



Bulls' Crossing

Malaria is an ancient disease. Mosquitoes have been biting us forever, injecting noxious parasites into our bloodstream with every jab. Never, perhaps, more notoriously than in India in the 1820s, where British Army personnel were being sickened in droves. Eminent medical experts were consulted, and a new medication was prescribed. Quinine had recently been isolated from the bark of the Chinchona tree, which is native to Peru. In fact, Andean shamans had long been using bark extracts to treat the malaria that Spanish colonizers brought to South America in the early fifteen hundreds. The bark was then introduced to Spain by Jesuit missionaries returning from the New World.

Quinine salts were effective but were also very bitter. British officers stationed in India started blending their doses of quinine with sugar and soda water to make a more palatable drink that was soon patented and produced commercially as Indian tonic water. They then added their gin rations to further blunt the unpleasant taste of quinine, and thus created one of the most delicious cocktails ever invented: the gin & tonic.

Gin has also been around for a long time. It was originally distilled by monks and alchemists in Europe in the 13th century and fused with juniper berries to make a medicinal tonic. It was a popular cure-all in those days, though some fretted that it was being consumed more for enjoyment than for medicinal purposes. The word gin is an abbreviation of an old English word that was borrowed from the Dutch *jenever*. Both are ultimately derived from *juniperus*, the Latin for juniper. A modern version of the drink subsequently emerged in the Netherlands, which some claim was the original "Dutch courage." It was brought to England in the 17th century where it soon became the alcoholic beverage of choice. It was all the rage by the time the British were in India, and became even more popular when it was paired with quinine to create the famous G&T.

My parents threw G&T parties at home in Montevideo when

I was in my teens. Guests arrived at midday on Saturday and mingled for two or three hours. A few stayed for a very late, very relaxed lunch. The garden was at its most beautiful in the summer, and we set up a bar on the back patio. People sat under the grape vine arbour or clustered in groups on the lawn, chilled glasses in hand. My brother and I were the de facto bar tenders and waiters, and we probably had as much fun as anybody. My father served imported Gordon's London dry gin because he thought it was the best in the world. But the mixer was another story. He would only serve Agua Tónica Paso de los Toros, the Uruguayan tonic water that was, in his opinion, better than any of the British brands.

Paso de los Toros is a town in Central Uruguay. It was originally a ford, a low water point for those who wanted to cross the mighty Río Negro. In the late eighteen hundreds, local men helped wagons and herds of cattle to cross the river at the "*paso*." Their strength and fearlessness earned them the nickname "*toros*" (bulls), which is how the crossing and eventually the town got its name.

A young chemistry student from Montevideo, Rómulo Mangini, moved there in 1924 to work at his wife's family's business and then opened a soda water factory. He befriended a Welshman, George Jones, who worked on the railways and was known for his refined palate. Jones challenged his new friend to produce a better tonic water than the British brands available at the time. After much trial and error, Mangini came up with a formula that Jones considered superior to any tonic water on the market. The improved flavour was at least partly attributed to the pristine spring water used in the manufacturing process, which was drawn from a well on the factory premises. The product was a huge success and Mangini's company soon flourished and attracted the attention of international beverage corporations. In time, the Paso de los Toros brand was bought out by PepsiCo, but it remains, to this day, a highly prized ingredient among those who are partial to a first-class gin and tonic.