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MAN AT HIS BEST

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THE WAY RUM USED TO TASTE

Which is to say, pretty funky. But in a delicious way.

BY DAVID WONDRICH

Rum has come a long way since 1724, when Ned Ward, a London writer-turned-bar-owner—not a dumb man, our Mr. Ward—labeled it “damn’d Devil’s piss.” These days if you pick up a bottle of, say, Angostura 1919 or Appleton Estate 12 Year Old and pour some in a glass, you’ll have a hard time finding even a hint of, uh, “piss.” Smooth, rich, clean, and tasty, it’s about as pleasant a spirit as you can hope to find. But back when it was young, rum was possessed of a certain “hogo.”

Derived from the French phrase for the “high taste” game meats de-

velop when they’re hung up to mature before cooking—and by “mature,” we mean “rot”—hogo used to be a term of art in the rum trade to describe the sulfurous, funky tang that raw-sugarcane spirits throw off. For 300 years, rum distillers have sought ways first to tame and then to eliminate it: high-proof distillation (more alcohol equals less hogo), filtering, tweaking the fermentation, long aging in barrels—all very effective, particularly when used in combination. Perhaps too effective.

There’s always been another way of taming that hogo, and it begins with limes and sugar. While they’re not miracle workers, in all but the

most extreme cases—the bottle of raw Haitian busthead we once purchased in deepest Brooklyn comes to mind—they have an amazing ability to turn that funk around, to make ugly sexy. They’re like beer goggles for rum. In fact, mixed with sugar and lime juice, a rough, funky rum is often better than a smooth, pleasant one. Mixed up in the traditional way, suave, hogoless sipping rums can be distinctly underwhelming, and some rum drinkers are beginning to recognize that, as the new popularity in cocktail circles of *rhum agricole* from Martinique and *cachaça* from Brazil, both traditionally hogo-rich styles, attests.

Until recently, the distillers in the English-speaking parts of the Caribbean were moving in the other direction, toward smooth sipping, not spicy mixing. But that’s starting to change. Here are four new rums from the region that don’t fight the funk, in order of hogosity. (If that wasn’t a word before, it is now.) We didn’t worry about tasting them straight, although the first two are more than sippable, but went straight to the daiquiri test, in which we shook them up with lime juice, sugar, and ice.

1 El Dorado 15 Year Old (Guyana), \$40. The Demerara River region of Guyana has a long history of making big, pungent rums. Even after 15 years in the wood, this one retains a dry tang that peeks through the layers of vanilla and brown sugar that cushion it, making for a daiquiri that’s like liquid gingerbread and a dynamite old-fashioned.

2 Plantation Grande Reserve (Barbados), \$20. The funk here is subtle, just enough to add a little depth and spice to a drink. The most balanced of the daiquiris, clean and soft.

3 Banks 5 Island (a blend of rums from Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana, and Indonesia), \$28. Plenty of hogo, and a daiquiri that’s crisp, bright, and juicy. Dark chocolate, smoke, habanero pepper. Wild.

4 Smith & Cross (Jamaica), \$29. An attempt to bring back the huge, intense rums for which Jamaica was once famous, this one clocks in at a stiff 114 proof, the traditional strength for Navy rum. A daiquiri mixed with this—well, it starts off almost too intense, just plain wrong. But then you find yourself taking another sip, and another, and another.



Give any rum-loving bartender a new bottle to play with and the first thing it’s subjected to is the daiquiri test. Because the daiquiri doesn’t lie: Three ingredients, each of them essential, combine to form a perfect synergy. If a rum can’t hold up its end, there’s little point in giving it further play. If it comes through, you’ve got something that you can work with. Here’s how:

Put 1/2 oz fresh-squeezed lime juice in a cocktail shaker. Stir in 1/2 tsp superfine sugar, or a little more if you’ve got a sweet tooth. Add 2 oz rum. Fill the shaker with ice, cover, shake hard, and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Evaluate. —D.W.