

RUM REEFS AND REVELRY

From duty-free Mount Gay in St. Barts to Hemingway's daiquiris in Cuba, a lifelong sailor chronicles his enduring affection for the Caribbean's most spirited export.



There's nothing quite like the first sip of rum at anchor, the light dimming on the sea, the scent of salt and sugarcane in the air. For me, the daily craving started with a gallon jug of punch on a bareboat charter back in 1979. Since then, Caribbean rum and I have had a long, spirited relationship—one sip at a time, one island at a time.

The seventh-annual Caribbean Rum Awards were held this past fall on St. Barts. This competition is all about sipping rums, not the more-pedestrian versions used for mixing evening cocktails, where most any good rum will do. Out of 60 rums entered, Martinique's Trois Rivières Triple Millésime was crowned world champion. Kudos to the French.

One of the great joys of sailing the Eastern Caribbean is sampling various island rums as you go. I've been doing this for 46 years, ever since a two-week bareboat charter in the Virgin Islands. The boat, a Morgan Out Island, was wide-beamed, lumbering, and about as elegant as a camper van in a cocktail dress. But tucked beside the chart table sat a complimentary gallon jug of rum punch, sweating in the tropical heat.



and the author's rum locker, revealed at anchor, showcases a sailor's spirited stash.

That did it. It's been rum ever since. Rum is the Caribbean in a glass: sun-warmed sugarcane, salt-laced breezes, and the echo of steel drums somewhere onshore. Made from local sugarcane or molasses, rum reflects its birthplace in flavor and color, from crystal clear to molasses black. West Indian rum is available in clear or in shades from gold to amber to black. Mix the amber fluid with pineapple and orange juice, add a splash of grenadine, and the drink takes on all the colors of a West Indian sunset.

In the early days, it was always Mount Gay and orange juice for me: simple, cheap, and potent enough to cut through the heat after a long sail. That was in the 1980s, when I could buy a bottle on St. Barts, duty-free, for \$2. And while my rum locker still contains a few bottles of select sipping rums, in more recent times, Cruzan Aged Dark has supplied my daily ration. This reasonably priced amber rum is distilled on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands.

I start with a 24-ounce insulated Yeti coffee mug—it keeps the morning coffee hot and the evening rum chilled, both for hours. Drop in four cubes of ice and 4 ounces of rum, and top it off with 18 ounces of tonic water. A squeeze of lime is optional, and dash of nutmeg is nice.

Each island down here has a distillery or two. Some of these island rums are excellent, most are good, and a few should come with a fire-hazard warning. I once tried a bottle from a roadside shack in Dominica that could've doubled as outboard fuel.

On Grenada, Clarke's Court and River Antoine produce their own rums. On Bequia, I found Sparrow's, a rum from St. Vincent. It was just right for mixing my evening libation. On Bermuda, Goslings makes a

dark rum that, when combined with ginger beer, becomes a Dark 'n Stormy. Guadeloupe and Martinique have their own distilleries, producing robust French-style rums. On Sint Maarten, Guavaberry and Topper's offer a dozen spiced and gussied-up varieties. Callwood Rum Distillery in Cane Garden Bay on Tortola has been making rum for more than 200 years. The stone buildings, scorched copper stills and weathered casks feel frozen in time. Callwood's signature 80-proof cane-based rum—named Panty Dropper—is as famous for its label as its lingering kick.



Rows of aging barrels in Puerto Rico promise future treasures.

Antigua Distillery Limited offers a variety of sipping rums. Its Cavalier Gold is a fine choice for any West Indian rum punch. If you're lucky—or persistent—you might find yourself invited to join the Royal Navy Tot Club of Antigua and Barbuda. Under the glow of nautical lanterns in a dock-side pub, a band of expats gathers nightly to toast the Crown and history itself. A Royal Navy tale is read aloud, and a full tot of rum—2.4 ounces, not a drop less—is downed in one steady gulp. Saturdays come with the toast: “To our wives and sweethearts, may they never meet.”

In 1999, I made my way to Cuba and found myself a few blocks behind El Capitolio in Central Havana, at a place called El Floridita, which Ernest Hemingway once haunted like a regular spirit. This pink, one-story restaurant and bar is eight blocks in a straight line down Obispo Street from the Hotel Ambos Mundos, where Hemingway lived for a while. He would drink a dozen daiquiris in one sitting while chatting with fellow writers such as Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos, Graham Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel García Márquez and Tennessee Williams. The photographs on the walls tell a more complete story from the 1930s to 1950s.

My red-aproned bartender—sleeves rolled, a practiced flick of the shaker—lined up daiquiris like a gunslinger. Rum, lime, grapefruit juice, sugar syrup. Shake. Pour. Repeat. According to William Grimes' book *Straight Up or On the Rocks: The Story of the American Cocktail*, this traditional drink is made with Bacardi white rum, fresh lime, grapefruit juice and sugar syrup. It's shaken, not stirred, with ice, and is served in large goblets. Add six drops of maraschino liqueur for more color. If the bartender skips the sugar, it's the Hemingway Daiquiri: stripped down, no-nonsense and a little dangerous. Where the classic version is limey and sweet, this one doubles the rum, earning the nickname "*Papa doble*." It's a drink that doesn't smile back, and after two, neither will you.

Bacardi rum is not available in Cuba now, yet the name is still in Havana, carved into a granite facade—the family's former headquarters. Today, the rum in Cuba is Havana Club. The Bacardi family set up shop in nearby Puerto Rico and is doing just fine.

Puerto Rico's piña colada is a sweet, slushy anthem to vacation-mode excess. It's served in hurricane glasses taller than your forearm, usually with a cherry and a paper umbrella. It tastes like sunblock and joy. I once ordered one that came in a hollowed-out pineapple—and briefly considered renting a cabana and staying forever.

For sailors, there's Navy Grog, made with Pusser's Rum, water and lime juice. This daily tot was first doled out to British crews in 1655 and then stopped in 1970. The Royal New Zealand Navy still continues the tradition.

The Painkiller is the BVI's answer to the mainland's ibuprofen and acetaminophen—a creamy, coconut-laced concoction that masks its potency behind pineapple sweetness and a dusting of nutmeg. I had my first Painkiller at the Soggy Dollar Bar, slumped in a hammock after a beach landing that required no shoes and one waterproof dry bag. The drink originated at White Bay on Jost Van Dyke, where there's no dock. Sailors swim ashore with dollar bills stuffed in their swimsuits. The Painkiller goes down really easy. By the second round, the name starts to make perfect sense. It comes in grades: one, two, three—and the fourth should be outlawed.

On the other hand, rum punch is the Caribbean's catchall cure: orange juice, pineapple juice, grenadine, a dash of lime and whatever rum's on hand, often two or three kinds. I've had versions so smooth that they sipped like juice, and others that lit up my sinuses like wasabi. The only constant? You don't stop at one. The recipe starts with ice in a tall glass, followed by white or amber rum, then tropical citrus fruit juices such as lime, lemon, papaya, mango, pomegranate and orange. I prefer pineapple and orange juice with a splash of grenadine syrup for color.





As daily life unfolds in Old Havana, where laundry flutters and street dogs roam, timeless charm flows through the Ambos Mundos bar, where locals and visitors mingle over cocktails and conversation.

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On Bequia, a variation of rum punch goes like this: one of sour, two of sweet, three of strong and four of weak. That's lime juice, sugar syrup, rum and tonic water.

The mojito is Cuba's contribution to the rum drinker's delight. In my opinion, having done the Hemingway Pub Crawl, Hotel Ambos Mundos makes the best one. Hemingway wrote 1932's *Death in the Afternoon* here, about Spanish bullfights. He also started writing *Green Hills of Africa* here, and worked on *To Have and Have Not*. The mojitos at this bar come with a sprig of mint so fresh, it still holds

the scent of the garden. That mint goes into a tall glass with a lime wedge and a spoonful of sugar, to be mashed into a fragrant pulp by a mallet worn smooth from good use. Then it's ice, Havana Club rum, soda water, a straw, and a nod from the bartender. The mojito is a refreshing drink with the fiery taste of rum tamed by sugar, lime and grass. One usually leads to two. Of course, not every rum drink comes in a frosted glass. Sometimes it's a tin mug of grog—rum, water, lime and not much else—passed around at anchor as the sun drops. No umbrellas, no fanfare. Just sailors, stories, and a slow burn in the chest.

As I sail among the islands this winter, I'll be hunting cocktails as much as coves. It's a ritual now. As the hook sets and the light fades, I head below, reach for the rum, and pour my daily ration. The sea sighs against the hull, and the scent of lime is on my hands as I raise a glass to the islands, to Hemingway, and to another day well-lived under sail.

