

Glossary

Evil Spirits	Espiritus malignos (y licores)
brand	marca
spills (spill the beans)	divulgar secretos
keenly	de modo penetrante
hordes of revellers	multitud de juerguistas
buskers	musicos callejeros
salivating	haciendo la boca agua
to lure	engatusar
dirt-cheap	muy barato
quick one	una bebida rapida
slip out	escabullirse
No harm done	Ningún daño hecho
a haven	refugio
barely	apenas
knock-off	falsificados
dripping	goteando
slyer	de una manera más malisiosa
trick	truco
dodgy	de mala calidad
tales	cuentos
tampered	adulterado
antifreeze	anticongelante
lid	tapón
pour	echar
to blow the whistle on...	denunciar
randomly carried out	llevado a cabo de manera aleatoria
civil servant	funcionario
paint stripper	decapante

EVIL SPIRITS

Pirated DVD, perfumes and handbags, yes. But pirated alcohol? El garrafón, the practice of diluting bottles of brand spirits with water or, more worryingly, industrial alcohol, has become increasingly common in Madrid bars and clubs. Andrea Maltman spills . . .

It's Saturday night. You feel the pulse of the city centre as keenly as you feel your own heartbeat. The hordes of revellers, the tourists, the buskers, the street sellers are all sharing your air and adding to the party atmosphere. When a salivating PR circles and tries to lure you into his club with promises of free entry and dirt-cheap drinks, of course you say yes, thinking you can down a quick one then slip out. No harm done, right? Actually, you could be horribly wrong. Over the last few years, bar-goers in Madrid have been increasingly suspecting that many of the capital's cheap discos and bars are a haven for el garrafón, the Spanish name given to the fraudulent practice of adulterating booze—either by diluting it with water or, more dangerously, mixing it with unbranded, industrial-strength alcohol—and passing it off as regular Smirnoff or Jack Daniels.

Shots in the dark

Many of us are used to the sight of pirated goods on sale on Madrid's streets. During the day you can barely move for knock-off Tous bags, DVDs, belts, jewellery and watches. But it seems the practice is also dripping down into our glasses at night; albeit in a much slyer way. By its very nature, el garrafón is an insidious trick performed by bar owners behind closed doors. When asked to comment, many indignantly denied the practice existed at all, suggesting it was a figment of paranoid drinkers' imaginations. However, these declarations of innocence contrast with the all-too common tales given by bar-goers of rapid intoxication, burning sinuses and disproportionate hangovers brought on by drinking tampered alcohol. A recent survey conducted by market researcher GfK Emer revealed that 39 per cent of Spanish people attributed their hangover symptoms to dodgy drinks. It seems that someone is lying and Jesús, a former bar worker, was only too happy to suggest who that might be: "I worked in various bars, and trust me, everything there was diluted," he reveals. "There was a particular bottle of Four Roses whisky that was just the worst. It didn't even have a lid. . ." he says, referring to the authentic, branded bottle tops that some bars recycle and even line with glue to mimic the sound of a bottle being popped open for the first time.

Antifreeze chupito?

If people like Jesús are to be believed, those who frequent Madrid's bars and clubs should be a little more discerning about what they pour down their throats. For as much as a garrafón is the cheap option in a bar, the physiological effects can be gravely serious, ranging from headaches, burning sensations in the nose and throat, to blindness and even death in the most extreme cases. Victims of a garrafón are effectively consuming toxic methanol alcohol which is most often used, not for drinking, but in substances such as antifreeze, solvent and fuel—three words, incidentally, that only too flatteringly describe some of the free shots or chupitos available in a few Madrid bars. One of the main problems for consumers is that the symptoms of a garrafón don't reveal themselves until some time after drinking, so if you experience a powerful hangover, vomiting, or prolonged discomfort in the days following a night on which you had only a few drinks, you've probably fallen victim.

Hangover remedy

The good news, though, is that el garrafón is now firmly on the radar of the Madrid authorities and you now have certain methods at your disposal for helping prevent, if not cure, the mother of all hangovers. In 2008, the Comunidad de Madrid set up the '012' citizens advice helpline which, among other things, enables consumers to blow the whistle on suspicious establishments and "help reinforce" randomly carried out inspections.

That said, a civil servant on the other end of your mobile isn't much use in the middle of a disco, so it's important you also use your own instincts and vigilance when drinking. The most important weapon in spotting a garrafón is your common sense. If your drink smells and tastes like paint stripper, and you're getting drunker faster than a 15 year old at their first fiesta, it's probably time to call a halt. Substandard drinks shouldn't be tolerated just because they're cheap or even free; ultimately, drinkers with that mentality are paying with their health what they're saving from their wallets.

For comments, suggestions, or to report an error, please contact didactic@in-madrid.com



Try to answer these questions based on the story

- 1) Explain the term “garrafón”
- 2) What was the reaction of many bar owners when asked to comment on the phenomenon of *garrafón*
- 3) What are the symptoms of having consumed adulterated alcohol?
- 4) What are the possible physiological effects?
- 5) What measures has the Comunidad de Madrid taken to combat *el garrafón*.