

Key West sojourn brings on Dark and Stormy nights

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Food writers, it would seem, never really go on vacation.

On a jaunt down to Key West last fall, my fellow journalist Kim and I were traipsing through a liquor store, pondering what to purchase. We had decided an evening cocktail hour would be a civilized ritual to establish during our week away from work.

But what to choose as the official drink of our holiday? Which libation would epitomize but also offer easement from Key West's lingering, sweltering heat?

Kim fluttered her fingers over the rum selection. "How about a Dark and Stormy?" she asked, mischief and memories glinting in her eyes.

This suggestion did not register surprise. Kim has spent considerable time on various islands in the Atlantic, where the Dark and Stormy is often a staple.

Simple and tropical

It was my first encounter with the drink, which only contains three ingredients: dark rum, ginger beer (a non-alcoholic predecessor to ginger ale) and lime. That seemed simple -- and tropical -- enough. We bought a bottle of randomly selected dark Haitian rum along with Barritt's ginger beer -- the one brand the liquor store carried -- and we picked up limes at a grocery store.

That night, I watched as Kim splashed rum over the ice in two glasses, poured ginger beer nearly to the rims, squeezed juice from generously sized lime wedges into the drinks and then gave each a brisk stir.

We took our tentative first sips, jiggling the ice in our glasses appraisingly.

"Not bad," we both agreed. "But what if ..."

Top ingredients key

Curiosity overtook us. The next day we schlepped our laptops to the nearest Wi-Fi-wired coffeehouse to research the Dark and Stormy's history on the Internet.

Then we rummaged Key West's grocery stores and booze depots, looking for multiple brands of ginger beer and rum with which to experiment.

The makers of Gosling's rum, we found, lay claim to the mythology around the Dark and Stormy. Their Web site notes that the drink is "hailed as the national drink of Bermuda," and pronounced it "unlawful" to use any rum besides Gosling's Black Seal Rum to make it. We proceeded with our unauthorized investigations, nonetheless. Here's what we discovered.

Dark rums with richly complex notes of molasses and licorice mingle most effectively with the drink's other ingredients. Gosling's Black Seal Rum definitely possesses these qualities, but so do other dark rums -- British Navy Pusser's Rum and Ron Anejo Aniversario Pampero were also favorites.

Gosling's also touts Barritt's as the ginger beer of choice for a Dark and Stormy, but we much preferred Reed's Ginger Brew. Reed's has an honest gingery wallop -- particularly its "Extra Ginger Brew," a variation that is available at Whole Foods and BevMo in the Bay Area.

Even the cherry-flavored version of Reed's imbues a clear gingery bite to the drink. The neon red color, though, ruins the effect of the dangerous thunderheads churning in the glass that is purportedly the origin of the cocktail's name.

And no need for Key limes. A healthy spritz of generic Persian lime cuts the rum's sweetness and unifies the flavors.

By the third day of our trip, Kim and I could relax. We'd stocked up on Reed's and had hoarded enough dark rum with the requisite burnt sugar overtones to keep us euphorically lubricated for the remainder of the week.

Local versions

Back home in San Francisco, I noticed that several restaurants around town -- Range, Coco500 and Le Colonial among them -- include the Dark and Stormy on their cocktail list. Hobson's Choice bar in the Haight offers an enormous selection of rums, though they make their Dark and Stormy with Gosling's in strict keeping with tradition.

With the appropriate high-quality ingredients, however, this is a drink you can easily concoct with confidence at home -- or on vacation.

Dark & Stormy

Because there are so few ingredients in this drink, be sure to use the richest dark rum and sprightliest ginger beer you can find.

INGREDIENTS:

2 ounces dark rum (also called black rum)

5 ounces ginger beer

Generous squirt of lime

INSTRUCTIONS:

Pour rum into a highball glass filled with ice. Cover with ginger beer, then spritz with lime. Drink immediately.

Makes 1 drink

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