes, but it took a seminal moment in Colombia’s history to deliver chicha a near-fatal blow. On 9 April 1948, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, charismatic leader of the left-wing Liberal party and a prominent candidate for the presidency, was murdered in downtown Bogotá. The assassination of the “voice of the people” sparked the Bogotazo, a 10-hour riot that destroyed much of the city centre, left thousands dead, and plunged the country into a decade-long conflict known as La Violencia. Gabriel García Márquez described it as the day “the twentieth century began in Colombia.”

One of the many casualties of the Bogotazo was chicha. “The [Conservative] government took advantage of the situation,” said González.

“It claimed drinking chicha was one of the reasons behind the Bogotazo, that people were losing their minds with anger because of chicha. The violence had nothing to do with chicha, of course, it was just a convenient excuse.” In November 1948, the government passed a law requiring fermented drinks to be industrially produced and sold in individual sealed bottles. Long stigmatised by the authorities, chicha was now effectively banned.

The law was eventually lifted in 1991, but although chicha continued to be drunk in the intervening years, particularly in indigenous communities, chicherías largely died out and the drink never recovered its former popularity. “Chicha’s not something most people today would think to serve at a dinner party or go out and have at a bar,” said González. But pockets of chicha culture still survive in Bogotá, notably in and around Plaza Chorro de Quevedo. “The area has always been a place to find chicha,” he said. “Students have drunk chicha for a long time because it’s associated with the counter culture. It’s like being a rebel, drinking something your father doesn’t drink. Travellers also come to try it – they are often more willing than locals, as they haven’t been exposed to the [stigma].”

As the global popularity of fermented products such as kimchi and kombucha has surged in recent years, some Colombian chefs have started to take a greater interest in chicha. They include Alex Salgado, whose city centre restaurant Ocio sits a stone’s throw from La Perseverancia, the neighbourhood founded by Bavaria to house its workers. Salgado’s interest in chicha comes from his grandmother, who used it to make dishes such as arepas, circular corn patties often stuffed with cheese. “It’s not that common, but more chefs are starting to use chicha in their restaurants. Most have family links to it, like me. It’s starting to become trendy,” he said.

Salgado served me his house-made chicha, fermented for six days, with an alcohol level of 8-12 per cent. It was smooth and sharply refreshing, with a cleaner taste than the chicha I’d tried before. He also makes a chicha vinegar that resembles balsamic and uses chicha-based marinades to flavour and tenderise meat. “Food and drink are very effective tools for telling stories – that’s the whole point of cooking,” he said. “It’s important to use things like chicha so we maintain culinary traditions and techniques and pass them on to the next generations.”



The next evening I headed back to the Plaza Chorro de Quevedo, testament to chicha's resilience. A sword juggler had replaced the comedian, and the surrounding bars and cafes were heaving. "Se vende chicha" ("Chicha for sale") signs were commonplace and tables were laid out with plastic bottles of the drink in a variety of flavours – from traditional corn to grape, passion fruit, and strawberry. One man carried a totuma, a traditional drinking vessel fashioned from a gourd.

I found a hole-in-the-wall joint and bought a glass of chicha flavoured with lulo, a tart local citrus fruit. As I drank, I thought back to my conversation with González. The renewed interest in chicha, he explained, is "like rediscovering our history, our flavours, our smells. Our history and heritage were denied for so long – this is a way to recover and remember them." [📌](#)