



In Fine Spirits

Hidden deep underground in a huge, dank cellar north of Bristol lie barrels of some of the world's finest spirits – cognac, rum, armagnac and whiskies – quietly maturing to perfection in a Bristol tradition that dates back centuries.

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John Barrett testing the Early Landed spirits

The arcane world of Early Bristol Landed is a fascinating little corner of the fine drinks industry. It dates back to the mid-18th century when Bristol merchant ships sailed into the city carrying young barrels of brandy from Cognac in France.

The barrels were stored in bitterly cold, musty cellars below the city centre... and a strange magic went to work. Away from warmer France, the spirit evaporated more slowly and gently than its French counterparts.

By luck or judgement, some of those first barrels were left untouched. Within 10 years, the brandy showed signs of a distinctive character. At 20 came a subtlety all of its own, more soft and gentle than French matured cognacs. The Early Landed principle had been discovered.

Today Early Bristol Landed cognac is cherished by Royals, the great Oxbridge colleges, ancient institutions and rich connoisseurs. They keep their treasured, discolouring barrels maturing in a subterranean Aladdin's cave beneath Wickwar, where it is lovingly tended by one of Early Landed's greatest experts, John Barrett.

One or two of Cognac's most illustrious tasters, often one of the famous Hine family, make an annual pilgrimage from France to join him. Tiny samples are taken to test maturity. Some barrels receive the final benediction after two decades. Let bottling commence.

But the story doesn't end there. The Early Landed technique isn't just confined to cognac these days. John Barrett has

successfully applied it to other spirits including the finest whiskies, British apple brandies and now, above all, classic rums.

John has Bristol's centuries-old wine and spirits trade in his blood. His family ran pubs and hotels in the city and an early venture was his port and claret business in King Street. He then created the Bristol Brandy Company, specialising as custodians of Early Bristol Landed cognac for wealthy clients.

Traditional city centre cellars were vanishing as prime land was exploited for redevelopment. He found a perfect alternative at Wickwar in a subterranean quarry originally mined for stone to line a nearby tunnel on the Bristol-Birmingham railway.

You must take an old, clanking metal lift down several storeys to reach Early Landed's Holy of Holies. It's a bitterly cold place and when lights are switched on, walls and ceiling glisten with a ghostly white growth... a fungus that feeds off evaporating spirit.

"Perfect conditions," John says breezily, rubbing his hands to keep warm. "Dark, damp, cold. You've got to wrap up well if you're working down here for any length of time."

The rows of Early Bristol Landed cognac barrels each carry the names of the great and good, owners who have made a long-term investment for that glorious day when the spirits are at their best and ready for that great banquet or college feast.

John loves his role as heritage guardian. "I had a call the other day from someone who wanted his Early Landed cognac bottled and delivered to his castle," but he longed to take the Early Landed idea further.

He says: "It was a late Scots friend with a keen interest in fine malt whiskies and who'd lived in the Caribbean who suggested that fine rum could benefit from the Early Landed maturing process. Most individual rums from the best stills in the Caribbean are blended – rather a waste of a very distinctive product. I took a closer interest and was delighted to discover they have a range of styles equal to the best Cognacs and malt whiskies."

Bristol Spirits Limited's dark and dingy cellars housing barrel upon barrel of maturing spirits



There was another aspect to rum he enjoyed as a Bristolian. Just like cognac, it has long historical associations with the city and was an important import from the Caribbean alongside sugar in the heyday of Bristol's transatlantic trade.

In 1993 he changed the company's name to Bristol Spirits Limited to reflect its wider focus as he sourced and imported the very finest rums he could find. Four years later, he launched the Bristol Classic Rum collection.

Bristol Spirits Limited has built up a network of contacts with the best stills across the Caribbean. John only buys unblended, distilled rum with a vintage date and from individual stills or estates to ensure provenance. The vintage and still or estate is clearly marked on each bottle sold.

The maturing is carried out at Wickwar. Once the spirits arrive from Caribbean, he selects an appropriate wooden barrel to suit each rum that will add to its character. He has an international network of suppliers of barrels, most of which were previously used for other drinks such as port, sherry and bourbon.

"Wood management – finding the best wood to mature each individual rum – is very important," he says. Examples include a 16-year-old from Jamaica finished in sherry casks, an 18-year-old from Guyana in port casks and a 10-year-old from Guadeloupe matured in new Limousin oak, the traditional wood used for cognac barrels.



Rum, which comes in white, gold and dark forms, was a canny choice for a business venture in classy spirits. Thanks to top brands like Bacardi, it's a hugely popular drink worldwide – unlike the more esoteric Cognac. All John needed to do was to establish an up-market niche in an existing mass market.

"Rum has a traditional yo-ho-ho image as a sailor's drink. I just needed to make the point that it offers a great deal more to discerning drinkers seeking the very finest rums," he says.

After just eight years, Bristol Classic Rum has built a strong export trade to countries including Italy, France and Japan – three quarters of its products are sold overseas – and home sales are excellent. Prices start at about £20 and are rising – Harrods sells one of the company's finest at £120 a bottle.

The Early Bristol Landed tradition is alive, well and prospering.

CONTACT:

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