

THAT CARIBBEAN SPIRIT

By Craig R. Carey

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EL DORADO RUM (DEMETERA DISTILLERS)



Cane: Fields of sugar, fields of dreams



Distillery barrels of rum

SYNONYMOUS FOR MANY WITH IMAGES OF MARAUDING CARIBBEAN PIRATES

or lazy days spent on the beaches of Puerto Rico or Jamaica, rum is a sweet distilled spirit derived from sugarcane. Its history, inextricably interwoven with that of the Americas, is rooted in the Old World with quite the checkered story. But as with all things American, it continues to adapt and reinvent itself.

Most rum is distilled from fermented molasses and typically contain about the same alcohol by volume as other popular spirits (approximately 40%). Though generally considered a “New World” drink, rum has its roots in ancient times, with fermented sugarcane juice having been served in Asia well over a thousand years ago. Though it is distilled the world over, the majority of the modern rum industry is based in the West Indies and the eastern coasts of Central and South America. The Mount Gay distillery in Barbados is generally considered the oldest operating rum distillery, established in 1663 and officially notarized in 1703.

Historically, the European and American demand for sugar led to the massive network of sugarcane plantations throughout the colonial holdings in the Caribbean. There, the harvested cane was milled and the juice extracted. The juice was in turn boiled, and what did not crystallize became the molasses that is the base for most rum. The molasses in turn was mixed with water and left to ferment. By the mid-1600s this side-product of crystallized sugar was being distilled into rum. The rum is then allowed to age in large (usually oak) casks. The process today follows the same basic steps, with different-shaped stills and aging techniques factoring into the complexity of the rums.

In his tome *Rum: A Social and Sociable History of the Real Spirit of 1776*, Ian Williams contends that in the 18th century, sugar was to the American economy what oil is to the modern global economy. As rum’s popularity grew and the demand for sugarcane (introduced to the Americas by Columbus



El Dorado 15 year old rum



El Dorado 21 year old rum

¿QUIÉN ERA BACARDI?

FOR THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES OF ITS DISTILLATION

in the West Indies and the American colonies, rum ("ron") was considered a coarse drink that paled—Figuratively speaking—in comparison to the haughty drinks of the Old World. To resolve this issue, the Spanish crown put forth a reward to any distiller who could improve the basic processes and end-product of rum. Many distillers contributed improvements to the overall process, and key among them was Don Facundo Bacardi Massó, a Spaniard who settled in Cuba in the 1840s. Don Facundo experimented with many processes, including those used by American whiskey distillers (such as charcoal filtering and cask-aging). The end result was a smoother, far more palatable drink

akin to the light rums presently available on the market. With this refined version of the molasses-distilled spirit, Don Facundo founded Bacardi & Company.

The company fled Cuba for Puerto Rico in 1961 ahead of Castro's troops, abandoning huge investments in distilling equipment. In his book *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails*, Wayne Curtis relates that "today, virtually all traces of Bacardi have been erased from Havana, like a Stalin-era apparatchik airbrushed out of a Soviet politburo photograph."

The Bacardi family and the Castro regime remain at odds over what is best for Cuba's interests, both economically and socially.

“THE FIRST TIME I PLAYED THE MASTERS, I WAS SO NERVOUS I DRANK A BOTTLE OF RUM BEFORE I TEED OFF. I SHOT THE HAPPIEST 83 OF MY LIFE.”

—CHI CHI RODRIGUEZ

in 1493 on his second American voyage) increased, so too did the slave trade in all its American markets. And while much is made of the Boston Tea Party, rum factored into the American colonial scene far more prominently (let us remember the Tea Party was not only a protest against the taxation of tea but also of molasses. The spirit was traded from Newfoundland to the Amazon delta, often in defiance of British laws forbidding spirit trade between colonies.

Today, because most rum purchased and consumed in the US hails from Puerto Rico, Americans tend to be familiar with the lighter rums of that island (similar to those of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and other traditionally Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean). Light rums are less complex and less flavorful than dark rums, and as a result are most often used for mixing cocktails, much like vodka.

Dark rums, more common in the English-speaking islands, retain more of their molasses heritage, are

aged longer and are more complex. This complexity has garnered a whiskey-like loyalty among many drinkers—El Dorado at present is considered the finest of these aged rums. Other variants include a multitude of flavored rums (Malibu and Bacardi offer a bevy of fruit-flavored rums) and a wide selection of spiced rums (such as Captain Morgan).

Casual bar denizens would already be familiar with the many rum cocktails such as the daiquiri, rum and Coke, piña coladas, and the recently-fashionable-again mojito.

The daiquiri, named for a region in Cuba, is comprised of rum, lime juice, and sugar, but like most drinks, the ratio of spirit to additional ingredients varies. A generic piña colada is a simple mix of light and dark rum, pineapple juice, and coconut cream (*not* coconut milk) garnished with fruit.

The mojito is of Cuban origin and thought to be the successor of a similar drink concocted by English corsairs in the 1500s using a crude forerunner of rum. A refreshing combination of mint, sugar,

lime juice, club soda, and rum, the mojito migrated north after the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933 and by the outbreak of World War II was a staple of many bars and clubs. But in the years after the war, mojitos did not regain their initial popularity. Theories abound as to why (the onslaught of pre-packaged drink mixes and the necessity of fresh mint leaves are among those espoused), but in the 1980s the cocktail re-emerged in Miami restaurants serving neo-traditional Cuban cuisine. Its popularity has only increased since, and like most rum cocktails, variations abound.

Fetch aft the rum, Darby! 🍷

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