

Drinks of Jamaica

Kion, flor de jamaica, tea, coffee and rum: what people drink on the island.



Before you start

In Jamaica almost everything comes with something to drink. This guide brings together what we have posted about the island's drinks.

At the end are the three drinks in our King Kion line.

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Island drinks

Carrot, seaweed, peanut and soursop: this is how Jamaica drinks.

The Sunday drink.

It became popular in the Second World War, when other things were scarce.

Grated carrot and ginger, strained, with sugar and lime. Sometimes with condensed milk. Ideal for Sunday lunch.

A seaweed drink.

It is made with boiled and strained seaweed, with milk, sugar, vanilla and nutmeg.

Many credit it with special powers; science has not proven them. People drink it because they like it.

Always with ginger.

Flor de jamaica (hibiscus) is harvested in December and January.

Since at least 1945, ginger has been its essential ingredient; rum is optional.

More drinks

Peanut punch	Peanut shake.
Soursop punch	Soursop juice.
Jelly coconut	Green coconut, since 1834.
Ting	Grapefruit soft drink.

In Jamaica, everything is “tea”

Coffee, chocolate, herbs... and even fish.



Hot = tea.

In Jamaica, almost any hot drink is called “tea”.

There is coffee-tea, cocoa-tea and tea-tea (real tea).

Cacao balls.

Roasted cacao is ground with spices and sugar and rolled into small balls. Half a ball makes one cup.

It is boiled with milk or coconut milk, and sometimes with cinnamon leaves.

Wild herbs.

Mint, lemongrass (fever grass), cerasee and more.

Around 1900, in the countryside people preferred bush tea to coffee because it was cheaper.

Yes: fish tea.

A light fish soup with spring onion, thyme, allspice and chilli.

Its first mention in the Gleaner, in 1930, was the name of a racehorse: Fish Tea.

Street drinks

Shaved ice, coconut opened with a machete, and sugar water.

Ice with syrup.

In the 1930s “snowballs” were sold from carts in Kingston: shaved ice with coloured syrup, for a penny.

Today it is called sky juice and sold at the roadside.

JAMAICA

Sky juice

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PERU

Raspadilla

Shaved ice with syrup

The same street treat, in two countries.



Coconut by machete.

Since the early 20th century there have been coconut sellers at crossroads and with handcarts.

They cut off the top with a machete so you can drink the water, then make a spoon from the shell to eat the flesh.

Sugar water.

Brown sugar, water and a little lime: the countryside drink for generations.

It was called “beverage” or “cool drink”.

Drinks to go with your meal

Jamaican soft drinks: what they taste like and what to expect.

Its name means “sour”.

In English, “sorrel” refers to sourness, Higman explains. The drink is made from the fleshy calyces of the flower, not the petals.

There are two kinds: red and white.

Flor de Jamaica.

It is Hibiscus sabdariffa. In Mexico its drink is “agua de Jamaica”, and in Panama it is called “saril”, because of Jamaican immigrants.

Guanábana: sweet and sour.

An early traveller described its flesh as tasting “sweet and sour mixed”; others compared it to “cotton soaked in vinegar” (Higman).

Its juice is still popular. In Peru it is also called guanábana, a name of Taíno origin.

Thick and creamy.

In 1993, Enid Donaldson described it as a cream-coloured jelly-like liquid, with condensed milk, nutmeg and vanilla (Higman).



Coconut water, ice cold.

A guide for tourists recommended coconut water “fresh, cold, from green coconuts”, orange juice, lemonade and ginger beer.

And nectars of tamarind, passion fruit, guava, soursop, mango and papaya (Higman).



Ginger beer: the history

The ginger drink Jamaica made its own.

Born in England.

Fermented ginger beer was born in England in the mid-18th century.

With Jamaican ginger came “Jamaica ginger beer”.

Among the best in the world.

Ginger arrived in Jamaica around 1525. Since the 17th century it has grown especially well in its soils.

In 2024, tests by Rutgers University found it has four times more gingerols, the compound behind the heat, than ginger from other suppliers.

Since 1918.

Desnoes & Geddes, founded in 1918, started with soft drinks and its own ginger beer.

At home people also drink it with rum, or to settle the stomach.

Why “kion”?

“Kion” is the Cantonese word for ginger. Chinese immigrants brought it to Peru and it stayed.

Jamaica calls it ginger. Peru calls it kion. It is the same thing.



Jamaican coffee

It was almost a third of the world's coffee. But Jamaicans hardly drink their best coffee.

Jamaican coffee

1728	Plants arrive from Martinique
1737	First exports
1780s	New plants and areas: the boom
1814	15,000 t, 30% of world trade
Afterwards	It falls and never returns to that level

Imported coffee.

Jamaica's first known coffee house is mentioned in Kingston in the early 1730s.

Its coffee was probably imported: the island's own coffee tasted bad at first.

All for export.

By around 1880 it was already a recognised brand. In the 1890s, all Blue Mountain coffee was exported to England for blends.

Coffee with condensed milk.

In Jamaica coffee became just another "tea": coffee-tea, cheap and with plenty of condensed milk.

Cookbooks almost never explain how to make it. Jamaica began producing instant coffee in 1963.

A liqueur for export.

Tia Maria, a liqueur made with Blue Mountain coffee, has been produced since 1947. In 1964 a US distillery bought it.

It sold all over the world, but it was not the ordinary Jamaican's favourite.



JAMAICA

Blue Mountain

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PERU

Café peruano

Coffea arabica

In Peru, about 223,000 families grow coffee on 425,000 hectares across 16 regions. In 2025 it exported almost 1,800 million dollars' worth.

Chocolate and coffee today

Who processes Jamaica's cacao and coffee on the island.

Cadbury in Highgate.

Until 1969 fine chocolate was imported. That year Cadbury began producing in Jamaica with local raw materials.

The factory was in Highgate, St Mary, right in the cacao-growing area.

A Jamaican company.

In 1977 Cadbury handed over to Highgate Foods, which was locally owned.

By around 1987 it was making chocolates, drinking chocolate, cocoa and instant mixes.

The end of Highgate.

According to the Gleaner, Highgate, very popular, ended up going bankrupt, and no local brand has matched its fame since.

Today there are small "bean to bar" makers.

Pure Chocolate Jamaica.

Wouter and Renée Tjeertes make bars with Jamaican cacao, in packaging by local artists.

According to JIS, they paid their first farmer double for his beans.

Chocollor.

A family business that tested recipes from 2012 and started selling in 2020.



It makes 70% dark chocolate, white chocolate with flor de jamaica (sorrel) and more.

Coffee and cacao, one authority.

The Coffee Industry Board was founded in 1950. Under the 2017 law, JACRA brought together the functions of the old coffee, cocoa and coconut boards.

It licenses processors and certifies quality.



RUM

Jamaican rum

Why Jamaican rum has a flavour of its own.

Fruity and intense.

Jamaican rum tends to be fruity and full of character, rich in esters, the compounds that give aroma.

It is made mainly in pot stills, which keep that aroma and give body.

Geographical indication (2016).

Since 2016 Jamaican rum has had a geographical indication: it must be aged in Jamaica and can only contain water and caramel as additions.

The oldest distillery.

In St Elizabeth, with the oldest rum record dating from 1749. It is the oldest continuously operating distillery in Jamaica.

In 1997, Joy Spence became the first woman master blender in the industry.

JAMAICA

Jamaican rum

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PERU

Pisco

Protected origin

Jamaica protects its rum. Peru protects its pisco with a designation of origin.

Pisco and rum (18+)

Two drinks with protected origin. Information for over-18s.

JAMAICA

2016

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PERU

12 Dec 1990

Protected origin



Pisco was Peru's first designation of origin. Jamaican rum was registered as a geographical indication in 2016.

One coast, eight grapes.

It is only made on the coast of Lima, Ica, Arequipa and Moquegua, and in the Locumba, Sama and Caplina valleys in Tacna, with eight pisco grapes.

No water, sugar or other additives are added, and it is not distilled twice.

JAMAICA

Limestone water

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PERU

No water

The water rule

In Jamaica, the wash is made with water from the island's limestone aquifers. No water can be added to pisco.

A fight over the barrel.

National Rums asked for rum to be allowed to age outside the island. The intellectual property office (JIPO) kept ageing in Jamaica.

It also set barrels of up to 250 litres. National Rums took the case to court.

Pisco days

1st Sat. Feb.	Pisco Sour Day (since 2004).
2007	Pisco sour: Cultural Heritage of the Nation.
4th Sun. July	Pisco Day (since 1999).



King Kion: Ginger Water

Ginger water, the simplest of the three.

Kion /kión/ · noun, from Cantonese

Ginger. Chinese immigrants brought the word to Peru and it stayed.

In Jamaica they call it ginger. It is the same thing.

For 500 years.

Ginger arrived in Jamaica around 1525. Since the 17th century it has grown especially well in its soils.

Jamaican ginger has a reputation as one of the best in the world.

Ginger from Junín.

Junín produces almost all of Peru's ginger, mainly in Chanchamayo and Satipo.

And Peru is among the world's big ginger exporters.

JAMAICA

Ginger

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PERU

Kion (ginger)

Zingiber officinale

Same rhizome, two names. That is why the line is called King Kion.

King Kion: Ginger Sorrel

Flor de jamaica and ginger: the pair of the Jamaican Christmas.

JAMAICA

Sorrel

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PERU

Flor de jamaica



Hibiscus sabdariffa

The same flower. It reached Jamaica around 1650, from the tropics of the Old World.

December and January.

In Jamaica the flower is harvested in December and January, and the drink is part of Christmas.

Since 1945, at least.

Since 1945, at least, ginger has been its essential ingredient, according to Higman.

That is why our version is called Ginger Sorrel.

King Kion: Ginger Beer

Sparkling ginger, with a history across two islands.

From barrel to bottle

18th century	Fermented ginger beer is born in England.
Jamaica	With its ginger, “Jamaica ginger beer” is born.
1918	Desnoes & Geddes makes its own ginger beer.

To settle the stomach.

In Jamaican homes people also drink it to settle the stomach.

JAMAICA

Ginger beer

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PERU

Kion con gas

Zingiber officinale

The heat comes from the gingerols in ginger. Jamaican ginger has plenty, according to tests by Rutgers University (2024).



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