

# From cocktails TO CONNOISSEURS

Think rum is just the basis for a Daiquiri? Fair enough, says **RORY ROSS**: but beyond the lighter 'cocktail' rums are some of the most complex, multilayered and rewarding of spirits, needing no disguise or accompaniment.

**F**INE RUM – AND I MEAN THE PROPER, serious, first-class stuff – presents a nose and palate that affords a greater range of nuances, such as banana, vanilla, caramel and citrus fruit aromas, than any other spirit, with huge variations depending on where and how the rum was distilled and matured. Yet for years, this great drink has been mired by a dodgy reputation. The favourite tippie of Oliver Cromwell and Lord Byron has suffered the indignity of commercial blending and drowning in sweet fizzy drinks. Now, rum is fighting back. It is hosing down its Bacardi-and-Coke image and reclaiming its status as a drink ripe for genuine connoisseurship.

Sales are soaring thanks to the newfound popularity of the Caribbean, the place where rum was born in the early 17th century when locals discovered that the leftovers from sugar production made an intoxicating drink. Some people are even talking up rum as 'the new single malt whisky'. Take John Barrett of Bristol Spirits. Barrett, a gently persuasive rum evangelist-on-a-mission, believes that rum's time has come. A specialist purveyor of fine spirits, he deals in rare and exceptional rums from individual estates, and sometimes from single casks. He buys small amounts of 'second-hand' rum, matures them in damp, cool cellars in Bristol and then bottles the stuff for sale. He describes himself as a 'second-hand car dealer in rum'. "Rum is part of a long tradition and a 300-and-something-year-old history," he says when we met at the Ritz hotel in London. "It isn't quite as esoteric as early landed Cognac, but I am convinced that rum is hot on the whisky trail, only 25 years behind.

"Many people think of rum as a sweet and sticky drink that goes with things like mango juice," he continued, wincing slightly, his voice sounding like rum trickling slowly over ice. "I think of it as a clean fresh drink." He called for glasses of Ron Paraiso (Paradise Rum), a four-year-old Cuban rum, into which he poured... tonic water?

"Cuban rums have a slightly vegetal, greeny, grassy character with a touch of boiled cabbage

about them," he explained. "They blend rather well with the quinine in the tonic."


We clinked and sipped this remnant of bygone sugar cane. Whoahh... yes... I see what he means. It tasted deliciously clean, fresh and invigorating, with hints of caramel and orange and a touch of the medicine cupboard about it. It zaps the thalamus and palate, but without any of the implied collateral brain-damage of some spirits.

"This rum is shipped over in bulk from Cuba," said Barrett. "We re-cask it into once-used bourbon barrels made from oak, then give it a further year's maturation to boost the vanilla taste. Cuban rums often lack the joy of vanilla because oak isn't readily available in Cuba, thanks to the US embargo."

Barrett then proceeded to give me a dazzling tour d'horizon of the state of rum. Its sheer versatility and breadth of appeal is one of its great strengths. While Lord Byron waxed ecstatic about its calming influence ('There's nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms as rum and true religion'), rum was putting fire into the bellies of the British Navy. In the 21st century, it appeals as much to trendy bartistas and mixologists as to connoisseurs and collectors. It rises to any occasion, whether sipped before or after dinner, or even with no dinner at all.

The three major types of rum are white, golden or amber and dark. The darker the colour, the longer its maturation and the more complex its taste. At the cheap end of the market, 3 to 7-year-old white rums, which taste fresh and sometimes a little harsh, are the life and soul of thousands of cocktails, from the Acapulco, which is mixed from tequila, pineapple and grapefruit, to the Zombie (pineapple, papaya and lime), via classics like Cuba Libre, Daiquiri and Mojito. Bar culture is awash with such rums.

After a gap in the middle part of the market in which very little rum seems to be available, you reach the smart end, where you find complex golden and dark rums from single estates that have been matured for up to 30 years in oak. These spirits pack terrific character and have a depth, warmth,



Human judgement and unhurried, time-hallowed methods give the finest rums a rounded, complex character. **Above** The River Antoine Distillery in Grenada. **Below left** Ready to mature... a barrel from the Saint James Distillery in Martinique. **Below right** As with the River Antoine Distillery, this distillery in Guadeloupe still relies on water wheel power.





**Above** Most Cuban sugar cane used in the production of rum is harvested by hand. Here, a cane cutter uses a machete to cut a stalk of sugar cane at harvest time. **Right** Mount Gay Rum Refinery MD Lew Ward enjoys a rum tasting with Mr Griffen in St Lucy's Parish, Barbados.



charm and mellowness to rival Cognac and Armagnac. It's a Caribbean holiday without the air fare. Their intense flavours can be softened and released by the addition of ice or water.

Barrett sells about 16 rums, from Cuban Ron Paraiso via Nicaraguan rums and various ages of rum from Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad, Martinique and Jamaica, culminating in a 1974 rum from Port Morant in Guyana ('Rich deep flavours of wood, fruits and leather produced from one of the oldest pot stills in the world.') and a 1974 from Very Old Jamaica 'Private Reserve'.

You need four basic ingredients to produce great rum: a good base product, which in this case is sugar and molasses (the brown sticky residue when sugar crystals have been produced from sugar cane), careful distillation, painstaking maturation in

Within these two broad categories, you find great variety. Virtually every Caribbean island-cluster and every fringe Caribbean country proudly upholds its own rum traditions. Barbados, which pioneered rum distillation and where the Mount Gay distillery, founded in 1663, is the oldest in the Caribbean, produces light and sweetish rums. Cuban rums are crisp and clean. Guyana is famous for rich heavy rums from Demerara – a byword for quality – which can bear long maturation. Martinique rums are often aged in French brandy casks for at least 3 years, imparting a Cognac-like flavour. Nicaragua rums age well, ditto Guatemalan rums. Jamaica used to boast 148 distilleries back in 1893. There are only a handful surviving today, but their aromatic rums cover the entire spectrum from light to very full-flavoured. Oliver Cromwell was particularly keen

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cool damp conditions (hard to find in the Caribbean, hence the best rums being matured in cool damp places like Bristol) and a polished final preparation. Assuming that all four ingredients are in place, where do the best rums come from?

There are Anglo rums and Hispanic rums. The best Hispanic rums come from Nicaragua, Panama, Cuba and Puerto Rico, which produce light spirits usually from a continuous distillation process to give a soft, fruity, easy style of drink. Anglo rums come from the British Caribbean where pot distillation is the common method, as in Cognac. (Pot stills are an old and simple method of distillation which produces a spirit that is part alcohol and part other fractions of the original fermented sugar. Continuous stills are more modern and scientific, and can be controlled to produce either a pure spirit or a spirit with heavier fractions in it. The choice of stills has a profound effect on the final character of the rum). The huge pot still at Port Morant on the Demerara River in Guyana holds 25,000 litres of fermenting sugar and molasses.



on Jamaica rum, which may partly explain why in 1655 he invaded Jamaica and wrested control of the island from the Spanish. Long Pond distillery on Jamaica produces some of the most pungent and complex rums; Monymusk, one of the oldest sugar plantations on Jamaica, produces amazingly concentrated almost winy rums. "If Monymusk is the Chateau Lafite of rum, Port Morant is the Chateau Latour," pronounces Barrett.

As you can see, so many rums, so little time. The best way to work out which rums you like is to head for the bar of an enlightened hotel, ask for unblended single-estate rums of between 3 and 30 years' maturation and work your way through the list. That done, head for a specialist purveyor and tell him you're looking for Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum. He'll know what you mean.

Rory Ross is a journalist and writer. His 'Four Men in a Boat', about the British gold-medal-winning coxless four at the Sydney Olympics, was published in summer 2004, co-written with crew member, Tim Foster.