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CHARACTERS



SUGAR DADDY

For 30 years, Stephen Remsberg has been amassing the largest private collection of rum in the world

Story by PAUL CLARKE
Photograph by RICHARD OLIVIER

It's a hot summer day, I'm sitting at a bar and I'm in the mood for rum.

For me, this isn't an unusual occurrence during the warm months of the year, but the bar I'm sitting at is tucked into the corner of a living room in a residential neighborhood in New Orleans. The home's owner—and bar's proprietor—is Stephen Remsberg, and the rum he's pouring is a simple sip of Bacardi—albeit from a bottle bearing a flaking, elaborately scripted label, containing a spirit that was distilled at Bacardi's facility in Cuba sometime around 1930.

It's Bacardi like I've never tasted: four years old (today's Bacardi Gold is bottled at two), rich with cascading flavors of vanilla and caramel, but with the telltale light crispness of Cuban rum. As I roll the rum in my mouth, Remsberg offers an apology: "This is a wounded duck compared to when I first opened the bottle," he says. "A bottle in good condition is just sublime."

Remsberg should know: Over the past 30 years, he has amassed what is believed to be the world's largest private collection of rum, with around 1,300 bottles representing more than 800 varieties, some more than a century old. Only around 200 bottles are displayed in his home bar—mainly his favorites, from Barbados, Cuba, New England and Jamaica. The remainder of his ever-growing collection was placed in storage after Hurricane Katrina; a small brass plaque about waist-height on the living-room wall shows the level floodwaters reached (and stayed for three weeks) following the 2005 storm.

But the house survived, as did the rum. "I didn't lose a single

bottle, and none of the bottles leaked," Remsberg says, noting that the only damage the flooding dealt to his collection was to the fragile labels. "Out of the 800-some total bottles that I had to clean, pack and move, there was only one bottle I don't have the faintest idea what it is."

Remsberg doesn't strike the Hawaiian-shirt-and-sandals pose you might expect from the world's foremost rum collector. A Kansas native with a Midwesterner's natural reticence, he speaks with the even cadence that he's developed over his 30-plus-year career as an attorney specializing in admiralty law. His home is tastefully decorated with framed photos of his (now grown) daughters and family dogs. The only unusual element is the four-seat bar, bedecked with vintage rum bottles, swizzle sticks and assorted rum and tiki-bar ephemera, and adjacent to a storage closet that at one point during the afternoon Remsberg's wife Cheryl exclaims—with some exasperation, and clearly not for the first time—is intended to hold the vacuum cleaner, not more bottles of rum.

With the possible exception of corporate collections, Remsberg's assemblage of rums is several orders of magnitude larger than that of his closest rival. (His collection isn't limited to rum: While that remains his preferred spirit, he's also amassed some 30 bottles of early 20th-century rye whiskey.) Creating such an unparalleled collection has required years of travel, relentless searching through second-hand stores and online auctions and, above all, unflagging dedication.

"You can call it dedication or you can call it a mental disorder; it probably falls in between there," laughs Wayne Curtis, a friend of Remsberg's and author of the rum-soaked history *And a Bottle of Rum*. "There are collectors of everything and that's what they live for, whether it's Beanie Babies or postage stamps. They consider themselves wired for it, and to not do it would take more work than to do it," Curtis says. "That's Stephen's case; his default mode is, 'Must look for rum.'"

Remsberg shifted into default mode while in college in Washington, D.C., in the late 1960s, when a friend whose family lived in Puerto Rico would bring bottles of a rare local rum, Ron Superior Puerto Rico Especial, whenever he returned from vacation. While at law school in Chicago, Remsberg frequented the local Don the Beachcomber, an outpost of the once-mighty chain of Polynesian-themed bars and restaurants. During those visits, he became enamored with a rum that remains one of his favorites: Wray & Nephew Special Reserve, a now-defunct 12-year-old rum once made in Jamaica. "I thought it was just magnificent stuff," Remsberg says as he takes a venerable bottle down from a shelf. "Acquiring replacement bottles of this to drink, that's what got me started."

In the late 1960s, the mid-century tiki movement had not yet fully collapsed into kitsch, and restaurants such as Don the Beachcomber and Trader Vic's served complex, exotic drinks that often incorporated several types of rum. Remsberg became an ardent fan of these drinks, and in an attempt to mix them himself, he began acquiring bottles. "I ... realized that to make the drinks you had to have a number of rums.

That required me to purchase my first dozen, and I just kept going from there," he says. "As my taste matured, I acquired a liking for the rums themselves, and it just mushroomed."

Remsberg began collecting in earnest in the 1970s, turning each family vacation into visits to rum-producing regions, where he could amass a broad collection of the world's rums. "I had one phase where I was using every device I could come up with to acquire all the Mexican rums, then I got off on Spanish rums, and Canadian rums," he says. "I was buying what was unknown here, but what you'd find in the supermarket in Guadalajara."

His family played along for several years, but at one point Cheryl insisted that the family take a vacation that didn't involve searching for spirits. "So we took the kids—they were small at the time—and we went to Portugal," Remsberg says. "I'd never heard of Portuguese rum. And what do I find?" he says, his eyes glittering with satisfaction. "Portugal has a rum distillery! Cheryl said, 'I can't win.'"

While he initially focused on rums that were rare simply because they weren't distributed beyond their places of origin, Remsberg soon drifted into searching for vintage rums, many of which hadn't been bottled or sold for decades. The spark for this shift, as with his initial voyage into the rum world, was Don the Beachcomber.

Established by Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt (who later changed his name to Donn Beach) in Hollywood in 1934, Don the Beachcomber is credited with launching the mid-century tiki phenomenon. Starting his restaurant on a shoestring budget, Beach built his bar around rum,

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which was astonishingly cheap in the years following Prohibition. Within a few years, Beach had arguably become one of the world's top rum experts, and by 1940, his Hollywood restaurant had a cellar that boasted nearly 140 different rums. The rum list was a connoisseur's dream: a collection carefully selected by Beach that revealed his knowledge of the spirit, featuring many of the finest rums ever produced. "He was the only guy who had everything at his bar that you'd ever heard of; that's the significance of that 1940 list," Remsberg says. "That was the universe."

Remsberg keeps a copy of the Beachcomber's 1940 rum list next to his bar. "I'm trying to re-create that rum collection," he says. "Now, I'm mostly looking for antiques, the majority of which would be pre-World War II."

While Remsberg's collection previously showed a mighty geographic breadth, it gained historic depth as he searched for the rums on the Beachcomber list. Almost none of the rums is still produced, the rest rendered obsolete by changing tastes, changing economies and downright bad luck. By digging into these lost rums, Remsberg made his own shift from collector to curator.

"I don't think Stephen's a collector; what he does goes beyond collecting," says Jeff Berry, a rum and exotic-drink expert and author of *Sippin' Safari*. "When you go to his house and look at his shelves, it's not a collection on display; it's more of a museum of rum. He picks and chooses as only a connoisseur and expert would. It's all cherry-picked with an eye toward having the most historical or culinary worth. It's the kind of collecting that advances knowledge, as opposed to just amassing stuff."

The rums on the Beachcomber list range from a crisp Alvarez Carta Camp Silver from Cuba to a deep, smoky Hedges & Butler from Guyana. The mainstays of the list were more than 40 types of rum from Jamaica, including a 30-year-old Myer's Mona—a rum Remsberg considers his bibulous white whale. The distillery that produced the rum burned in 1918, and the last rum it produced was bottled in 1948. "I've never seen a bottle, never seen a facsimile of a label, never seen an ad," Remsberg says. "People who knew about rum in the 1930s and '40s all said the Mona was the best rum they'd ever tasted."

In the early years of his collecting, Remsberg's search was conducted by telephone and at thrift stores. During a lucky visit to a second-hand shop around 1990, he found a wooden crate on the floor with a number of rum bottles, including two bottles of Bacardi from 1925 and a bottle of Field's Finest Old Jamaican Rum that was only sold in the U.S. prior to World War I, making it possibly the oldest bottle in Remsberg's collection. "I bought the bottles for \$5 each," he says. "That was my find of the century."

Today, online auctions have changed his approach—as have the realities of living in a time when the passing of the World War II generation has led to greater amounts of vintage rum entering the market. "They've all gone to their great reward with a lot of bottles in their cellar or tucked away in the back of the closet somewhere," Remsberg says. "People my age are having to clean out their parents' or grandparents' homes, and come across 12 or 15 old bottles. Instead of throwing them out, or pouring everything into a big can and filling it up with Hawaiian Punch, they're putting them up on eBay. There are some wonderful things that I can now find that I'd never have been able to get before."

While Remsberg's collection is remarkable for its size and depth, it's also notable for its utility: He emphasizes that he'll open any bottle for which he has a duplicate. This makes his collection not just an amalgamation of rare old bottles, but a collection devoted to discovering the flavor and character of a different time. For Remsberg, this isn't the kind of discovery you keep to yourself.

"Stephen refers to his collection as a 'living museum of taste,'" Curtis says. "He doesn't want things to sit there like taxidermied trophy heads on a wall, so you can point to a rare bottle of 1909 rum. He wants to know what it tastes like."

Berry agrees. "Collectors tend to have a hoarding mentality; they shepherd it like a mother hen, and are suspicious of any other collector who comes in," he says. "Stephen is the anti-collector in that sense; he's so generous and it makes him happy to share his knowledge. And not just the knowledge—the booze! That's the coolest thing of all." ■

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