RUM IN AMERICA

THE SPIRIT'S PEDIGREE AND ITS ROLE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

By Erik Vonk
Photography courtesy of Richland Rum Distillery

Culture de la canne à sucre aux Caraïbes. (1591)
Philipp Galle - London, Stapelton Collection, The British Museum.

Rum runs deeper in America's veins than bourbon, whisky, or any other distilled spirit. It helped develop capitalism, boosted slavery, was at the root of America's independence, and served as a major contributing factor to temperance and, ultimately, prohibition. Then, it became a forgotten spirit for a while, displaced by post prohibition's new favorites: bourbon, whisky, vodka, and gin. Over the last two decades there has been an accelerating comeback; today, there is a true rum renaissance. Rum is everywhere: It is not only a spirit of choice for mixologists with rock star status, but rum is also a hot topic to which blogs, publications, books, tastings, and even festivals are dedicated, and there is a growing cadre of folks who take pride in adopting the title "rum expert."

But more so than other distillates, rum is not one drink, but a group or a selection of spirits. The huge, diverse, multifaceted, eclectic assembly of products called rum—which vary by origin, base material, fermentation techniques, distillation methods, and aging and maturation approaches—has only one common aspect: sugar cane. The distillate technically cannot be called rum, unless the pedigree can be traced back to sugar cane. But, as a consequence of the magnitude and diversity of this pool of sugar cane based distillates, many different styles are recognized, using a host of criteria often associated with a flavor signature, in combination with a point of geographic origin, but not aligned with the pedigree of the product. Examples are Jamaican style (full bodied, aromatic), Cuban style (light, dry), and Guyana /Demerara style (strong, hot) rums that may have been produced, anywhere using different base materials and production methods.

To better understand rum's history and put the spirit's role in American history into the right perspective, it may be helpful to review the various base materials and production methods that ultimately lead to a distilled spirit called rum.

Rum's pedigree: design, production method, and purpose

Technically, the best and most fundamental way to categorize rum is not by geography or flavor, but by its proximity to pure, unrefined sugar cane, in combination with the distilling technique. Call it the design, production method, and purpose of the product. At this stage of the renaissance, that is not always fully recognized. Expert opinions, detailed blogs and long articles highlight and compare and contrast minute details, without mentioning or even recognizing the rum's pedigree. A pot-stilled agricole may be described, reviewed and compared to column-stilled molasses rum, without revealing the fundamental difference in design, production method, and purpose. This is synonymous to describing two cars at length, but never mentioning that one is a truck and the other a sports car; one may be categorized as a "heavy vehicle from Detroit" and the other as a "light, fast car" from Italy, leaving the "truck" and "sports car" designations of the two vehicles undisclosed.

Proximity to sugar cane (see chart)

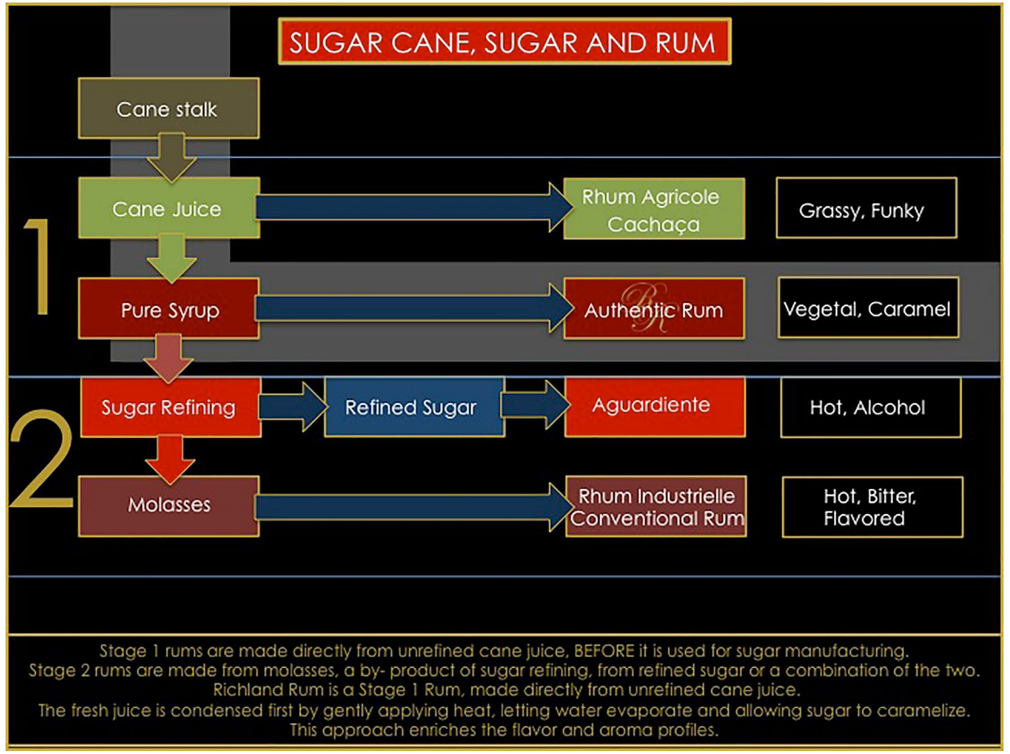
As stated above, the most fundamental distinguishing factor in categorizing rum is the proximity to pure, unrefined sugar cane, in combination with the distilling method.

Closest to their cane origin, are rums made directly from fresh cane juice, immediately after the cane stalk has been crushed to release the juice. The fresh juice is fermented, after which the wine is distilled. Rum crafted this way is known for its grassy notes and, when made under French jurisdiction, qualifies as Rhum Agricole or as Cachaça when made in Brazil. Full-time production of this type of rum is only possible in the tropics, where sugarcane can be grown and harvested all year.

One step down the proximity scale, at level two, syrup—not molasses!—is used. Instead of immediately fermenting the fresh juice, it is first heated and reduced to a syrup, simply by letting the water evaporate. The syrup, sometimes referred to as sugar cane honey, is then fermented and the wine is distilled. Heating the juice and reducing or condensing it to syrup has two consequences: 1) it becomes storable—the heat kills the natural yeasts that are present on the cane stalk and mixes into the juice when it is crushed, plus the high sugar content serves as a natural preservative, allowing for continuous production outside the tropics; 2) some of the sugars in the juice caramelize during the heating process, which influences the flavor. Rums crafted from pure cane syrup are referred to as agricole style or authentic and still have grassy, flowery notes, but are full bodied, complex and aromatic. Even more so than true agricoles, the agricole style rum lend themselves well to be enjoyed as a sipping drink, neat, on the rocks, or as a cordial.

One step further removed from fresh cane—level three on the proximity scale—is rum made from sugar. In that case, the juice was reduced to syrup and the syrup was refined to sugar. The sugar is then dissolved in water, fermented and the fermented wash is subsequently distilled. Note that after fermentation, the product is called a wash and no longer a wine, recognizing that the sugar refining process has created further distance between fresh juice and the fermentable base. Rum in this category are known to be harsh and hot.

The last category, level four, is rum made from molasses. Molasses is what is left over after sugar has been extracted from syrup. In other words, it is a by-product of sugar manufacturing. Molasses usually has (almost) sufficient residual sugar left to serve as a fermentable base. If not, sugar is added back in. The challenge with molasses is the neutralization or removal of residual undesirables it contains, such as enzymes and chemicals used during the sugar extraction process. In spite of this aspect, the vast majority of rum is made from molasses, simply because of economics. Sug-



ar producers have an opportunity to make and sell sugar and monetize the leftovers (molasses) by selling it to rum makers as a very low-cost base material for their spirit. Molasses spirits are known as traditional or conventional rums, which vary hugely in flavor, quality, reputation, and price. Many have additives, in particular, sugar or sweeteners, or are even spiced; all are most commonly used as (low cost) mixing drinks and seldom as a sipping spirit or cordial.

The rum base's proximity to sugar cane and distillation techniques

Distillation as we know it is a simple separation process based on the different boiling points of the ingredients in the wine or fermented wash. A distiller's challenge is to separate one alcohol—ethanol—with the right congeners—carriers of flavors and aromas—from the rest of the wine or wash. If *"ethanol wearing a tuxedo"* is a good metaphor for high-quality rum, then *"ethanol dressed in raggedy jeans and a dirty T-shirt,"* has us picturing the opposite. Metaphorically, the question then becomes what garments will be present in the wine or wash: tuxedo parts or rags? The answer is quite simple: The closer the fermentable base is to pure, unrefined sugar cane, the more predominant the presence of tuxedo components will be; on the opposite side, the farther removed the base is on the 'proximity' scale, the more the prevalence of rags will dominate the contents.

That being the case, distillation objectives become clear: When distilling a wine made from fresh cane juice, retention of good congeners (tuxedo) is important, while during distillation of a molasses wash removal of bad congeners (rags) is key. A fundamental difference in goals that requires different techniques and equipment and results in different categories of rum.

Pot still versus column still

Old fashioned pot stills are inefficient. In other words, they are not optimally suitable for a precise removal of impurities or to obtain high alcohol yields. On the other hand, if the distiller's objective is retention of congeners, they work well! They are inefficient because they leave congeners in! The pot still's inefficiency works in its favor, if and as long as the congeners are desirable. But, the inefficiency becomes a disadvantage, when distilling a wash with bad congeners, because they will end up in the distillate. Ergo, a pot of stilled agricole or agricole-style rum can be flavorful and aromatic, while a pot of stilled molasses rum can be harsh and pungent.

Column stills, which were developed in the 19th century, are much more efficient and lend themselves well for improving alcohol yields by removing congeners. That is good news and bad news at the same time. Good in the sense that higher (alcohol) yields represent an economic advantage. Also good is the fact that undesirable congeners can be removed. The bad is that congener removal equates to flavor removal. The introduction of column stills allowed producers to significantly increase volumes while reducing harshness and pungency, and remove unwanted congeners, but it denaturalized the rum. The high-proof distillates produced in large volumes tended to be somewhat flavorless, which is often compensated for by using artificial flavoring and aging in used barrels that have whiskey, wine, port, sherry or other remnants in them or both.

Barrel Aging

Rum, more so than other distilled spirits, is almost equally appreciated in white and dark versions. As a rule of thumb – there are exceptions – white or virgin rum is aged only briefly or not at all. Like any distillate, rum starts as a clear spirit. Storage, for long periods, in an oak barrel will darken the fluid and significantly impact the flavor. Some white rums have been aged for a while, but have had the color filtered out. But, overall, white rums are considered to be virgin or unaged; they were bottled shortly after distilling. Once in the glass, the aging process halts.

Oak is the wood of choice for aging, but of course, the choice of oak—white, red, American, French, etc.—will significantly impact the outcome. The choice between new and used barrels is also a key factor in flavor development. Used barrels are considered less expensive than new barrels and introduce a starting flavor, which makes them doubly attractive for low-cost producers who want to age high-proof, low flavor material.

Unfortunately, barrel aging is a source of myths. First, consumers have been conditioned to believe that older = better. That is not necessarily true, definitely not for new barrels. A fluid stored in an oak container for a very long time will taste like … oak! In other words, there is an optimum amount of time, not dissimilar to keeping a tea bag in a cup of hot water. The outcome is subjective, but keeping a teabag in your teacup for 10 hours does not give you a fantastic cup of tea. Used barrels (and tea bags) generally require longer interaction with the fluid. Exhausted barrels, used multiple times, allow for very long storage periods, without ruining the contents. Overall, however, age statements often tend to err on

the high side, fueling the popular belief that older = better.

The pattern that emerges in the vast pool of rums is that, in general, but with exceptions, agricoles or agricole-style rums lend themselves best to be pot-stilled and aged in new, (white) oak barrels, whereas molasses rums tend to be column stilled and aged in used barrels.

Needless to say that understanding the basics of rum's pedigree – the proximity to fresh cane in combination with distillation and aging techniques – helps to better understand the spirit's role in history.

Rum in the Americas

The first indications of sugar cane cultivation in the Americas dates back to the 1500's when Portuguese, Spanish, French, and British sugar cane plantations and sugar mills developed and flourished in Brazil, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. The huge returns and labor shortages drove the Portuguese to start importing slaves from their colonies in Africa, bringing slavery to the New World. Reports about rum production in this era are limited to mentions about Dutch Jews in Martinique who distilled liquor from cane juice and indications that the Portuguese government in Brazil allowed only slaves to drink cachaça.

It wasn't until the mid-1600's that rum appeared in the Caribbean, and reports surfaced that the British colony of Barbados produced a *"hot, hellish, terrible liquor"* from sugar cane called *Rumbullion*, also known as *Kill Devil*. What rumbullion precisely means or where it comes from is unclear; kill devil is Anglicized Dutch for *"keelduivil"* or *"throat devil."*

While it is not clear that Barbados deserves the claimed title of the birthplace of rum, it should be recognized as the first place where rum was refined and merchandised.

Overall, rum's rapid ascent was congruent with the burgeoning sugar trade. Playing into the growing demand for sugar, the era's powerful nations – Portugal, Spain, Holland, France and Britain – claimed and fought over territories in the Caribbean and South America to establish sugar cane plantations and sugar mills. The icing on the sugar producers' already lucrative trade was selling their waste – molasses – to rum producers.

Reports do indicate that the wealthy owners of plantations and mills commonly diverted small portions of their juice or syrup away from sugar production to designate it for in-house production of private reserve rums. A French copper pot still, alembic, from the Cognac region, was the equipment of choice to craft the equivalent of an agricole-style rum, fit for a gentleman.

Rum in New England

Around 1650 molasses was traded in New England, and a decade later rum was produced in Boston, Staten Island, New York, and Philadelphia. First deemed a menace to society, rum's popularity initially evolved as a medicinal wonder and later as a popular base for shrubs and punches. Demand kept growing, production increased to industrial scale and exports started. High volumes in rum sold and molasses bought led to low prices. Increasingly, rum found its way into Native American communities, with devastating consequences.

By the 1680's, as a result of England's prohibition to export silver coins, the colonies were short of money and, although first, the use of Spanish, French and Dutch coins became prevalent, barter evolved and rum started to become an alternative currency. In one or two decades, the value of rum was stable and recognized broadly, even too an extend that it was not uncommon for wages to be partially paid in rum. Increased circulation of the currency rum allowed it to be used in illicit trade to avoid duties and taxes. Large scale smuggling was a consequence and created rum's lingering association with pirates. The turn of

the 17th century marked the point where rum and molasses were the heaviest traded commodities in the Caribbean and by far the main source of profits for Britain's colonies in the America.

The Rum Triangle

While rum is not responsible for the African slave trade, a major flare up was caused by the need for labor at the sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean. A triangular trade developed: Exports of molasses from the Caribbean to New England, where it was processed into rum, which was used as currency to buy slaves, shipped to the Caribbean to produce sugar and molasses. The trade developed into a multinational activity during the 18th century, in which French, Dutch, and American enterprises played an important role. Quantifying the economic magnitude of the Triangle is difficult, but it certainly qualifies as one of the most powerful economic engines in the world's history. Britain's desire to stay in command of this engine set the stage for the American Revolution.

The American (Rum) Revolution

One of the first attempts by the British crown to curtail profits and wealth creation in the new colonies without benefiting the Crown's coffers was the Molasses Act of 1733. It imposed a tax on molasses and was the basis for dozens of laws, attempting to control the trade in the colonial harbors and generate tax revenue for the Mother Country. The act and its derivatives failed, and showcased massive disobedience by the colonies against mother England. In 1763 the Sugar Act was imposed, now policed by the British Navy and Army, further intensifying anger and igniting sentiments in favor of independence. In 1776, Britain lost its American colonies and America's Founding Father John Adams admitted that, *"I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses was an essential ingredient in American Independence."* In retaliation, Britain did all it could to hinder the trade in molasses and rum. As the supply of molasses dwindled, indulgence continued and rum started to face two new enemies: temperance and whisk(e)y.

Demon Rum, Temperance, Prohibition, and Rum Runners

In the late 1700's, the temperance movement started with *"demon rum"* as its target. By 1833, it had 1 million members, and in 1851 the first state went dry: Maine. The movement continued to build momentum over a long period and finally, in 1919, the 18th amendment was passed and in 1920 the manufacturing, importation, distribution and sale of alcohol were banned. Banned, but not halted. Consuming alcohol was driven underground and abroad, amongst others, to Cuba. The underground market was supplied by rum runners; a moniker given to anyone who supplied any booze to bootleggers outside the 12-mile zone off the U.S. Coastline. Rum served as the culprit and as the hero at the same time. Legendary names like Captain Bill McCoy—whose high-quality booze was recognized as the *"real McCoy"*—actually shipped Scotch and Canadian Whiskies, and also rum. The name now serves as a rum brand, because of his reputation as a rum runner.

During prohibition, Americans flocked to Cuba, and Havana established itself as an international capital of rum cocktails, in which Cuban (light) rum was prevalent, and dominated by 1 brand: Bacardi.

Rum Renaissance

Rum's origin is a delicate, complex, and aromatic distillate of sugar cane wine. At some point, in the 1600's, economics tied it to sugar manufacturing, removing it in proximity from fresh sugarcane to molasses. The base material, molasses, does not have a producer; it is a by-product. Waste. The sugar producer aims to make sugar and ends up with a leftover that has never been a goal or a purpose. It is an outcome. A beautiful, all-natural drink became a hellish commodity, dubbed *"kill devil."* Political and societal forces around economic power, trade, slavery, taxes and alcohol consumption have controlled its destiny.

Somewhere in the late 19th century, agricultural laws, trade regulation, and taxes made it more economical for European countries, including France, to make sugar from sugar beets, rather than from sugar cane. That was an impetus for very few producers – mainly in Martinique – to go back to growing sugar cane for the purpose of making rum, not sugar. That could be seen as the comeback of pot-stilled agricole style rums, reminiscent of the private reserves savored by the sugar cane plantation owners in the 17th and 18th centuries. A new appreciation was born for true, authentic rum, which, together with Cognac – distilled wine from grapes – is a phenomenally complex, soft, aromatic sipping drink.

Today's Rum Renaissance is beginning to appreciate and recognize how rum can be best categorized and understood, based on its proximity to cane, in combination with distilling technique. At present, that recognition is partially based on intrigue, partially on intuition and only in part based on facts. At this stage of the Renaissance, tracing the roots of a rum can sometimes be confusing because of misleading label statements and mythical brand stories. However, a deep-rooted and growing societal desire to better understand and relate to what we eat and drink is increasingly exposing the facts, empowering the consumer to make choices and develop preferences based on knowledge, less on image and hearsay. Most importantly, it is bringing back pot-stilled agricoles as pure, beautiful and sophisticated sipping drinks, *"fit for a gentleman."*

Richland Rum

The proprietors of Richland Estate, which consists of a sugar cane plantation and rum distillery located in South Georgia, take pride in producing America's first and only—to date—Single Estate Rum since 1999. As the moniker Single Estate implies, the producer crafts the rum field-to-glass. Richland Estate grows and cultivates sugar cane for the purpose of making rum, processing the cane into syrup and fermenting, distilling, aging, and bottling the rum on-site. Award-winning Richland Single Estate Old Georgia Rum is recognized nationally and internationally as a leading example of the Rum Renaissance.