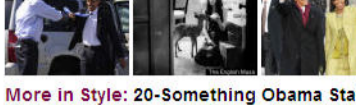




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It Was A Dark N' Stormy Night: One Man's Search For The Secrets Of Gosling's Black Seal Rum

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Why, you may wonder, was I in Bermuda looking for magical elves? The answer is simple -- it was the rum. No, I wasn't wiggled out and hallucinating again from some naval strength rotgut. I was ... well, I have to backtrack a little here.

I first set foot in Bermuda about 15 years ago. There are lots of things to do in Bermuda, not least of which is drink dark n' stormies. The dark n' stormy is the signature cocktail of the island, and it's available to all comers any time of the day or night. You want a dark n' stormy with your eggs for breakfast, nobody bats an eye.

The dark n' stormy is a seemingly humble concoction of rum and ginger beer (a spicier, more robust animal than ginger ale), usually adorned with a slice of lime. But something about the combination creates an alchemy that's just this side of heaven. It provides a tickle on the nostrils, a tingle on the taste buds, and such a feeling of refreshment and generally fine disposition that if enough people drank dark n' stormies at the same time, it could possibly lead to world peace. I spent a good chunk of that long weekend pointing at my empty glass and motioning to the waitstaff to get me another. And when I got back home, I vowed to dazzle all my friends with homemade dark n' stormies.

Only problem was, when I made them myself, they didn't taste the same. My dark n' stormies tasted like ... well, like plain old rum and ginger beer, not the magical elixir that had bewitched me in Bermudian locales from Hamilton to St. George. Being a callow and, frankly, moronic youth at the time, I thought it was the island breezes that imparted the secret ingredient which was missing on the island of Manhattan. It wasn't until my second or third visit to Bermuda that I realized I was using the wrong rum.

You see, every restaurant, hotel, bar, dive and watering hole on the island makes their dark n' stormies with the same ingredients: Gosling's Black Seal Rum and authentic Bermuda Stone ginger beer. You can mess around with the brand of ginger beer if you must, because the native brands are hard to find outside of Bermuda. But use any rum besides Gosling's Black Seal and you haven't got a dark n' stormy, you've just got a glass with some stuff in it. And you don't hear people ordering too many "glasses with stuff" at your local tavern, do you?

Black Seal rum is dark and almost opaque to the eye, which may scare off some rum novices who are used to the barely-there look and flavor of Bacardi. But its appearance is belied by its lush, velvety mouth feel which reassures the tongue that there's nothing to fear. Add an ice cube and whole new vistas of flavor appear -- caramel, vanilla, citrus, wood, tobacco ... I could go on, but I'd start drooling all over the keyboard. Simply put, this stuff doesn't taste like any other rum you've ever had.

As I became more enamored of the dark n' stormy, I delved deeper into the mystery that is Gosling's Black Seal. What is the deal with this stuff? What makes it different from other rums? How else can it be consumed? What happens, on a molecular level, when you combine this stuff with ginger beer to make it so pleasing to the taste buds?

I found out that the company was founded in Bermuda in 1806 and is still owned and run by the Gosling family today. It got its name because it was bottled in recycled champagne bottles and sealed with black wax. It's one of the few products actually made in Bermuda; the raw materials are largely imported, but every bottle of the stuff is blended and bottled in the warehouse in Hamilton. Black Seal rum is a combination of three different rums which are aged and blended from three to six years in once-used bourbon barrels. There's one master taster, a guy named Kenny, who makes sure that each batch of the stuff is up to snuff.

But after much speculation and research, I finally determined that I wasn't getting the whole story. There must, I concluded, be magical Bermudian elves who sprinkle a little pixie dust in each and every bottle of Gosling's Black Seal before it leaves the factory. And that's why I found myself on Dundonald Street in Hamilton, Bermuda, knocking on the door of the Gosling's headquarters. I knew the elves were in there, and I wanted to meet them, if only to shake their elfin hands and say "Thank you."

Alas, I found no elves. I did, however, find a group of investment bankers who were visiting the facilities for a tasting of Black Seal and various other Gosling's products, hopefully not with TARP money. I was invited in for a sampling and a tour of the facilities. The bankers were more interested in getting drunk than in learning anything about rum ("You should write down that we were guzzling when we should have been sipping... guzzling Gosling's, heh heh heh..."). But I gleaned another valuable nugget of information about the dark n' stormy. Listen carefully, kids -- the rum must be poured *on top* of the ginger beer.

Now, official Gosling's legend has it that a century or so ago, at the Bermuda Yacht Club, a harried bartender poured a thirsty sailor a glass of ginger beer without putting the rum in first. Knowing better than to serve a boozeless drink to a seaman, he topped off the drink with Black Seal. The sailor apparently picked it up and, seeing the dark rum floating atop the ginger beer, said, "That's a storm cloud neither a fool nor a dead man would sail under!" And in the revelry that followed, more sailors asked for "dark n' stormies." And so a (trademarked) cocktail was born.

More pieces of the dark n' stormy puzzle were falling into place. But a quick walk-through of the factory where the stuff is aged, blended and bottled turned up nothing unusual. I needed to get the whole story. I wanted to find those damn elves. And that's how I wound up talking with none other than Malcolm Gosling, the man in charge of developing the brand's international presence and one of the seventh generation of Goslings to run the company.

From 1806 until the mid 1980s, if you wanted a bottle of Black Seal, you had to catch a flight or charter a boat to Bermuda. Why bother with the outside world? Gosling's was, and is, the mighty corporate colossus that bestrides the tiny island. Black Seal rum is used in everything from fish chowder to cakes to preserves to marinades. Walk into a Bermudian liquor store and you'll see one Gosling's product after another -- almost all of them available exclusively on the island -- including light rum, 151-proof stuff for flambés, grenadine, even gin. Gosling's is also the leading importer of wine, beer and spirits onto the island, topping even Bacardi, which maintains a corporate presence there.

But Malcolm Gosling is trying to spread the gospel to the rest of the world and make the brand a medium-sized fish in the huge international pond. It hasn't been an easy task. "It started with zero budget," he said, laughing. "I'm not exaggerating. I bought my own plane tickets in the beginning to get this thing moving. There really was nothing. So it's been a slow and steady build. We're building for the long term, as opposed to trying to get a quick hit."

Outside of Bermuda, Black Seal is regarded as not quite a party rum like Bacardi, but not quite a hoity-toity sipping spirit -- much as Bermuda itself is not quite Caribbean, but not quite British. And while it's a rather exclusive product made in limited quantities for people who know their rum, its low price leads many to think it's not a first-rate spirit; you'll find it on the top shelf at some bars and down amongst the cheap stuff at others. So what is it?

"If you take something like the dark n' stormy," Gosling told me, "it appeals to such a broad age range. So we have younger consumers, and we have much more mature consumers drinking the dark n' stormy. The Black & Coke - Black Seal and Coke - that's definitely down at the younger age of the spectrum. But then, with the Black Seal and tonic, and Black Seal and soda, or just Black Seal on the rocks, we appeal to a more mature palate.

"You know, due to our limited budget in comparison with some of our competitors, we have to be extremely focused. So we are very focused on yachting, because we see that, you know, the typical yachting community, that would fit right in with our demographic, and golf. So we're trying to break into the golfing community and make the dark n' stormy the official cocktail of the 19th hole." Sounds good to me. The dark n' stormy should be the official drink of something besides my apartment.

Of course, man does not live by one kind of rum alone, and a few years ago the clan took the almost unprecedented-for-Gosling's step of introducing new brands to their line for the first time in more than a century. Family Reserve Old Rum is the classic Black Seal blend, only it's aged in oak barrels for a minimum of 16 years. The extra aging makes it a beautiful, smooth and potent spirit designed for sipping like a cognac, with strong hints of toffee, chocolate and smoke. Gosling's Gold is an amber rum that to my palate works best as a mixer; because it's dry and light, it can be used in cocktails in lieu of other spirits (a rum and tonic, for example), although it also makes an excellent mojito.

And now, they've developed their own ginger beer, making the dark n' stormy an even more formidable, all-Gosling's affair. Consumed straight or on the rocks, Gosling's ginger beer starts out a little on the syrupy-sweet side before the ginger kicks in with a pleasant, strong-but-not-too-strong kick. The finish is beautiful, with the spice and tingle lingering on the back of the tongue. In a dark n' stormy, it's sublime. The rum smooths out the ginger beer's initial sweetness, and the spice of the ginger combines perfectly with the molasses in the rum. You can't find a better ginger beer outside Bermuda, and hopefully Gosling's will be a lot easier to get hold of on American shores than other Bermudian brands.

But it all comes back to the company's flagship product. The success of the other rums will likely hinge on the international success of Black Seal. So far, according to Malcolm Gosling, so good. But while he's committed to taking his family's rums worldwide, he's just as committed to keeping the company's roots in Bermuda -- unlike, say, Bacardi, which was forced out of its original Cuban home by the Castro regime and then spread far beyond its second base in Puerto Rico.

He's already made sure his blending and bottling plants in Hamilton can handle the job. "We've planned to accommodate what is realistic over the next, I think over the next ten years," he told me. "We can accommodate a great deal. Because, you know, Bermuda is such an important part of our history, and such an important element of the brand, it really is. And that's where all the recipes are, the blends are held there. Could you do it elsewhere? Obviously. But I don't foresee that."

Hmmm, the recipes... the blends... and where there are recipes and blends, there must be elves and pixie dust, right? Not that Malcolm copped to their existence, let alone telling me where they were. But it couldn't just be oak and molasses that make a rum that damn good. Could it?