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Liqueurs

Aims and learning outcomes

This chapter introduces the world of liqueurs, covering their history, their many varied ingredients, the production processes and the main categories. On completion of this chapter, the learner should be able to:

- Explain the origins, ingredients involved and production process of liqueurs.
- Act on the recreational, culinary and medicinal uses for liqueurs.

8.1 Introduction

Presented in distinctively shaped, coloured and sized bottles, liqueurs offer a vast array of flavours, are often steeped in a rich cultural heritage, for some people are a symbol of their national identity and are the basis of some of the world's most famous mixed drinks and cocktails. Liqueurs antecedents were the apothecaries' potions and medicines of the middle ages, which were flavoured with herb, plant, seeds, spices, nuts, roots, flowers and fruit essences came to be added to mask the unappealing flavour of the impurities that had not been rectified out of the base spirit and to endow the resulting drink with medicinal value. This chapter introduces the learner to liqueurs, we will focus on their history, and their many varied ingredients, the production process used to make liqueurs and the main categories of liqueurs. We will also explore some of world's most famous liqueur brands, and examine the tasting and service traditions of these famous beverages.

8.2 History and background

Schumann (1995) defines liqueurs as sweetened liquors that are flavoured and scented by the addition of spices, herbs, flowers and so on. Certainly the majority of liqueurs produced fall within this definition but liqueurs produced today are also flavoured with ingredients like fruits, roots, plants, barks, and sometimes cream.

The word *liqueur* comes from the Latin word *liquifacere* which means ‘to dissolve.’ This refers to the dissolving of the flavorings used to make the liqueur. In some parts of the world, especially in the USA, people use the words ‘cordial’ and ‘liqueur’ interchangeably. Though in these places the two expressions both describe liqueurs made by redistilling spirits with aromatic flavorings and are usually highly sweetened, there are some differences. While liqueurs are usually flavored with herbs, cordials are generally prepared with fruit pulp or juices. Nearly all liqueurs are quite sweet, with a highly concentrated, dessert-like flavor.

At one time, certain liqueurs were considered for their medicinal purposes and most of their ingredients were chosen for their healing properties. We attribute to the Egyptians the production of liqueurs. It was later that the monks were to improve the techniques, becoming themselves experts in this field.

The first documented liqueur utilized the caraway seed to produce the World famous *Kummel*, which was distilled first in 1575 by Lucas Bols of Amsterdam, Holland. Caraway’s digestive properties had been known for centuries before. Benedictine, the famous French liqueur, is documented as far back as 1510, but unfortunately was not available for sale. Liqueurs date back centuries and are historical descendants of herbal medicines, often those prepared by monks, as Chartreuse or Bénédictine. Liqueurs were made in Italy as early as the 13th century and their consumption was later required at all treaty signings during the Middle Ages.

The monks developed liqueurs primarily as medicines (elixirs), for example Benedictine liqueur was used for treating malaria. Access to physicians for most people was impossible and only reserved for the rich, so many people depended on the monks for remedies for their maladies.

Some the most famous remedies which the monks developed were:

- the *aperitif*: which was given to help aid the appetite,
- the *digestive*: which was given to aid digestive problems, for example when surfeited or stuffed by food or for the old,
- the *corrective*: which was given out for being unwell, sick or as we commonly know it today, the hangover cure.

It’s amazing when you think that we are referring to remedies used hundreds of years ago which are still used today, but on a commercial basis and drunk for leisure rather than necessity.

Keeping the secret

Liqueur recipe makers normally protect their secrets by entrusting the recipe to only two or three personnel, and they would usually never travel together.

8.3 Ingredients and production of liqueurs

The main manufactured liqueurs are fruit, plant, grain liqueurs. Some liqueurs are prepared by infusing certain woods, fruits, or flowers, in either water or alcohol, and adding sugar or other items. Others are distilled from aromatic or flavoring agents. The distinction between liqueur and spirits is not simple, especially since many spirits are available in a flavored form today. Flavored spirits, however, are not prepared by infusion.

The alcohol content is not a distinctive feature, at 15 to 30%, most liqueurs have a lower alcohol content than spirits, but some liqueurs have an alcohol content as high as 55%.

The main producing countries are: France, Italy, Holland, Germany, Hungary, Japan, England, Russia, Ireland, U.S., and Denmark.

Composition of liqueurs

- **The spirit base:** neutral spirit, brandy (Cognac, Rum, and whiskey).
- **The sweetener:** sugar, sugar syrup or honey, the amount of sugar is used as follows: for liqueur de ... (200 grams per litre), for l \grave{r} eme de ... (400 to 520 grams per litre).
- **The flavouring agent:** fruits: lemon, orange, banana and apricot; flowers: violet, lavender, rose, orange and blossom; herbs: peppermint, vervain, lime and blossom; barks: cinnamon, angostura; roots: angelica, liquorice root, and gentian; seeds: coriander, juniper berries, almonds, vanilla, caraway, clove, cocoa and camomile.

Production methods

The spirit base can be brandy, rum, whiskey or other spirit and may be flavoured in five ways:

- **Percolation** (hot extraction, infusion - short period): the alcohol is dripped through the flavouring agents to extract their essences.
- **Maceration** (cold extraction, long period): the flavouring agents are steeped directly in the alcohol base; this process takes a few weeks where all the ingredients are soaked and stirred in alcohol, for a bitter taste (use a low alcohol soak), for a less bitter taste (use a high alcohol soak). These soak strengths depend on personnel preferences.
- **Distillation:** alcohol and flavouring agents are blended before being distilled.
- **Infusion:** flavourings are steeped in hot water, which is then mixed with the alcohol base.
- **A combination** of these procedures.

The sweetening or *edulcoration* is done after maceration, for the fruit liqueurs, and after distillation, for the grain or plant liqueurs.