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Rum Rises From the Cocktail Shaker to Challenge Scotch, Bourbon

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Review by John Mariani



Aug. 10 (Bloomberg) -- Rum is going up in class. More often seen in the company of its proletarian partner Coke, the sugarcane-based liquor is mixing instead with the elite sipping spirits, the single malts, XO cognacs and aged bourbons.

According to Adams Liquor Handbook, rum, with an 11.5 percent share of the U.S. brown liquor market, outsells brandies (6.6 percent), Scotch (7.7), and American

whiskies (9.0) -- spirits that have garnered far more prestige by promoting their high-priced single barrel, reserve, and even vintage bottlings.

Rum has always been more of a versatile liquor for making cocktails like daiquiris, pina colodas, mai tais and the good old rum-and-Coke. Now, rum makers are beginning to promote their own top-grade products as drinks to be savored on their own, or cut with a dash of water.

Made by distilling the fermented cane, usually at 80 proof, rum has been made throughout the Caribbean since Christopher Columbus brought the plant to the West Indies in 1493. By 1775 Americans were drinking four gallons per person a year, and on British ships it was the base of the daily grog ration.

Americans now consume 134 million 9-liter cases of rum per year, overwhelmingly white or silver rum mixed into cocktails, says the Adams handbook. While many Caribbean islands make rum, Bacardi, with its main operations in Puerto Rico, sells a whopping 43 percent of all rum in the U.S., 38 percent under its own brands.

Havana Contraband

Some well-established names, like Gosling's Black Seal Dark Rum, have always been sold on the basis of their intense, caramel-like, woody flavor and color, even though Gosling's is just 80 proof. And there are cult favorites like Havana Club, whose principal appeal is that you can't buy it in the U.S. because it is considered Cuban contraband. (Bacardi, however, has a license to use the name and, they contend, the original recipe for Havana Club made in Puerto Rico.)

I sampled an array of premium, aged rums and tasted them neat, then cut with a dash of filtered water. I was amazed at the distinctions among bottlings from different islands, though that has more to do with the distilleries than with the soil the sugar cane grows in.

Here are my favorites.

Ron Zacapa Centenario Solera Grand Reserve (\$39-\$45)

A Guatemalan rum blended from stocks 6 to 23 years old, distilled from the "virgin press" of the sugar cane. It has a huge bouquet, and if you like natural sweetness in your liquor, this has plenty of caramel flavor and, underneath that, tasty tobacco notes. A very lush rum, nicely mellowed with water.

Flor de Cana Grand Reserve (\$22)

A tropical, Nicaraguan beauty, pale gold, with a mild piney aroma and some fruit flavors that make it better served neat. It would also make a fine addition to a daiquiri, but not a pina colada.

Depaz Blue Cane Rhum Agricole (\$50)

This Martinique rum is worth every penny, a fabulous example of complexity, balanced sweetness and dryness, and as sophisticated as cognac with some of the dash of Armagnac.

Gosling's Gold Bermuda Rum (\$21)

Far lighter than Black Seal Dark, this is delightfully spicy, though not artificially "spiced," with light caramel. Very good cut with water or on the rocks as an aperitif.

Bacardi 151 (\$24)

The label reads "WARNING: FLAMMABLE," and that's a good description of what

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happens if you slug back this 151 proof Puerto Rican rum too fast. It packs a wallop, and its aroma bounds out of the glass. You may want to smoke a cigar with this just to counteract its massive flavor. Bacardi's 8 Year Old (\$24) is also a beauty, with good spice and real elegance in the finish.

Clement Rhum Vieux (\$40) and Tres Vieux (\$150)

Clement "rhums," made in Martinique, have always touted their French connection, so that Rhum Vieux, made from white rums, takes the old cognac insignia of "VSOP" (Very Superior Old Pale), and the company's Tres Vieux, at 88 proof, is called "XO" (Extra Old). The former is a perfect expression of the power of rum without going over 80 proof: exploding on the palate, with a dry-sweet balance that reminds me of the finest Irish whiskies.

The Tres Vieux, which comes in a gorgeous teardrop-shaped bottle that makes it a perfect gift, was the most complex rum of those I tasted, with an enchanting sea-salt component, a pleasant bite, and a long finish. You could cut this with water, but this is definitely a rum for sitting around in a white linen suit and straw hat watching the green flash of the sun setting in the tropical sea.

(**John Mariani** writes on wine and spirits for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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