

BY ALAN J. WAX

The Smooth Taste of Luxurious, Tropical Rums



Confession: I hated rum. It reminded me of my post-prom night club outing and the catered affairs I attended at that youthful age — the legal drinking age then was 18. I didn't particularly like to drink, but rum and Coke was the only thing I could choke down while somehow giving the appearance of sophistication.

Rum, at least in my mind, always has been associated with fruity, sweet mixed drinks, some of them decorated with little paper umbrellas, as well as with such planter's punch, piña colada, daiquiris, and mojitos. Indeed, a just-published book, "And a Bottle of Rum," by Wayne Curtis (Crown) tells the history of this tippie using tales of 10 drinks as its framework.

Rum is produced on virtually every island in the Caribbean, as well as in Central America, South America and elsewhere in the world. Most rums use molasses as their base, but many use sugar cane juice

instead, especially rums made in French-speaking areas. Rums can range in taste from light and fresh to dark and smoky. They can be smooth as silk or fiery. They range in color from clear to straw to golden to deep brown, depending mostly on what kind of oak barrels they had been aged in and for how long. (Some have caramel coloring, however).

"I love the vast range of tastes you find, compared to the narrow range, in say, bourbon," author Curtis told me.

"I like the free-for-all, whatever-goes attitude among producers, and I like how rum mixes so well with so much."

Wherever it's produced, rum is a taste you can't dissociate from the tropics. It's been around at least since the earliest days of European settlement of the New World and it has a sometimes sordid history that includes giving rise to the slave trade.

In spite of my own personal history with the demon rum, I've done a 180. What changed my mind? An opportunity to sample a swath of luxury rums — sipping rums mostly, first at a tasting in Syosset sponsored by Post Wines at Testorosa restaurant, and then on my own. I approached these samplings with no other expectation than to gain some new knowledge. I was more than rewarded, often blown away, by what I sipped.

Never before had I thought of rum as a sipping drink; but the brands I tasted recently were like nothing I ever had before. These were elegant and smooth and every bit as complex as cognacs, single malt scotches and fine bourbons. Most lacked that molasses burn taste you often detect in rum. And, while I'm sure they'll do much for a mixed drink, I'd just as soon have one of these in a snifter as I would anything else. (Actually, I recently enjoyed very refreshing, flavorful mojitos concocted with two clear rums: Rhum Clément, from Martinique, and Cane 10, made in Trinidad, by



LVMH Moët Hennessy.) With few exceptions, some of these luxurious tipples represent great values vs. other super premium liquors. Most cost under \$40 a bottle, often less.

Fancy rums are hot. According to Beverage Media, sales of super premium rum in the United States last year rose 22 percent to 130 million cases while the overall rum market rose just 4.9 percent. "It's going to be the next big thing," said Iker Fernandez, the U.S. brand manager for the Guatemalan distillery that produces Ron Zacapa.

HERE ARE NOTES ON A FEW OF MY FAVORITES.

Among the white rums, Rhum Clément Première Canne (\$28) and Cane 10 Rum (\$35) tasted neat; both reminded me of eaux-di-vie, the sweet-tasting liquor distilled from fruit wine. Their scents reminded me of Poire William. Both are distilled from fresh-pressed sugar cane juice, rather than molasses. The Clément was floral and clean. The Cane 10, fuller in body and tinted straw, had many subtle flavors, including licorice.

HOW THE DARK RUMS.

Goslings Family Reserve Old Rum (\$70) from Bermuda in a bottle hand-dipped in wax is a long-aged sipping rum, deep copper in color with notes of wood, herbs, ginger snap, vanilla, and orange, with a lengthy finish.

Pyrat XO Reserve (\$30) from Anguilla was highly aromatic with notes of dried fruit, orange and spices and smooth as silk going down.

Rhum Clément VSOP (\$38) offered earthy, woody, herbal flavors suggestive of cognac. It was aged partly in used cognac casks and then in used Wild Turkey barrels. Very smooth.

Rum Zacapa Centenario (\$40), from Guatemala, aged 23 years and finished in old Jim Beam barrels, is dangerously smooth. It, too, drinks like a cognac with complex notes of sweet wood, vanilla and spice, and a sweetish finish.

Sea Wynde (\$40), a blend of rums from Jamaica and Guyana, distilled like a cognac in copper alembics, is fragrant and mellow with subtle aromas of wood, spice and vanilla. Extraordinarily easy to sip.

Care to spend more? Consider Pyrat Cask 1623 from Anguilla (\$250). Aged 40 years in oak, it has intensely concentrated notes of caramel, dried fruit, spice and orange peel, and tasted as soft as a cloud. An extremely dangerous potion.

Want to break the bank? There's the special-order, only 105 proof, British Royal Navy Imperial Rum, bottled in 4.5-liter ceramic, woven-wood covered demi-johns. (I tasted from a 1-oz. sample).

The price for this drink, from stocks remaining from 1970, when the British stopped serving rum aboard Royal Navy ships, is an eye-popping \$3,000. Deep copper in color with strong woody notes, this offering most definitely needed water to harshen its fiery taste.



RUM READER

RUM — ONCE CALLED KILL-DEVIL — HAS A FASCINATING HISTORY INVOLVING COLONIAL MERCANTILISM, THE SLAVE TRADE, THE NAPOLEONIC WARS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. YOU CAN READ MORE IN THESE RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOKS:

AND A BOTTLE OF RUM (Crown Publishers, 2006), by Maine-based freelance writer Wayne Curtis, tells the story of rum's evolution from colonial rotgut to chichi cocktails with mixologists as well as history buffs in mind.

RUM: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE REAL SPIRIT OF 1776 (Nation Books, 2005), by British author Ian Williams, UN Correspondent for the Nation magazine, focuses in large measure on how rum fermented the American Revolution.

RUM (Citadel Press, 2004), by Los Angeles writer-lecturer Charles A. Coulombe, tells rum's saga with an added dose of cooking recipes (rum cake, for example) and reviews of various rums.

Read them with a snifter of good rum at your side.

— Alan J. Wax