

Updated History of Pisco

Historia actualizada del pisco

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ABSTRACT

This document explores the origin and evolution of pisco, highlighting its history from the cultivation of the vine in Peru and Chile during the 16th century. Thanks to its favorable climate, Peru recorded the first South American wine in 1539, while Chile documented the distillation of brandy in 1586. However, the authenticity of some Chilean records is questioned due to a lack of documentary evidence. The name “pisco” originates from the Peruvian region of Pisco, known for its birds and port, where brandy was stored in clay jars called “piscos.” Peruvian documents from 1613 and 1712 confirm the early use of the term, while Chile adopted the name centuries later, even renaming a town “Pisco Elqui” in 1936 to legitimize its production. The dispute over the designation of origin has intensified, with research emphasizing the historical export of Peruvian pisco to markets such as Guatemala and Chile. Although Chile developed its own industry, 19th-century Chilean lexicographers acknowledged the Peruvian origin of pisco. The document concludes that, beyond the controversy, this research enriches the understanding of the history and quality of this iconic spirit.

Keywords: Brandy, Chile. distillation, Peru, Pisco, wine.

RESUMEN

El documento explora el origen y evolución del pisco, destacando su historia desde el cultivo de la vid en el Perú y Chile durante el siglo XVI. Perú, gracias a condiciones climáticas favorables, registra el primer vino sudamericano en 1539, mientras que Chile documenta destilación de aguardiente desde 1586. Sin embargo, se cuestiona la autenticidad de algunos registros chilenos por falta de evidencia documental. El nombre “pisco” proviene de la región peruana de Pisco, conocida por sus aves y su puerto, donde se envasaba el aguardiente en botijas llamadas “piscos”. Documentos peruanos de 1613 y 1712 confirman el uso temprano del término, mientras que Chile adoptó el nombre siglos después, incluso renombrando un pueblo como “Pisco Elqui” en 1936 para legitimar su producción. La disputa por la denominación de origen se intensifica con investigaciones



que destacan la exportación histórica del pisco peruano a mercados como Guatemala y Chile. Aunque Chile desarrolló su propia industria, lexicógrafos chilenos del siglo XIX reconocen el origen peruano del pisco. El documento concluye que, más allá de la controversia, la investigación enriquece la historia y calidad de este destilado.

Palabras clave: Aguardiente, Chile, destilación, Perú, vino.

INTRODUCTION

When the word history is mentioned, one might think of ancient books, monuments, or wise men recounting chronicles of the past. However, in its strictest sense, human history begins with the invention of writing, leaving everything that occurred before this event as prehistory. Though this may seem a simple starting point, it forms the foundation of this discipline: written language.

The Regulatory Council of Pisco (CRDO-PISCO) maintains that what is not written has not happened. Newspapers, magazines, legal documents, travelers' accounts, or love letters, all written records, serve as valuable historical sources, while oral traditions, poems, or tales only gain historical weight once transcribed. Based on this principle, this study compiles all available information on pisco up to the year 2024, including research from Chile, which continues to claim the origin of this renowned spirit.

Vine Cultivation

To make brandy, one must first make wine, and to make wine, one must grow vines. Although logic suggests that the “blood of Christ” (wine) should have first been produced in New Spain and other earlier Spanish territories, the tropical climate and local pests prevented successful viticulture there. Thus, wine was mostly imported from the Old World until the conquest of Peru, as narrated by Father Joseph de Acosta in his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1572–1587):

“In the islands and on the mainland, neither wine nor grapes grow; in New Spain there are vines that bear grapes, but no wine is made from them. The reason must be that the grapes do not fully ripen due to the rains that come in July and August. Wine is brought from Spain or the Canary Islands; and so it is throughout the Indies, except in Peru and Chile, where there are vineyards, and very good wine is made.” (De Acosta, 1590)

According to Acosta, both Peru and Chile were making wine by the late 16th century. But—in which country was it made first? Peru's proximity to the Equator would suggest a tropical climate similar to that of its northern neighbors. However, the cold waters of what would later be called the Humboldt Current created ideal conditions for vine cultivation and proper grape maturation in the central and southern regions of the Viceroyalty of Peru.

Guillermo Toro-Lira, in *Las Viñas de Lima* (2018), identifies Peru's, and therefore South America's, first wine as having been produced in 1539 by Hernando de Montenegro, who served as mayor of Lima (then Ciudad de los Reyes) on three occasions and is considered the father of South American viticulture. Consul Carlos Buller (2021) further notes that wine production likely emerged simultaneously in other Peruvian cities during that same period.

Earliest Evidence of Distillation

The oldest known document referring to the distillation of brandy in Peru dates to November 18, 1587, in the town of Valverde (Ica). It records a dispute between Manuel de Azante and Jorge Capelo: Cape-

lo demanded the return of a copper still he had lent to their partnership, while Azante claimed repayment for large quantities of wine and brandy he had contributed for the same purpose.

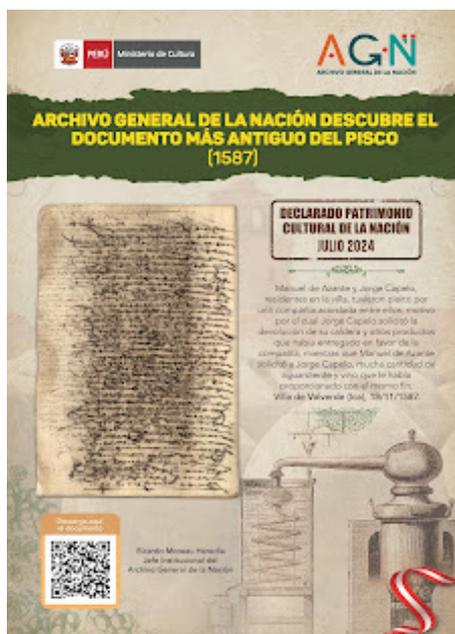


Figure 1. Oldest evidence of distillation in Peru

Source: National Archives

Following this event, the document that for many years was considered the “birth certificate” of the Peruvian distilled spirit was the will of Pedro Manuel “El Griego,” dated April 30, 1613. In it, he lists the assets he bequeathed to his heirs:

“...thirty burney jars full of brandy containing one hundred and seventy small jugs of brandy, plus one barrel full of the said brandy containing thirty jugs... also one large copper still for distilling brandy with its lid and spout, two pultayas—one through which the spout passes and another smaller one that is sound... plus seven empty burney and sangley jars...” (Huertas, 2008).

Although it may seem surprising, Chile possesses documentation of distillation that predates Peru’s, dating back to 1586 (Muñoz, 2014), with the will of María de Niza, a woman who, upon remarrying, drafted this document that mentions the presence of a “still for making brandy.” This device was likely used extensively by her first husband, who was a pharmacist, since at the time, brandy was primarily employed for medicinal purposes rather than recreational consumption.

This document is considered highly significant because, for many Chilean historians, it demonstrates the early presence of stills in the region, especially when compared to Peru, where references continue to

mention “brandy cauldrons” well into the 17th century. Based on this and other documents, the renowned table compiled by Pablo Lacoste was created, listing stills registered in Chile and Argentina since the 16th century, confirming that distillation was already a widespread practice.

However, one might still ask: Why doubt that the origins of distillation in the Americas began in Chile? While Peruvian discoveries are consistently supported by

photographs of original documents, freely available to the public, no trace of María de Niza’s supposed will has ever been found, despite repeated requests made to historians who have cited it. Although this absence does not prove falsification, it does raise questions about the alleged early presence of stills in South America, particularly since the word “alambique” (still) does not appear to have been in common use at the time.

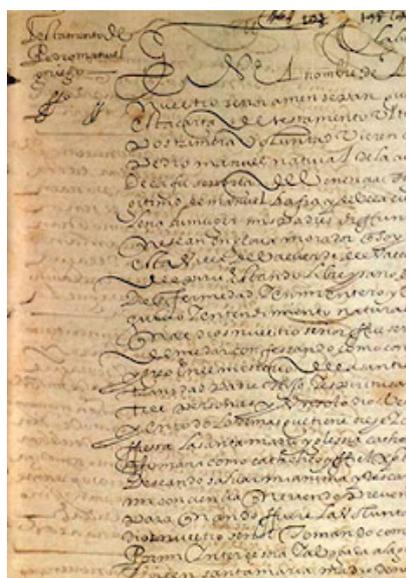


Figure 2. Will of Pedro Manuel “El Griego”

Source: Chronology of Wine and Pisco Production

For instance, Diego de Santiago’s 1598 book on medicinal distillation, written after the supposed date of María de Niza’s will, does not use the term “alambique” even once in nearly 80 pages. Similarly, other works, such as “Notes on the History of Distillation” (Otero de la Gánara, 2006), in Chapter 7, titled “Evolution of the Still,” provide an important clarification on this subject.

Following this data, attention is given to the various types of stills, which, despite differences in form, maintain the same basic concept. These reflect advances in metal-shaping techniques, though it is

not possible to arrange them chronologically due to insufficient documentation. It can be said, however, that most of these innovations appeared between the late 18th and early 20th centuries (p. 107).

The appearance of stills in Chile thus seems earlier than in most parts of the world. Although Orujo from Galicia was already being consumed by 1521, the alquitara (a traditional distillation device) appears to have left no trace in any of the Spanish American viceroyalties. Interestingly, although Peru has been criticized for using “brandy cauldrons”, historically, that terminology seems the most accurate.

Table 1.
Stills Registered in Chile and Cuyo, 16th–19th Centuries

Jurisdiction	16th c	17th c	18th c	19th c	Total
Coquimbo y Copiapó	-	5	39	3	47
Valle del Aconcagua y Valparaíso	-		10	28	38
Santiago	1	4	17	23	45
Colchagua	-	-	3	12	15
Maule y Concepción	-	1	14	3	18
Mendoza	-	4	14	29	47
San Juan		1	90	25	106
Total	1	15	187	123	326

Source: Lacoste *et al.*, 2016

Pisco: The Place

Nicolás de Ribera “El Viejo”, one of Los Trece del Gallo and the first mayor of Lima, is credited with founding Sangallán in Pisco (Real Academia de la Historia, 2024). He even proposed the town as the capital of the future viceroyalty, a proposal dismissed by Pizarro in favor of Lima.

The Viceroy Francisco de Toledo later ordered the establishment of a town in Pisco under the title “Santiago de Caballeros”. A three-folio manuscript, dated July 13, 1571, and February 10, 1575, signed in Lima, serves as the earliest document referring to this settlement:

[Folio 1] “All of us who sign our names here will populate the town of Pisco that His Excellency commands to be established, making it in accordance with the articles so that it may have the intended effect for the growth and foundation of the town.” (Archivo General de las Indias)

For the native peoples, however, the area had long been known as Pisco, a name that predated even the Inca Empire, due to the abundance of birds inhabiting the region. This term also came to describe the local inhabitants, “the piscos.” One of the earliest proofs of this is Diego de Méndez’s 1584 map.

The Port of Pisco gave its name to the liquor not only because it was one of the main export ports of the viceroyalty, but also because of the clay jars, originally called *peruleras*, used to store it. Local potters influenced their renaming as *piscos*. To this day, one can hear in Ica the phrase:

“Dame pisco de Pisco en pisco” “Give me pisco from Pisco in a pisco jar,” referring simultaneously to the drink, its origin, and its container (Caballero, 2008).

It is well known that the city of Pisco Elqui in Chile is less than a century old (established in 1936). It was born from an

effort to give a topographical link to a product already marketed under the name pisco, associating it with a place, similar to the Peruvian spirit. But who initiated this? The answer lies in the Memoirs of former Chilean President Gabriel González Videla:

“When I was a congressman, I had to defend the importation of pisco into the United States, which was being contested by the Peruvian government, since it was a product exclusi-

vely from the Pisco region (Peru).

The claim was upheld but later suspended, because I, as a representative of that area, presented a bill, which was quickly approved, giving the name Pisco Elqui to a small town in that region called La Unión. And thus, Chilean pisco from Pisco Elqui gained free entry into the United States.” (Videla, 1975).

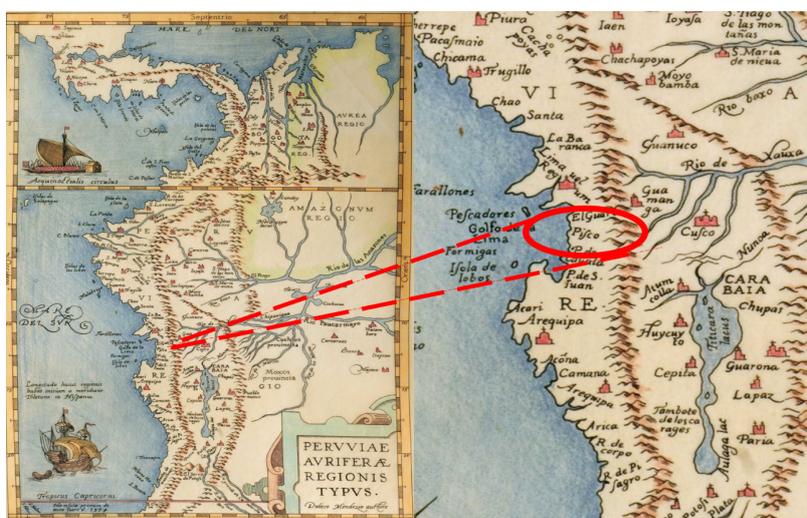


Figure 3. Peruviae Auriferæ Regionis Typus, Diego Méndez (1574)

Source: Wikipedia

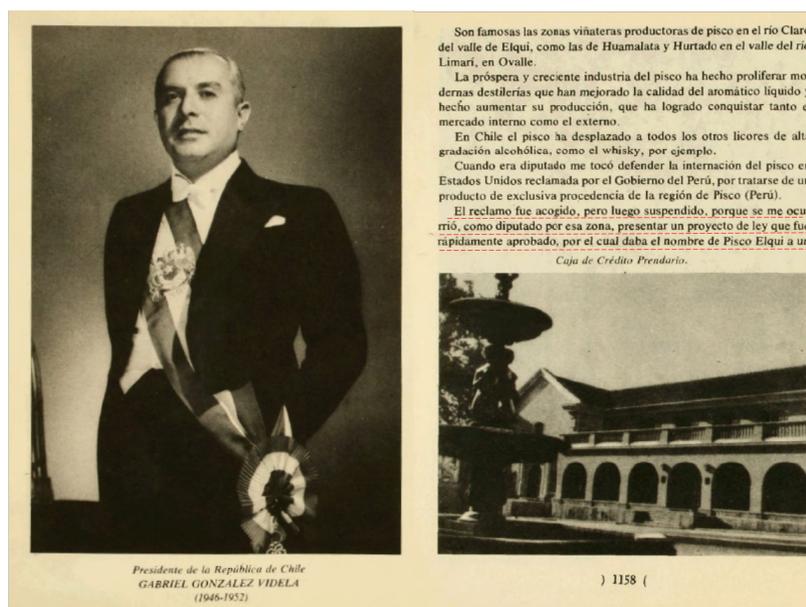


Figure 4. Photographs from the book Memorias de González Videla

Source: Memorias by González Videla

Although González Videla claimed this initiative was well received by the locals, there are also testimonies from residents who never accepted the name change, recognizing it as a commercial maneuver, downplaying the historical origin of the name La Unión

Naturally, I will never call La Unión by the name Pisco-Elqui, a sad idea by some Coquimbo resident who wanted to mock the lovely town. Someday we shall return its name, which refers to the meeting of the two rivers. I know that in some homes they danced and celebrated that foreign decree, and I was glad to hear it, but with a hint of bitterness. (Mistral, 2004)

On this specific point, there is no real debate about which location gave birth to the spirit. At one time, Neruda's countrymen argued that pisco took its name not from the place of production, but from the port of shipment, just as Porto wine takes its name from the city of Porto in Portugal, even though it is produced upriver in the Douro Valley. However, that analogy fails since the entire process, from harvest to export, occurs within the same country, unlike the case of pisco. This idea has thus been largely dismissed over time.

The Name “Pisco”

The etymological, lexicographical, topographical, and cultural origins of the word pisco have been extensively studied by César Ángeles Caballero in his book *La Peruanidad del Pisco* (2008), written long before the modern controversy emerged. The debate, however, is not about the word's origin but when it was first used to refer specifically to the national spirit.

Historian Lorenzo Huertas suggests that during colonial times, “pisco” was a colloquial term used to describe what was legally defined as “aguardiente de vino de la región de Pisco.” This would explain the scarcity of formal legal documents referring to the beverage by that name.

For many years, the earliest known reference to the drink was attributed to William B. Stevenson, who, in 1814, wrote after visiting the port of Pisco: “The brandy generally called pisco, as it takes its name from the place where it is made, is of good flavor and colorless.” (Stevenson, 1972).

The historical silence of more than 200 years between the first signs of distillation and the first written record referring to the distilled beverage as pisco was broken by the discovery of the inventory of the La Torre estate in Chile, where one can clearly read, without needing a paleographer, the phrase: “por tres botijas de Pisco” (“for three jars of Pisco”). This discovery was initially celebrated in Chile, leading to an investigation that resulted in both a documentary and a book. Curiously, however, the document itself was not given much prominence, appearing only in the appendices (Lacoste, 2016).

It did not take long for the Peruvian ambassador to Brussels, Gonzalo Gutiérrez, to completely discredit Chile's “great discovery.” Upon examining the document, he noticed something that might easily escape most readers: a simple capital letter. The word Pisco was written with a capital “P,” which means it referred not to the beverage, but to its place of origin, Pisco, Peru. This interpretation is supported by another line in the same inventory that mentions “...por cinco cañones para sacar aguardiente...” (“...for five stills to produce

brandy...”). If they were supposedly producing pisco there, why would the equipment still be described as used for making aguardiente (brandy)?

Gutiérrez also pointed out that there were family and commercial ties between that estate and the Condor estate in the Pisco Valley (Peru), both belonging to relatives Francisco Cortés de Monroy and Pedro Cortés Monroy y Mendoza. This strongly suggests that the botijas de Pisco mentioned were jars from Pisco, Peru (Gutiérrez, as cited in Sánchez, 2018).

Years later, Gutiérrez presented further evidence showing that in Peru, “aguardiente de Pisco” was already being sold as early as 1726, effectively debunking the Chilean claim that the La Torre document was the oldest reference to the name. However, a new discovery in Chile shook the debate again: the 1717 inventory mentioning not three but twenty-five jars of pisco, this time written in lowercase. This seemed to dismiss the argument of a geographic reference.

This is where the expert eye of Consul Carlos Buller comes in to see beyond the obvious in the complete document and, of course, the first thing that stands out is that the inventory is from Alhué, an area near Santiago where this spirit does not appear to have been produced. This is confirmed by the fact that there is no other reference to production or distillation equipment.

Instead, the document repeatedly mentions “cordovanes peruleros” (Peruvian leather goods), that appear line after line on the only page that has been accessed, so it is very easy to deduce that this

inventory did not belong to a producer but to an importer of Peruvian products, among which pisco is obviously included (Buller, as cited in Gutiérrez 2021).

But the research did not stop there. In *Pisco: Its Name, Its History*, Gonzalo Gutiérrez presents an even older reference, this time linked to commercial exchanges between the Viceroyalty of Peru and the Captaincy General of Guatemala. Trade between these regions was relatively open until the early 17th century, when, on May 18, 1615, the importation of wines from Peru was explicitly prohibited in an attempt to maintain Spain's commercial monopoly with its colonies. This led to many complaints due to the inability to properly supply the Central American market, so a Royal Decree of May 21, 1685, allowed the entry of wines and other Peruvian products for a period of three years (with the possibility of extending the term), although with some restrictions.

These limitations meant that some Peruvian ships departing from Callao first arrived in Acapulco, and then were reloaded onto the same vessel to the Captaincy General of Guatemala. It was in this context that Juan de Recalde acquired the cargo of the ship called “Nuestra Señora de la Soledad” that arrived from Callao in 1712, and requested permission from the port authorities to depart from Acapulco to Guatemala. This request was approved on November 19, 1712, where he declared among all the products:

“...A diez pesos por cada botija de aguardiente de pisco” (“...Ten pesos for each jar of pisco brandy”) (Gutiérrez, 2021).



Figure 5. Register of the Frigate “Nuestra Señora de la Soledad”

Source: Pisco: Its Name, Its History, page 46

Obviously, this is not the only document in that publication; many more records throughout the 18th century would confirm that the place to look, if one wants to study the history of pisco, is in customs records, but the silence of exports between Guatemala and Peru for almost a century would make it very likely that the best option for finding that information would be in Chilean customs records, since the southern neighbor has always been a major consumer of the Peruvian spirit, even to this day, having competed in some years with the United States (Agrodata, 2024) for the top spot as its main importer. It should be noted that, given the protection of its designation of origin, the Peruvian spirit cannot enter under the name that has been usurped. However, what happened during the colonial period? Pablo Lacoste, author of *Pisco Was Born in Chile. Genesis of the First Designation of Origin in America* (2016), provides relevant information taken from customs guides, published in the article *Vines and Wine in South America: The Displacement of Wine-Producing Centers (16th to 20th centuries)*, in which he dedicates beautiful words to Peru, wine production, and brandy: However, it is on page 78 of the book that relevant information taken from customs guides is provided.

That is why they wrote down the entry of ‘so many bottles of brandy from the Pisco region’ over and over again, line after line, filling entire books with this data. With the repetition of the same words, abbreviations began to be used: little by little, ‘from the region of’ was eliminated and they began to write ‘so many bottles of Pisco brandy’; then the word ‘brandy’ was eliminated, and they began to write directly ‘so many bottles of Pisco’ (p. 78).

Lacoste explains how, little by little, it went from being called Pisco brandy to simply pisco, and this, although it was easy to deduce, needed to be put on paper in order to begin to be taken as true; unfortunately, this quote does not come with a year or a period of time, which raises the question that invites further investigation: Could it be that it was the Chileans who gave the Peruvian distillate the name pisco? And of course, what was slang for Lorenzo Huertas would not be so in Chile once the product passed through customs, and its use in legal documents would not be frowned upon as it would have been in Peru. It is worth noting that this does not make Chileans the owners of the name, nor does it take away the right of Peruvians to

use it. An example of this situation is the name sherry, which the English continue to use to refer to the famous wine from Jerez.”

That name comes from the ancient city of Sherish during the Arab occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, and after their expulsion, it changed to Jerez, but the English kept that name, and the Spaniards did nothing more than include it in their denomination of origin as the name of their product.

Since when has Chilean pisco existed?

Lacoste (2004), in his article *The Vine and Wine in South America: The Shift of Viticultural Centers (16th to 20th Century)*, refers to the distillation of wine in the Elqui Valley, but never refers to these spirits as “pisco”; many Chilean lexicographic dictionaries reference the word pisco as a beverage originating in Peru:

- Rudolf Lenz Dazinger, better known as Rodolfo Lenz, was a German linguist, philologist, and folklorist naturalized as Chilean. In his “*Etymological Dictionary of Chilean Terms Derived from Indigenous American Languages*,” published in 1905, he writes: “...the current pisco was called *aguardiente de Pisco* because it came from there and from Ica. The province of Ica is fertile and rich in vineyards. The name of the city has become generic no less than Cognac, *coñac*.”

- Don Manuel Antonio Román was a priest, lexicographer, and Chilean language scholar who, in his work *Dictionary of Chileanisms and of Other Improper Words and Expressions*, written between 1901 and 1908, would say the following about the Peruvian spirit: “Pisco: a highly

esteemed brandy that is produced in Peru and known throughout the world. It undoubtedly originated in the port of Pisco, and that is why it took that name.”

- José Toribio Medina Zavala was a lawyer, bibliographer, researcher, historian, and Chilean collector, considered by many to be the greatest gatherer of sources for the study of his country’s history. In his work “*Chilenismos: Lexicographic Notes*” (1928), he wrote about Pisco: “from the town of Pisco in Peru. Brandy made from Muscat grapes from that place.”

In dates so close to the proclaimed first denomination of origin in the Americas (1931), most Chilean historians continued to affirm that pisco was a beverage originating in Peru, which is why many Peruvian authors mark the beginning of the era of southern pisco with the War of the Pacific. During that war, large-scale looting of wineries in southern Peru, and with it large volumes of the distillate crossing the border, may have inspired some producers to take advantage of the great fame that pisco had already achieved in international markets and begin to imitate it. One of the proofs of this is the *Bulletin of the War of the Pacific*, which publishes the reports of the military encounters between both countries and which, during Pinochet’s dictatorship, was republished to commemorate its centenary. In that bulletin, a small fragment stands out narrating the passage of the Chilean army through Ica:

“The brigade under the command of Colonel José Domingo Amunátegui departed on November 21 toward Ica with the objective of taking possession of that place (...) The city of Ica is a town of seven to

eight thousand inhabitants; it is surrounded by small farms dedicated especially to the cultivation of the vineyards that produce the famous Pisco.” (Chilean Academy of History, 1979).

In the report one reads “the famous Pisco”, without making any reference to it being produced in Chile or being similar to a Chilean version, which would confirm that by that time the historical Chilean distillate did not exist, and if it did, it is clear that it was still unknown to the general population.

The lifting of Prohibition in the United States was a major incentive to

“legalize” everything that was being done in the Elqui Valley, and Chile’s excellent wine industry became a powerful lever that allowed that distillate to enter international markets with great ease—using a name that had already gained fame centuries earlier: that of Peruvian Pisco.

Research on pisco must have multiplied fivefold over the last 30 years, which constitutes a major encouragement to continue exploring the history of Peru and, in particular, the distillate whose origin goes back to Pisco.

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