



## Rum: dialogue & cooperation in the Greater Caribbean

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Few products are more closely associated with their region of origin than this quintessentially Caribbean spirit

In the world of alcoholic beverages, Rum is relatively young, and even though there is no specific date for its origin, its emergence is placed somewhere in the early 16th century. And since it's a matter of centuries, we could place its birth in the year 1550 because Rum was not born on a single day, it was a process of maturity that extended over many years, and whose epicentre was the Caribbean, which made it known to the world.

Rum has its origins in the English, French and Spanish colonies of the Caribbean. In the English colonies it was called "Kill Devil", and in the French islands it was known as "Rumbullion", which was reduced with time to "Ron" in Spanish and "Rhum" in French. However, there were also other denominations, such as Tafia and Guildive.

As the French Dominican Missionary Jean Baptiste Labat (1663-1738) states in his memoirs: Rum is the cultural product of the Caribbean, of the French islands, where "it was the drink of the slaves and the natives". Father Labat relates that he observed the natives of the island and the Negroes making a drink that he describes as "strong and brutal, made from the sugar cane syrup that made them happy and restored their fatigue". A clear and explicit description, in the sense that rum is a product originally made by the natives and slaves that constituted for them the drink of recovery, as described by Father Labat, because slaves and natives were forbidden from consuming alcoholic beverages.

With the passage of the years, the sugar plantation owners, seeing the virtues of this beverage, initiated its production and sale in the early 1600s, and from then



Rum and the cultivation of its essential ingredient, sugar cane are closely intertwined with the history of the Greater Caribbean



on its commercialisation was extended to the rest of the world. But its historic epicentre always remained in the Caribbean.

It is indicative that by 1654 the General Court of Connecticut was so alarmed by the number of barrels of rum that inundated its ports that it forbade the import of any liquor from Barbados, in order to protect the small distilleries of New England, and thus confiscated all cargoes of rum.

For many years, rum was also the drink of choice for pirates, buccaneers and adventurers, and later on the English fleet instituted a ration of rum for its crew because rum helped ease the hardships of life at sea.

An empty bottle of rum, floating in the ocean with the message of a shipwrecked sailor inside, was the mail that fed the hopes of the unfortunate shipwrecked souls who waited to be rescued.

In the Caribbean, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic and the French Antilles (only to mention the most vociferous) all dispute the origin of rum. But as the sorceress, Aunt Dalma, in the Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* says regarding the contents of the chest they had found, after the pirates had given different accounts: "it's the same story, though with different versions, but they all are absolutely true". In other words, all versions of

the origin of rum are absolutely true; rum is a product that originated in the islands of the Caribbean and then extended to the countries of the Caribbean mainland.

In the same way that Champagne originated in a single region of France and Tequila originated in the Mexican state of Jalisco, rum originated in the Caribbean. This is the historical and cultural truth, widely supported and backed by the international community: Rum is a product that originated in the Caribbean made from products derived from sugar cane.

Regardless of its youth, nowadays the rum industry has reached levels of demand and acceptance that enable it to compete, in terms of quality, with other alcoholic beverages with many more years in the market, including in the more exclusive sectors in the case of premium and super-premium rums. Rum as a cultural product is subject to different variables which are expressed at the time of production, such as its alcoholic grade and texture, which have a marked impact on the final character of the rum and which translate into the particularities of its aroma and colour, with a wide diversification towards different uses, tastes and palates.

In general, rum has an alcoholic content of 40 per cent; however, there are higher and lower contents. If we make a short list of the names used for rum, we can draw the following classifications:

One area in which further understanding about rum is needed is in the research into its medicinal properties



A Barbadian rum maker tests his product to monitor the ageing process





One of the purposes of the ACS is to strengthen the collective capacities of its Members in their various areas of expertise, of which rum is an obvious example

- White Rums: these are clear, dry and light. Here we include the silver rums which have a rather neutral flavour thus being preferred as the base alcohol for cocktails.
- Gold Rums: these are defined as medium-bodied by the experts and are usually aged, with a more intense flavour than white rums. Historically, they acquire their dark colour from ageing inside oak barrels; however these rums may also enhance their flavour through the addition of spices and a caramel colouring.
- Dark Rums: these are a degree of shade darker than the gold and are generally aged for longer periods in highly carbonised oak barrels. These are categorised as heavy and full-bodied.
- Flavoured Rums: these are rums which have fruit flavours added, such as lemon, orange, coconut, or even spices like cinnamon or vanilla. These generally have less than 40 per cent alcohol content.
- Overproof Rums: these are much higher than the average 40 per cent alcohol content. The majority of these rums are white and usually vary between 75 per cent and 80 per cent alcohol content. Some even reach as much as 85 per cent.



Mount Gay's 300 year old distillery in Barbados: the island boasts the oldest working distilleries in the world

- Premium Rums: like other alcohols such as Cognac and Scotch, there are also Premium and Super-Premium rums which are extremely aged and produced with the utmost care. They have a very defined flavour and character and are consumed without mixing – in other words, smooth.

This variety allows us to cover a wide range in consumption for different tastes, colours, aromas and flavours, which leads us to ask ourselves about the opportunity of establishing a Tasting Saloon for Rum in the Greater Caribbean.

The spectrum of the use of rum ranges from the rum that is used as a mixing base in multiple cocktails to the rum that is drunk at room temperature without being mixed with another product, as in the case of premium and super-premium rums, and includes all the different varieties of rum used in the preparation of food and desserts.

One area in which further understanding about rum is needed is in the research into its medicinal properties. From its earliest origins, as Father Labat indicates, rum was believed to possess medicinal qualities. Father Labat assures us that rum saved him from Malaria. Rum was used by pirates to treat and prevent diseases, such as scurvy, influenza, the common cold and above all, to eliminate stress. It is widely recognised that the consumption of rum in moderate quantities helps to prevent and eradicate ailments and can even contribute to a long and healthy life. In this respect, the wine industry has been able to advance further, and thus we see how red wine has been accorded certain beneficial properties for the heart, in regard to arterial circulation problems, and also as a contributor to the digestive process. The same can be said of the beer industry, whose product is believed to combat anaemia and whet the appetite.

In this regard, it should be pointed out that at a local level, throughout the Greater Caribbean rum (mainly for internal consumption) is produced with spices and/or diverse roots to which have been attributed aphrodisiac properties. Rum is recommended for the alleviation and prevention of many ailments; for example, to counteract low blood pressure, for ailments of the throat, the cold, the 'flu and for respiratory ailments in general, and also for relaxing. Medicinal recipes include the mixing of rum with flowers, honey, lemon, herbs and spices in general. There are (although disseminated) a group of recipes regarding the use of rum as an alternative medicine. However, even though the general public believes that the above mentioned



properties are true, no conclusive scientific studies have yet been carried out.

Perhaps in the future we will be able to sanction a new classification of rum, typified as “curative or medicinal rums”, but in order for that to take place, we need coordinated action by the rum industry in the Greater Caribbean with regards to scientific investigation. This could be achieved through the establishment of a fund geared towards the backing of research in this field. In the meantime, it would be interesting to compile the different ancestral recipes of the medicinal usages of rum in the Greater Caribbean.

At present, the rum exporting countries in the Greater Caribbean are: Barbados, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Colombia and Nicaragua. The case of Barbados is particularly significant since it has the oldest working distilleries in the world, such as the 300-year old Mount Gay Distillery. However, we can state that in the entire Greater Caribbean rum is produced as a national or

regional drink, even though not all countries export it. In Dominica, for example, rum is sold by the litre straight from the barrel; customers arrive with a container and buy half a litre of rum, or any desired quantity. Barrel rum is usually made with several herbs and spices in order to produce strong mixes such as the famous Bois Bande which has aphrodisiac properties, one of the few medically recognised, as is stated on its bottle. In the Caribbean, rum sales (rum shops) form part of community life since they occur in the same establishments where food is purchased and men play Dominos while sipping on their rum. The Caribbean is renowned as a place of sun, sand, sea and rum.

One of the purposes of the ACS, as is pointed out in Article III of its Constitutive Constitution, is to strengthen the collective capacities of its member states in their various areas of expertise, as well as consultation and cooperation.

An area that encompasses “collective capacities” in the Greater Caribbean is rum, whose origin can be traced to this area. However, this is not the only one. Like rum, there are other collective capacities

The lack of a common definition of Rum has not been an obstacle to greater dialogue and cooperation in the Caribbean Rum industry



Premium and super-premium rums, such as those from Guatemala and Cuba, (left and next page), are capturing a growing share of the world market



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that need to be equally strengthened in the Greater Caribbean, such as the banana industry, the sugar cane industry, the coffee industry and the tobacco industry, to name but a few.

The subject of rum in the Caribbean was introduced to the ACS in 2002 by the West Indies Rum and Spirits Producers' Association (WIRSPA), under the presidency of Mr Patrick Mayers. It constituted a new and innovative initiative, intended to facilitate a rapprochement in the rum industry of the Greater Caribbean, including both the insular and mainland Caribbean countries, in which the rum producers of CARICOM participated, alongside those of the Dutch Antilles, Aruba, France (representing Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana), the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala and Nicaragua, as well as other countries interested in the subject.



This effort takes place within the framework of the Trade Committee of the ACS, denominated as the Rum Dialogue, as part of the process of negotiation of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) and dedicated to the search for a common definition of rum for the Greater Caribbean. As we know, FTAA, due to particular circumstances, has been suspended, and therefore the meetings of the Rum Dialogue have also been suspended, without having achieved an agreement on the common definition of rum.

In 2006, various consultations with the rum industry in the Greater Caribbean were carried out regarding the opportunity to re-start the Rum Dialogue, since that initiative had been received with great enthusiasm. In this way, in 2007, we have re-started the Rum Dialogue by exchanging criteria on what is meant by the rum definition, but also orienting the activity towards other issues of interest for the industry, changing the name to "The Greater Caribbean Rum Dialogue". In 2007 we had two meetings, one in Managua, Nicaragua, on June 27, sponsored by the Pellas Group (owners of Ron Flor de Caña) and another one in Ciudad Antigua, Guatemala, on October 17, sponsored by the Association of Guatemalan Rum Producers. The next meeting will take place in the first half of 2008 in Havana, Cuba. For its part, the Venezuelan Rum industry has expressed its interest in hosting the next meeting of the Rum Dialogue, which would take place in the second half of 2008.

The lack of a common definition has not been an obstacle for the Rum industry to meet again five years later, with a new approach on the subject, allowing for the discussion of new areas of interest for the industry in the Greater Caribbean.

At this stage and under these new circumstances, we have opened the door for the exchange of ideas and cooperation in other areas of interest for the rum industry in the Greater Caribbean as a whole, in subjects such as best practice, responsible consumption campaigns, a collective brand and denomination of origin brands, amongst others. We have even entered into an exchange of opinions regarding the development of recent initiatives in the framework of international organisations that could eventually affect the rum industry as a whole in a negative manner. This circumstance has brought greater attention and interest from the Member States and Associate Member States of the ACS, due to the importance of the sector in their national economies. ■