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FOOD DRINK SPIRITS

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The gospel, according to the Ministry of Rum

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE *Hold the Coke! The rum elite arriving Stateside from Martinique is standing on its own quite fine*

Edward Hamilton's Caribbean-based sloop, the Triton, doubles as home-sweet-home and a floating pulpit for the Ministry of Rum (www.ministryofrum.com), a website dedicated to spreading the rum gospel. Hamilton, the author of *The Complete Guide to Rum*, is tall, bespectacled and a bit gawky, with a disarming stoop and a rather nerdy cast that suggests his former career as an engineer. Nothing about him seems remotely Caribbean or ministerial, but give him credit, for he has managed to turn his overriding passion into a career as a premier advocate of rum and a globe-trotting speaker and educator. And to that list, we can now add the title *importer*.

"I had to start bringing in my favorite rums," he said, "because every time I'd come to the States with a case of it, my friends would consume it all and I'd start to miss my favorite drink."

That drink is the Ti Punch, best made from the rums of Martinique, which were previously unavailable here. So thanks to Hamilton's cravings, we now have Neisson and La Favorite, Martinique's two most popular rums. (In French, the word *rum* is spelled with an "h": *rhum*—a minor twist, but one that returns a touch of the exotic lost over the centuries as it went from being the muse of the Caribbean to a simple drink with Coke.) Not a colony, but an actual part of France, Martinique treats rum with the same reverence wine enjoys on the Continent. Thus, you find two AOCs (the government's seal) for the sugar-cane spirit: *rhum agricole* and *rhum industriel*.

The difference? The latter is made from distilled molasses, which is that dark, oozy byproduct of the sugar-making process, while the former is made from purely pressed sugar cane juice. "Imagine a wine made from molasses," says Hamilton, closing his eyes as he whiffs the aroma of a small glass. "And then imagine a wine made from sugar-cane juice, and

you can guess the difference." Most of the rum in the world is made from molasses, which is why the graceful and aromatic *rhum agricoles* of Martinique are a beautiful redemption of the category.

White *rhum agricole* indicates a clear cane spirit that has not been aged. Both Neisson and La Favorite have the evocative aromas of raw sugar and citrus and a slight brininess. They drink impeccably cleanly, with Neisson having a slight advantage in smoothness. Amber *rhum agricole* is rum that's been stored at least a year in wooden casks to attain a bit more smoothness and character, while rum labeled *vieux* has been aged in wood for at least three years.

White rum is typically enjoyed in a Ti Punch, a simple cocktail evocative of Martinique. Says Hamilton: "You'll find people enjoying a Ti Punch after about 11AM, as they gather to discuss the events of the day—while playing dominoes, while waiting for friends, while visiting the market. Basically any time is the right time for a Ti Punch." ■

TI PUNCH RECIPE

THE "TI" IN TI PUNCH DERIVES FROM THE FRENCH WORD *PETIT*, TRANSLATING AS AN ADORABLE LITTLE PUNCH.

POUR 1/4 TEASPOON OF PETITE CANE SUGAR SYRUP INTO A TUMBLER (THIS IS HIGHLY CONCENTRATED SUGAR CANE SYRUP). SQUEEZE A SMALL PIECE OF LIME INTO THE GLASS, ADD 2 OZ OF RHUM AGRICOLE BLANC. STIR AND ADD ICE.