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By Jonathan Miles

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I've Been Drinking Out of My Gourd



In many parts of South America, people gather in the afternoons, and sometimes mornings, to engage in a drinking ritual said to be hundreds of years old. The dried leaves of the yerba maté plant, a relative of the holly, are crumbled into a calabash gourd into which hot water is added. The resulting tea, which is commonly sipped through a silver straw and then passed around, like a bong in a dorm room, is loosely alleged to cure everything from gastric turmoil to nervous disorders. We have our own drinking ritual in New York.

It involves sitting at a bar, drinking cocktails that we all agree cure nothing save the stress and ennui of urban life. Maybe you can see where I'm going with this. To a bar, naturally, where the recent fusion of yerba maté and liquor is in full, tannic swing. One such bar is at Yerba Buena, a pan-Latino restaurant on Avenue A in the Lower East Side, that opened this summer. That's where I found Artemio Vasquez, Yerba Buena's mixologist, wielding an unlabeled bottle of honey-colored liquid that had the illicit look of moonshine. He said it was Chilean pisco, a type of grape brandy, in which he had steeped yerba maté leaves for a couple of hours. He shook it with syrups he'd made by infusing simple syrup with lime and grapefruit zest overnight, and a splash of lemon juice. Then he served it in a little gourd that looks like something you might pick up at the airport gift shop in Buenos Aires. If I was supposed to pass it around the bar, I'm sorry. It's way too good for sharing: a froth of sweetened citrus underlaid with the yerba maté's grassy, smoky flavors, which come across more herbal than tea-like. Those herbal notes are what drew Mr. Vasquez, who was born in Oaxaca, Mexico, to yerba maté. "My mother always used herbs, like epazote, to give her cooking a little punch," he said. But yerba maté boasts another kind of punch. It's a mild stimulant, with a mellow but palpable caffeine content. "That's the little trick in there," Mr. Vasquez admitted. You could call Mr. Vasquez's pisco maté a Red Bull and vodka for people with functioning taste buds. Are we on the cusp of New York's maté moment? Mr. Vasquez is betting so. He ordered another 50 of those little gourds.