



- Home
- Drinks News
- Analysis & Comment
- Features
- » Beers
- » Spirits
- » Cocktails
- » Wines
- Regional Focus
- Departure Zone
- Digital Edition



Pirates of the Caribbean



The spirit of the sugar fields

Published: (01-04-2007)

Rum is no longer adrift in a sea of old-fashioned naval iconography. Its swashbuckling heritage is being revived to help it appeal to a new generation of drinkers. Felicity Murray reports on a category fighting the dominance of vodka and brandy.

Rum consumption is growing. It has overtaken whiskey and is predicted to overtake brandy to become second only to vodka by 2010, according to the latest global research by Vinexpo/IWSR.

Producers are marketing to a new generation of 25 to 35-year-old consumers who are not only looking for super-premium products, but also products with provenance. By developing aged, dark, gold and platinum rums, and by designing distinctive, modern, elegant bottles that stand out on the shelf behind the bar or in retail outlets, they are creating a fashionable image for the spirit.

With increasing numbers of style bars opening in cities around the world in response to a growing trend among this target audience for cocktails, rum is starting to stand its ground in what has traditionally been a vodka-dominated arena. Indeed, rum has been identified as the next category to experience an explosion of interest at the super-premium level in much the same way vodka has in recent years.



The US and India have the highest rum consumption figures, followed by Cuba and the Philippines. In the US, rum accounts for 12.9 per cent of all spirits sales, ranking second only to vodka. In 2005, volumes of rum sales were up by 6 per cent to 22 million 9-litre cases, according to the Adams Beverage Group.

Robert Furniss-Roe, senior global brand director of the world's top-selling white rum, Bacardi, says the strong performance of Bacardi rums has been driven by both mature markets, such as the US and much of Europe, and emerging markets such as Russia and India.

"In the US, Bacardi's growth is coming from a number of strategic initiatives, such as consumer-relevant promotional programmes like the Bacardi mojito cocktail, and the 'zero carbohydrate' message of Bacardi and diet cola, but also from flavoured rums," he says.

Vodka fatigue

Directly targeting the flavoured vodka market, Bacardi launched Big Apple and Grand Melón flavours and, following the success of these, has now introduced Peach Red, the first peach-flavoured rum. Other rum producers are following Bacardi's lead, such as United Drinks in Denmark with the launch of Spiceman, a raspberry, lemon or tropical-flavoured white rum from Cuba in an aluminium bottle.

"From both a trade and consumer level, we're seeing strong interest in our portfolio as some 'vodka fatigue' sets in among influencers," says Furniss-Roe.

Rob Morrison, marketing director for Cockspur US, concurs: "The versatility of rum allows it to be just as easily mixed in cocktails as vodka, and the incredible popularity of that one drink - the mojito - can be credited to driving significant category volume." He also believes education and simply tasting some of the "fabulous super-premium rums" will solve any image problems associated with the old naval rums. Cockspur is a golden rum hailing from Barbados.

While Bacardi still tops the global ratings in white rum, Captain Morgan is holding its own in dark rums. With its redesigned brand icon - "a mischievous and fun-loving buccaneer" - it is the second-biggest selling international rum brand worldwide (DI Millionaires Club 2005) regardless of concerns that dark rums have an image problem through association with the navy and older men.

Morrison believes that, as consumers realise that aged rum is great to sip and savour and they experiment with some of the niche and boutique brands at the super-premium level, "they will realise there are alternatives to some of the mass-produced brands that currently dominate the market".

Malcolm Gosling, owner of Gosling's Rum in Bermuda, believes the training of bar owners and mixologists, by his and other brands, is helping increase rum sales. Gary Hayward, of Boutique bar in Leeds, England, says Gosling's Black Seal Rum's signature cocktail, the dark 'n' stormy, has taken off and "people are asking for the brand by name, which is great for the dark rum category".

Although not officially part of the Caribbean, Bermuda is an important island for rum and for cocktails. Iain Stewart, commercial director of Gosling's distributor Castle Brands GB, comments: "Heritage and origin are incredibly important to the UK rum category, possibly because rum is so entwined with the history of the Royal Navy." And the company is determined to help transform the image of dark rum to appeal to a younger, influential audience.

The smooth, caramelised flavours associated with dark rums certainly make easy drinking, but a move towards golden rums is being driven by a growing awareness of aged rums along with an interest in heritage and provenance.

"There is a greater awareness and availability of premium aged blends aged from five to 15 years. Some are being used in cocktails, and the older ones are enjoyed on a parallel to whisky or Cognac," says Pauline Clarke, UK brand manager for Cockspur. She believes one of the major drivers behind the growth of rum is greater above- and below-the-line marketing activity by companies positioning their brands as part of lifestyle choices. "Consumers want to be exposed to new alcoholic alternatives which are versatile and enjoyable in leisure, social environments or at home," she says.

Rum for every taste

The Caribbean has been identified as the birthplace of rum and, as a result, the imagery and spirit of the islands has been an integral part of promoting Caribbean rum brands for decades, says Morrison. "For the first time in many years there is a focus on and investment in the rum category by both the Caribbean producers and the large multinational drinks companies. This will no doubt bring attention and new consumers to the category."



Havana Club, which is co-owned by Pernod Ricard and the Cuban government, plays heavily on its Cuban roots. But, rather than portray the clichéd Caribbean imagery of beaches and palm trees, it relates itself, through its marketing, to the spirit and culture of the city and people of Havana. Master distiller Don José Navarro describes Havana Club aged rums as complex and harmonious, like the people of Cuba. "A perfect mix of diverse flavours and aromas like a mixing of races without contamination," he says. "Sweet in the mouth but strong in the throat. Hospitable, but not without rebels."

The growing interest in rum is generally being attributed to its scope - there is a rum to suit every taste, according to Navarro. For the consumer wanting a white spirit-based cocktail with the strength of alcohol but with little or no taste, white rums offer more character than vodka and a level of smoothness depending on whether and for how long the rum has been aged before charcoal filtering. For those wanting an aroma and taste of rum, there are many golden and dark rums of varying ages which offer a wealth of different flavours and even more drinking options - mixed or straight. And for bartenders, the added benefit of rum's provenance gives them something more to talk about and sell to their customers.

Elements Eight, a brand launched in June 2006 with a super-premium, four-year-old Platinum and a six-year-old Gold, combines the rum history of the oldest distillery in St Lucia with ultra-modern packaging more typical of vodka.

Following a good reception in the UK and gaining more than 100 listings in London bars - some of which are selling more than 30 cases a week - it now has international distribution and, last month, appointed CBH Trading and Brand Support as distributors in Germany and France respectively. In the Caribbean, the roll-out has begun at top-end, duty-free, five-star resorts in more than 30 countries.

"A visit to New York to meet potential distributors and attending the Rum Festival last October confirmed for us that the US is ready for something more contemporary," says Carl Stephenson, managing director of Elements Eight. "We believe we have captured a niche with a super-premium white rum. There are lots of good golden rums out there, but we are the only ones to age it for that long then take out all the colour. Why? Because it's down to consumer perceptions of premium white spirits where they are looking for purity and clarity. We have presented rum in a way which will attract the younger drinker and the vodka and gin drinkers into the category - and perhaps with the gold we can bring in bourbon drinkers," he says.

Touchy subject

J Wray & Nephew, distiller of Appleton rums in Jamaica, also sees its Estate range competing for the traditional bourbon, whiskey or Cognac drinker, and its white rum as a premium alternative to other white spirits.

"The movement in rum is at the top end, as with other spirits all over the world," says Peter Martin, the company's regional manager for Europe.

"In some markets they go for age statement, in others they don't. But age is a touchy subject," he says. "In some regions of production, such as the Anglo-Caribbean islands, they adhere to the rules of Scotch whisky, so, in a 12 Year Old, the youngest element in the mix is 12 years; but in other regions an average age is used, and on some bottles you'll see 15 years and solera in very small print underneath. There is presently no law in rum to accredit the age statement."

But like other Caribbean rum producers, he's convinced the product's authenticity and Caribbean heritage are critical to driving sales.

However, Gracia Larrain, at Flor de Caña, Nicaragua, argues that, although the popular perception is that rum's roots can be traced back to early beginnings in Cuba, Jamaica and other Caribbean spots, there are nevertheless many other excellent brands that have emerged in the rum category from other regions. "Central America produces some of the best rums on the market today," she says, but agrees that consumers are going for a smoother taste and quality above all else. "A top-shelf spirit that can be enjoyed neat or on the rocks."

"Rum's time has come," agrees Marc Beuve-Mery, managing director Havana Club, Cuba.

New Havana Club distillery

Pernod Ricard's new distillery in San José, Provincia de la Habana, Cuba, has completed extensive tests and is now producing its first rums. The investment of some €150 million in this 170,000-sq m, purpose-built plant for the exclusive production of Havana Club International dark aged rums comes as part of Pernod Ricard's plan to grow the brand to 5 million cases by 2013.

The new distillery will specialise in production using the traditional Cuban rum-making processes based on "añejamiento natural", the art of blending and ageing overseen by "maestros roneros" - master blenders.

To negate any possible problems with disruption of essential power and water supplies, the distillery, which complies with the highest Cuban and international requirements in terms of environmental practices and security, has been located and constructed to be completely autonomous. Even transport for the 145 workers to and from the high-security site is organised to avoid any dependence on Cuban systems.

While present production capacity is 9 million litres per year, or 12,000 bottles an hour, there is plenty of space on the 17 ha site for further lines and future expansion and, with six ageing cellars, it possibly already has the world's biggest rum-ageing facility.

Havana Club International is a joint venture between Cuban company Cuba Ron, responsible for rum production, and the French Pernod Ricard Group, which markets the Havana Club brand internationally and locally via Groupe.

By operating the new rum distillery, Havana Club International will undertake rum production for the first time, while Cuba Ron will continue producing the portfolio's white rums, which currently represent about 40 per cent of total production.

The company is based in Havana and exports to 124 countries across the world. The exception is the US, where Cuban products are banned due to the trade embargo.

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