

# Tropical flavours

Sensory and lifestyle appeal are lifting the popularity of aged rums from the Caribbean and South America. Felicity Murray visits the St Lucia Rum & Food Festival and talks with major brand owners and mixologists



**Jules Gualdoni and Glen Hooper created hot cocktails from the London scene on the Elements 8 stand**

**Recent research by Diageo in the US reveals 36 per cent of people enjoy rum neat or on the rocks**

Why is aged rum gaining popularity? Because it tastes so good, says Joey Bergstein, Diageo's senior vice president for global rums. And scores of leading cocktail mixologists and bar owners around the world agree with him.

"Quite simply, rum is more than just the spirit in the bottle. It's a lifestyle," says Ian Burrell, UK rum ambassador, owner of Cottons Restaurants and founder of the London Rumfest. "Between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, right across the globe, rum is made and drunk because it is part of the culture. The mojito, that Cuban minty cocktail of rum, lime, sugar, fresh mint, soda and ice, is still perceived as the most popular cocktail in the UK bars, unless you include rum and coke. Some call it the Cuba Libre, another popular Cuban cocktail from the late 19th century, but you must add a squeeze of lime to this to make the transformation from a spirit and mixer to a higher-priced cocktail.

"It is also very easy for a whisky or brandy drinker to switch to aged rum because of the similar taste profile of the wood-aged spirit. But even more importantly, discerning drinkers are frequently travelling to the tropics and seeing the rums in their natural habitat. It's no wonder that the re-creation of

the 'holiday feel-good factor' is a major part of the revival of the rum category," he adds.

Burrell was one of the presenters, along with Las Vegas mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim, participating in the second annual St Lucia Food & Rum Festival, which took place hot on the heels of the inaugural London Rumfest late last year.

Visitors to the island enjoyed a "gastronomic celebration" hosted by regionally and internationally renowned chefs and rum connoisseurs. More than 40 rums from across the region were available for sampling during the four-day festival.

Carl Stephenson, managing director of Elements 8, which once again supported the festival, took seven top UK bartenders

to demonstrate the latest rum cocktails being made on the London scene. "It is developing into a great showcase of the region's finest rums," he says.

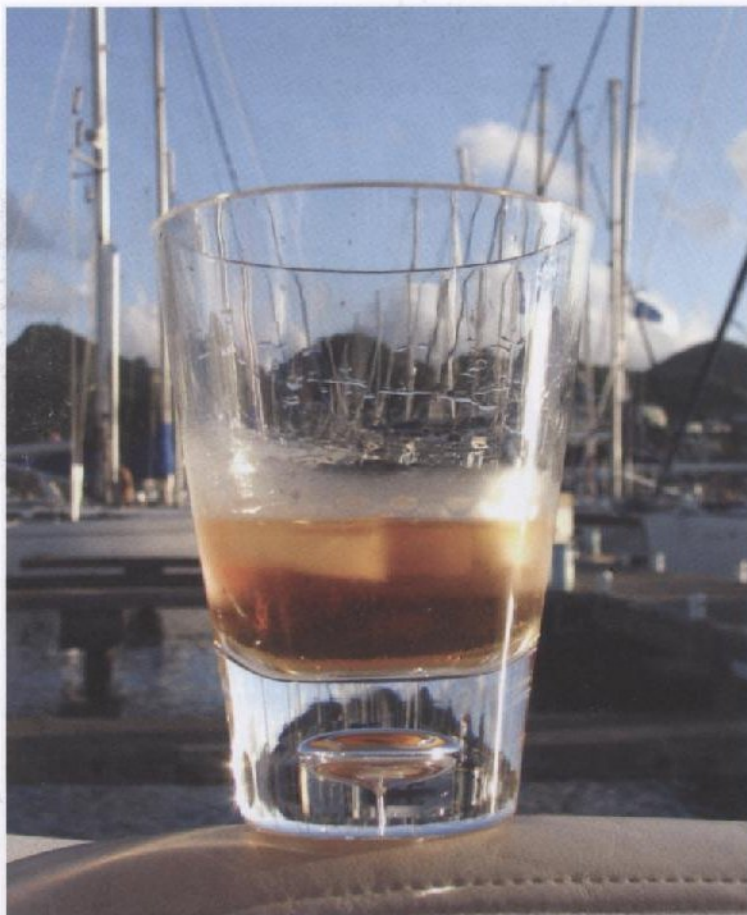
As St Lucia is the home of Elements 8, the company also hosted an in-depth tour of the St Lucia distillery, where the rum is produced under licence. St Lucia Distilleries, which uses a combination of column and pot stills to produce a wide range of rums and rum liqueurs, including Bounty, Chairman's Reserve, Admiral Rodney as well as Elements 8, used the festival as a launch pad for its latest

blended aged rum TØZ (see Drinks International, December 2007). All of its rums are presently produced from molasses imported from Guyana, but the distillery is going back into sugar cane production for the first time since 1962, when it replaced the plantations with the more profitable banana crop. The cost of flat, coastal land is fabulously high in St Lucia, so the plantation will be small. But five acres have been re-planted with four varieties, and the first distillation for a new style of rum is expected in May.

Other exhibiting rum companies included Appleton (Jamaica), Barbancourt and Berling with Vieux Labbe (Haiti), Belfast Estate with Elixir of Bois Bandé (Dominica), El Dorado (Guyana) and Angostura (Trinidad and Tobago). Angostura used the festival as an opportunity to introduce its new orange bitters into the region (see Drinks International, August 2007) as well as its wide variety of rum styles and flavours, including the internationally known premium brands 1919 and 1824. The company is about to launch a range comprising an aged (three years) and filtered white Reserva, a five-year-old gold añejo and a seven-year-old dark añejo.

"The St Lucia Rum Festival is a really good market for us because we produce not just rum but also bitters, which are used in food as well as drinks," explains Giselle Laronde West, manager of corporate communications at Angostura. "A lot of tourists come, but also the trade from the hotel and resort bars and restaurants on the island. And if you can get your brand into these places, then their customers from different countries





**Above and right:** Pernod Ricard's new distillery and ageing sheds in San José, Cuba, for Havana Club aged rums

**Rodney Bay Marina is the venue for the annual St Lucia Rum & Food Festival**



come to recognise it and want to take it back with them."

The growing interest in boutique rums is certainly being helped by increased global travel, with more people experiencing rums in their region of origin, such as the Caribbean islands. And the best route to market for these producers is still initially through the on-trade both locally and internationally.

"Over the last couple of years, there has been more emphasis and interest in higher end, premium rum worldwide, and so we have started to push our two brands 1919 and 1824 to wider parts of the world," she says. "Ironically, in our local markets there's a trend towards Scotch. So while rum is growing internationally, at home in Trinidad Scotch is giving us a hard time."

This is a trend that was highlighted by many of the producers in the region. When the locals have some money in their pockets, it is Johnny Walker they ask for at the bar. Rum is fighting to lose its old image as the agricultural workers' tipple and re-establish itself as a category with quality premium products on a par with some of the best whiskies.

Abou-Ganim believes the finest rums in the world come from the Caribbean. "There is such

variation in style, and to really delve into and understand them is a fabulous journey and so much fun," he says. As someone who understands the culinary approach to mixing drinks, he, like many bartenders and mixologists, enjoys rum because it lends itself to such versatility in drinks: "Light-bodied rums work well in cocktails with subtle ingredients, such as the mojito. Then complex rums like Mount Gay, that are both pot and column distillations with the flavours of coconut, banana and vanilla, lend themselves to that style of drink. Then there's the heavy, full-bodied Haitian and Jamaican rums that will support tropical fruit flavours. I don't know of another spirit category that offers that versatility and mixability.

"With rum, there are characteristics going on and we need to understand what flavours are going to complement each – a mojito made with a dark aged rum will be a totally different animal to one made with a silver rum. The diversity of rum styles across the Caribbean and South America is astonishing – everyone in that huge tropical belt around the world produces it and they're all different."

Diageo's Bergstein agrees the fashionable mojito, like the ubiquitous rum and coke, has

had an impact on rum's popularity; although he admits he was surprised by just how many people enjoy it straight or simply on the rocks – according to Diageo research in the US, this amounts to 36 per cent of rum serves.

Cutting-edge bartenders are interested in rums, not only for the way their complexity of flavours can be enjoyed straight or mixed, but also because they are "crafted, authentic, and come from interesting places that have a story behind them". But it is this very diversity of style and character that also makes rum difficult for consumers to understand.

Nick Robinson, Diageo's marketing director for global travel and the Middle East, believes there is an opportunity for suppliers and retailers to come together to help demystify the category – perhaps in much the same way as Diageo has done with its "malts map".

While the major brand owners, Diageo (Captain Morgan, Cacique, Black Label, Parrot Bay and Pompero) and Pernod Ricard (Havana Club), both report double-digit growth with their dark and more characterful rums, generally whites rum sales remain static.

Havana Club managing director Marc Beuvmery in Cuba concurs. This is why the company ▶

has turned its focus to aged rums. Last February, Pernod Ricard opened a new €50 million distillery in San José (see *Drinks International*, February 2007) which, one year on, is well on track to meet the company's strategy for the brand to reach a target sale figure of 5 million cases by 2013. "Presently," he says, "we are very close to 3 million."

The new plant incorporates six ageing sheds with the aim of building reserves for the years to come. Beuve-Mery anticipates sales growth could reach 40-70 per cent year-on-year in some markets. He says the brand has been growing very fast – on average 15 per cent – in recent years across all markets, but the most dynamic new nations are Greece, growing at 44 per cent, Mexico at 46 per cent and Canada at 40 per cent. Italy and Spain, however, remain the biggest rum markets.

Diageo reports an overall growth for rum last year of approximately 8 per cent – and this is a combination of quite varying performances across different brands and markets, with steady growth in established markets and more explosive growth in newer markets.

"Consumers are now seeking dark, aged rums, small-batch style, from the Caribbean by independent distillers," says Gary Chau, global marketing director for the Bacardi Global Travel Retail division. "Bacardi rum has been in the folio for 50-plus years, and it is still appreciated as a clear rum for mixing," he says. "So we are now looking at the Caribbean and South/Central America for potential acquisitions to create new trademarks. People want small-batch, super-premium, aged rums that have unique flavours. Just being dark isn't enough; it has to have an age statement – 23 years or so – and heritage and provenance."

All three of these companies have seen their rum brands grow most strongly in Spain and Italy.

"The UK, Spain and Italy have been identified as the most important markets for our [Caribbean] rums," says Laurie Barnard, managing director for St Lucia Distillers and speaking as a representative of The West Indies Rum & Spirits Producers' Association (WIRSPA), the regional organisation that represents producers of rum from the ACP Caribbean region. "We've seen huge growth for rums, especially

**Bacardi rum has been around 50-plus years and is still appreciated as a clear rum for mixing**



in Spain, by the likes of Appleton's, Angostura and, of course, all the major brands. But we now have a new programme which is going to push Caribbean rum forward.

Havana Club has also given the Caribbean a push. The Caribbean is hot for rum – it likes to think of itself as the home of rum and the origin of rum. Producers such as Mount Gay, for example, have been in the business for more than 300 years."

Caribbean rum producers heard in January that they are to get an extra three years in which to take advantage of the €70 million funding from the European Community, which is matched by co-financing from the sector.

The Integrated Development Programme for the Caribbean Rum Sector granted in 2002 was expected to end on June 30, 2007, but has been extended to June 30, 2010. This extension gives producers more time to upgrade their distilleries and clean up their act in terms of the environment, through energy efficiencies and better effluent disposal systems.

But a key element and substantial proportion of the funding will go towards marketing Caribbean rums in the EU. The target markets are the UK, Spain and Italy, where the first campaign will be the roll-out of a new Authentic Caribbean Rum Marque, designed to assure consumers that the product is an authentic Caribbean rum meeting the highest quality standards.

The WIRSPA is to employ marketing managers in the UK, Spain and Italy to help generate consumer and trade awareness of the newly created marque. A logo has been designed and registered and the licensing procedure for rum producers is well under way.

Says Barnard: "The rum festivals here and in the UK are good for getting our message out. We now have to find the right distributors, invest some money and attend trade shows in Europe. And we will be using the rum marque programme to support our thrust into these markets – and cement the roots back where they come from." □



**Ian Burrell with London bar managers Jules Gualdoni (Mahiki), Charles Vexenat (Lonsdale) and Theo Sternberg (Zuma restaurant) checking out the new sugar cane plantation at the St Lucia Distillery**