

RUM'S RENAISSANCE

AT LAST, DISTILLERS DISCOVER LOUISIANA'S SUGARCANE BOUNTY

by wayne curtis



ONE OF THE ENDURING mysteries of Louisiana history is why it failed to spawn a vibrant rum distilling industry two centuries ago. In the early 19th century, ads appeared in Louisiana papers for “rum from the north” and rum from Jamaica, the English islands, and Boston, Massachusetts—but not for rums from Louisiana.

That’s strange. The state had abundant sugarcane. It had the know-how—the French had been distilling for centuries. And it had merchants who traveled frequently among the West Indies, where sugar plantations made and sold vast oceans of rum.

It’s likely that Louisiana sugar planters distilled a little rum on the side for home consumption. Yet the spirit never established an enduring footprint as it did in Cuba, Martinique, Jamaica, Barbados, and, well . . . most other sugar-producing regions. (I have a theory as to why: By the time Louisiana’s sugar industry got established in the 1790s, drinkers had developed a fondness for abundant and cheap whiskey, which was then coming down the Mississippi on countless barges.)

But the past is the past. Today, Louisiana is poised to make up for lost time. The craft spirits boom has belatedly embraced the state’s sugar plenitude—there are now at least 10 distilleries producing rum in the state today, with several others in the pipeline.

The first to link place and potion was artist James Michalopoulos, who in 1995 launched Celebration Distillation in New Orleans’ 7th Ward, becoming the first craft rum distiller in the United States. His crew rolled out a white rum and later a barrel-aged version, first under the



Cane label, and later as Old New Orleans Rum.

In 2012, three other Louisiana rums made a splash—Bayou Rum in Lacassine, Rougaroux Rum in Thibodaux, and Sweet Crude Rum in Lafayette. All produced rum distilled from molasses, and each produced a slightly sweet, full-bodied rum.

More recently, a new crop of craft distillers has bloomed, carving out niches in the Louisiana spirit scene. Lula was the state's first restaurant-distillery, with diners looking out on New Orleans' St. Charles Avenue in one direction and at the gleaming coppery distillery in the other. Seven Three Distilling operates along North Claiborne Avenue and is named after the number of New Orleans neighborhoods, which also inspire their spirit names, such as the soon-to-be-released Black Pearl Rum.

Rum stands out in the spirits world in part because producers have tremendous latitude in how they produce it. Many other spirits are each made under the oversight of a single nation's regulators, which broadly decree how it's produced. Rum, on the other hand, is made on countless islands and remote locales, each with their own history, technique, and oversight.

Two new Louisiana craft distillers are deep into exploring some of those distinctions among rum styles. Cane Land Distilling fired up its stills in 2017—it was the idea of Walter Tharp, whose family owns the Alma Plantation & Sugar Mill in Pointe Coupee Parish. He launched a distillery in downtown Baton Rouge, where

he's not only making a traditional molasses-based rum but also an agricole rum, distilled from fresh-pressed sugarcane juice. This produces a fresher taste that reminds one that sugarcane is actually a grass. Agricole rums are common in the French West Indies, but Walter is the first to produce this style of rum in a significant scale in the United States.

Jamaica is another island that boasts its own distinctive rum style, owing to the types of stills used and an understanding of microbial fermentation, which imparts bigger, funkier notes. Andrew Lohfeld and Patrick Hernandez, the young entrepreneurs behind tiny Roulaïson Distilling in New Orleans, were fascinated by that flavor and found a way to produce a rum with high concentration of esters characteristic in a Jamaican rum. Their first product took home Best of Class in the blind judging at American Distilling Institute's annual spirits competition in 2017, suggesting they're on a winning path.

In just over a decade, Louisiana's craft rums came from nowhere, then swiftly shifted from producing rums that seem to broadly mimic nationally known brands to taking on the more challenging approach of exploring niche flavors pioneered by other rum cultures.

The next step? I'd wager that we'll see more rum that's uniquely, ineffably Louisiana. Not just made from local sugarcane, but rums that capture the essence of the place.

Louisiana might be two centuries late to the rum game, but . . . well, what's that saying? ♣

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