

SPIRITS OF THE TIMES

Flip Fan On,
Elevate Feet, Sip

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cially rums made in French-speaking areas, which are labeled rum agricole, or agricultural rum. By contrast, molasses-based rums are often referred to as industrial rum, which is often an unfairly pejorative term.

Either way, rum, America's leading spirit in the 18th century, is surging in popularity again. It is now second only to vodka in sales (though by a ratio of more than two to one), according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a trade group.

Flushed with heat and ready for fantasy, the Dining section's tasting panel decided to taste a variety of rums. It was more than just a transporting experience — it was fascinating, demonstrating that good rums can be every bit as complex as Scotch or Cognac, and that they can be enjoyed neat just as easily as in a cocktail, although sitting on a beach in the tropics, you would hardly want the cabana boy to return with anything that wasn't cold, tart, sweet and fruity.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Eben Klemm, director of cocktail development for B. R. Guest, a restaurant group that includes Dos Caminos, Fiamma and Vento, and Clark Clark, an owner and the bar director of Bar Marché, a restaurant in NoLiTa. They both have a firsthand view of the rum market, and as Mr. Klemm said, "It's a one-brand country."

That brand, of course, is Bacardi, which makes, among other products, the familiar white rum that is perfect for cocktails like the Cuba libre, better known as rum and Coke, or as some cocktail manuals like to put it, Bacardi and Coke. In drinks like that, or like frozen daiquiris, the rum is overwhelmed by the accompaniments, which is fine because these mass-produced rums have little flavor anyway. But while we included two inexpensive Bacardi rums in our tasting of 24 bottles, we were most interested in examining the true flavors of rum. We ruled out two other highly popular categories of rum: those with added flavors like lime, banana or coconut, and spiced rums.

That left us with a narrow swath of rums, as far as sales go, but we still needed to pare our choices. Since rum comes from so many places, no single set of rules guides their production. Our 24 bottles alone included 18 from seven different Caribbean islands, two from Central America, one from South America, one from Louisiana, one from Australia and one from Mauritius in Africa. Some rums are bottled without prior aging. Others are aged in barrels for anywhere from a few months to 15 or 20 years.

They range in color from clear to beige to golden or amber to inky



Tony Centicola/The New York Times

BITTERS, TOO A Double Shot mixes amber and orange-flavored rum.

dark, and while it may seem that darker colors correspond with longer aging, that is not true. Many producers achieve a darker color by adding caramel to the rum — no rules, remember? — which can also affect the flavor, adding additional sweetness.

We decided to eliminate dark rums and limit ourselves to white and amber rums, a distinction that was somewhat arbitrary but not inappropriate for such a libertarian, swash-buckling spirit. As someone who has enjoyed rum but hasn't made a study of it, I expected the amber rums to be much more interesting than the

whites. Indeed, the amber rums had a lot of character. Many had a buttery quality along with subtle, complex flavors that included vanilla, banana, smoke and spice. But the whites were a tremendous surprise. The best had a purity of flavor, a distinct sweetness that led me to believe I was actually tasting sugar cane, along with other floral and fruit flavors. The best amber rums, too, conveyed a pure cane quality.

"I found myself looking for a preservation of character, telling me it wasn't a bourbon or a Scotch," Mr. Klemm said. Some of the rums also had a distinct brininess to them that

we all found intriguing.

"Maybe proximity to the sea is reading too much into it," Ms. Fabricant said, reining in our tropical escape.

Our 24 rums were split, half and half, into ambers and whites, and our Top 10 included, though not by design, five whites and five ambers, demonstrating that great rums can come from any category. In fact, our No. 1, 10 Cane from Trinidad, was one of those white rums with enough of a beige tinge to fall somewhere in between the categories. This rum is a new entry into the high-end rum market from LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, the luxury goods company. At \$43, it was by far the most expensive bottle in our Top 10, though second in price in the tasting to Bambu, a \$60 bottle that narrowly missed the cut. Ms. Fabricant called it elegant and Mr. Klemm found a

When it's hot, rum is
fine, neat or sweet.

"great sense of terroir." I loved the smooth, slightly viscous texture and the purity of flavors.

We tasted three rum agricoles from Martinique, and all three made the list, including the amber St. James Royal, which had lovely floral flavors and was our best value. Perhaps it indicated a preference for rums made in the agricultural style, from sugar cane juice rather than molasses. It turns out that the 10 Cane was also made from sugar cane juice. But all the other rums in our Top 10, including the excellent No. 2, Demerara El Dorado, were made from fermented molasses, so generalizations are difficult, except to say that in most Caribbean islands, the choice of cane juice or molasses is traditional more than anything else.

Perhaps the most familiar name on the Top 10 list is Mount Gay Eclipse from Barbados, which you can find in just about every bar in New York. Its popularity should not diminish the fact that it is a fine rum, for sipping or for cocktails.

Among those rums that did not make the list were Inner Circle from Australia, which we found overly harsh, and Starr Ultra Superior, from Mauritius, which, though we all liked it, could not eke past La Favorite, an agricole from Martinique. Mauritius, by the way, is actually a small island in the Indian Ocean with climate, at least, in common with the Caribbean islands. Though the island is not on the triangle trade route, the fact that an African country is exporting rum to the United States is both a reminder of what once was and a sign of what may come.