

AQUAVIT

Viking types drink it, and they kick ass

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

When I was teething as a baby my mom put aquavit on my gums to soothe the pain. Maybe that's when I developed a taste for the vodka-like, herb-flavored spirit.

Danes down aquavit — usually called “snaps” — like it's medicine. Bellow a toast, bang an elbow on the table a couple times and pour it back. Eat some pickled fish; drink some beer; repeat.

The liquor connoisseurs at Izakaya Meiji, where I recently encountered the Oregon-made House Spirits Krogstad Aquavit, say that perhaps the reason Danes gulp their aquavit, instead of serving it in stemmed glasses and sipping the icy liquid more gently, is because Danish aquavit isn't very good. They gave a thumbs-down to the Swedish stuff too. Norwegian aquavit, they assure me, is the way to go.

Aquavit is from the Latin for “water of life,” in case you were wondering how seriously Scandinavians take drinking. The herbs that flavor it are said to be medicinal. Caraway is good for your digestion. Star anise, a licorice-flavored herb, is used to fight swine flu. Dill, coriander and cardamom are also used.

Elliot Martinez, a bartender at Meiji and popularly known as the editor of *Booze Week*, served two aquavits on a “flight night” in February, paired, as they should be, with fish — locally produced white anchovies. Linie Aquavit is made in Norway, crosses the equator on a ship, twice, and is aged in sherry casks, Martinez says.

Krogstad, however, is made here in Oregon, and according to eponymous maker

Christian Krogstad, it's the number-one selling aquavit in the state, beating out Aalborg, a popular Danish aquavit. While I defer to the encyclopedic beverage knowledge of the gurus behind the bar at Meiji, I argue that you first have to taste Aalborg's Jubilaeums Aquavit before you write off Danish snaps entirely. Dill, coriander and a hint of star anise flavor this golden-hued drink, and beating its sales in a state liberally sprinkled with Nordic types is no easy task.

“My family is Norwegian, I grew up with not only aquavit, but the food that goes with it,” Krogstad says. “It makes a lot sense with foods, and that's kind of how it started.”

He says the distillery originally “just made it for a lark,” but soon the cool-kid bartenders from Portland to NYC were using the uniquely flavored liquor in cocktails. “We used my name because we aren't very creative,” Krogstad laughs.

“It's not a super-aggressive flavor like you get from most gins,” he says. “It's complex, but smooth and balanced. A lot of people are using it to make something that would be a vodka drink and make it more interesting.”

Krogstad Aquavit is dominated by caraway and star anise. The anise gives it that licorice flavor, and the caraway, Christian Krogstad says, “is very complex and has these savory low notes.”

Some local liquor stores sell aquavits, including Aalborg and Krogstad, or you can head to Izakaya Meiji and have Martinez or another creative mixologists pour you a cold shot of snaps, or create a cocktail with a distinctly Scandinavian flavor. ■

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