

By Timothy Dugdale

Punching Above Your Weight

We were waiting to check in when the porter asked if we cared for a complementary punch to pass the time. I demurred. For me, when it comes to mixed drinks, even gratis ones, hope does not triumph over experience. When you fall in love with rum, you fall hard for the real thing. This fact was impressed upon me the next night during happy hour at the Amaryllis as I lost my composure after a quartet of tumblers brimming with the amber nectar and found myself prone in a bush a good distance away. Talk about a rum go.

Rum is a distillate that enjoys a full dynamic range of taste and history. In antiquity, rum began, as so many spirits do, as white lightning or "kill devil." It was nasty stuff. Perhaps that is why in the popular imagination it is the preferred tonic of mythical Caribbean pirates and seafaring rogues, laying waste to hapless galleons and louche ports-of-call while tuned up on rum. What schoolboy can forget Billy Bones tipping rum with skittish caution in the Admiral Benbow at the beginning of "Treasure Island"?

Rum is distilled in either a pot or column still, although pot stills deliver more flavour because they preserve more elements from the fermentation process. What is true for baking is true for booze – the best rums begin with the best managed yeasts. White rums, the staple of countless mixed drinks originating from countless locales in the tropics, are usually aged in stainless steel tanks while more premium rums are matured for at least one year in a cask that was the former home of bourbon or other dusky spirit.

Barbados is a paradise for the rum enthusiast. Founded in 1703, Mount Gay is the oldest brand of rum in the world and one of the most distinguished. Although the map on the front of the distillery's bottles features a red star marking Bridgetown, the distillery is rightly located in the northern part of the island near the best sugarcane. Mount Gay's name honours Sir John Gay Alleyne who was the trusted business manager of the original estate of John Sober where the distillery's first cane was grown and the rum distilled.

Although Alleyne earned a reputation as a staunch abolitionist, rum was a valuable economic commodity in the slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries. Slave labour was required to harvest the sugarcane of the Caribbean to produce the molasses that was distilled into rum. Little surprise a slave could be bought and sold for a few casks. In Haitian voodoo mythology, you can even haggle your way out of the afterlife if you provide Baron Samedi with good rum and cigars. He's that kind of devil. And businessman.

Like any spirit, the best rums are best enjoyed neat or on the rocks, unmolested or masked by mixers. The rise of so-called "craft cocktail" and attendant "mixologists" can seem both faddish and foolish to those who appreciate how beautifully Zen even a plastic cup of quality rum enjoyed poolside can be. I knew a bartender in Detroit who kept a certain bottle of rum from Grenada right next to the Louis XIII cognac and would do the charity work of steering misguided big shooters to the rum with a iron clad guarantee of superior satisfaction for a fraction of the price. Great taste and great value pack a hell of a punch.

