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LIQUID GOLD

Serious rums are made to be savored

Story by PAUL CLARKE

Photos by STUART MULLENBERG

If your name was frequently prefaced by “demon” and your past paramours included pirates and slave traders, your Match.com listing would likely receive very little in the way of wanted attention. For rum—which also lists a long, torrid affair with umbrella drinks and an on-again, off-again thing with frozen-daiquiri machines in its relationship history—it’s been a long, lonely time since respectable suitors came calling. “Rum is the underdog of the spirits world,” says Matt Robold, a Southern California rum enthusiast who blogs at RumDood.com. “When people think of fine drinking, they think of whiskey or eight-times-distilled vodka—they turn their noses up at rum. Largely that’s because they’re only familiar with the low-end stuff, so as an aficionado you feel like you have to evangelize it.”

It’s identified primarily with the Caribbean, but rum is a global spirit, distilled in more than 100 countries and with roots in places ranging from Thailand to Tennessee and New England to Australia. At its simplest, rum is a spirit derived from sugarcane, but rum is rarely simple. Adapted by each producer in each place to suit their own needs, rum has countless styles that together form a broad, boozy diaspora, making it one of the most diverse—and confusing—spirits to ever grace a glass. “Rum has the biggest diversity of any distilled spirit,” says Ed Hamilton, publisher of the Ministry of Rum online forums and a rum connoisseur and importer. “It varies from vodka-esque white rums to rums as complex as any single-malt scotch.”

Despite this dazzling diversity, rum has long suffered an image problem. From its early incarnations as pirate juice to its more recent turns in Blue Hawaiians and Bahama Mamas, rum has never had the widespread respect of spirits such as brandy and whiskey; but as has been seen with other spirits once viewed as the source of countless spring-break regrets, rum's luck is changing.

"Ten to 15 years ago, people couldn't believe that you could sip tequila; we're still kind of there with rum," says Martin Cate, owner of Smuggler's Cove in San Francisco, which opened in December. The bar—with a menu and an education program dedicated to elevating rum's position in the spirits world—debuted at a time when well-made rum is getting something resembling respect: recent industry figures show dramatic growth in premium rum (a 43 percent growth in volume in 2007), and today's selection is of a stylistic diversity not seen since perhaps the second world war.

Humble Beginnings

Rum's origins are, not surprisingly, hazy. The spirit was probably first distilled in the Caribbean in the 17th century, most likely from molasses, a byproduct of sugar production and the base of a vast majority of today's rums. Descriptions of this early rum frequently include the words "rough" and "hellish"—words that could also be used to describe the spirit's early history, which is inextricably linked with slavery and the bleak conditions at island sugar plantations.

Over the centuries, rum grew up, and today scores of styles are produced worldwide. The many variables in rum's production—whether it's made from molasses or fresh sugarcane juice (the latter is typically known as "rhum agricole"—see sidebar below); the type of yeast and the length of fermentation; the type of still used to produce it; the length and manner of aging and blending—mean that each rum-producing region has a distinct style, and the aromas and flavors range from sweet and fruity to dry and grassy, and from heavy and smoky to sour and tangy. Some rums are as clear as water, others as dark as Texas crude. Some are as coarse and abrasive as the buccaneers who once swilled them, while others are as delicate and complex as Cognac or whiskey.

Unlike Cognac or whiskey, however, there are few international standards governing the world of rum. Most rums are a blend of many batches produced over the span of months or years; some nations require the age listed on the bottle to represent the youngest rum in the blend, while others allow producers to list the age of the oldest, making most age statements misleading or irrelevant. The rum's appearance is also no guarantee of age or quality; almost all white rums are aged in oak for at least one year, and are then filtered to remove the amber tint they acquire in the barrel; other rums are doctored with caramel coloring to give them a darker hue, which implies longer aging and better quality.

Crystal Light

BEFORE THERE WAS RUM, THERE WAS MOLASSES. A byproduct of sugar refining, molasses was viewed largely as industrial waste until early Caribbean sugar producers found a way to turn the sticky black muck into a profitable (if rough) liquor. Today, almost all rum is still made from molasses, but a small but growing class of rum is gaining traction among rum aficionados: rums made from fresh sugarcane juice, much of which is known as rhum agricole.

Made primarily on the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, along with the former French colony of Haiti, rhum agricole is distinctively different in character and flavor from molasses-based rums, or rum industriel (and while Brazilian cachaça is also produced from sugarcane juice, variations in production methods make them different, though related, spirits). Light rhum agricole can have an assertive grassy aroma and a peppery, almost tequila-like flavor, while aged rhum agricole has a flavor more like a vegetal cognac or malt whisky than the rich vanilla sweetness of aged molasses-based rums. Practically unheard of in the U.S. only a few years ago, rhum agricole now has a growing body of devoted fans.

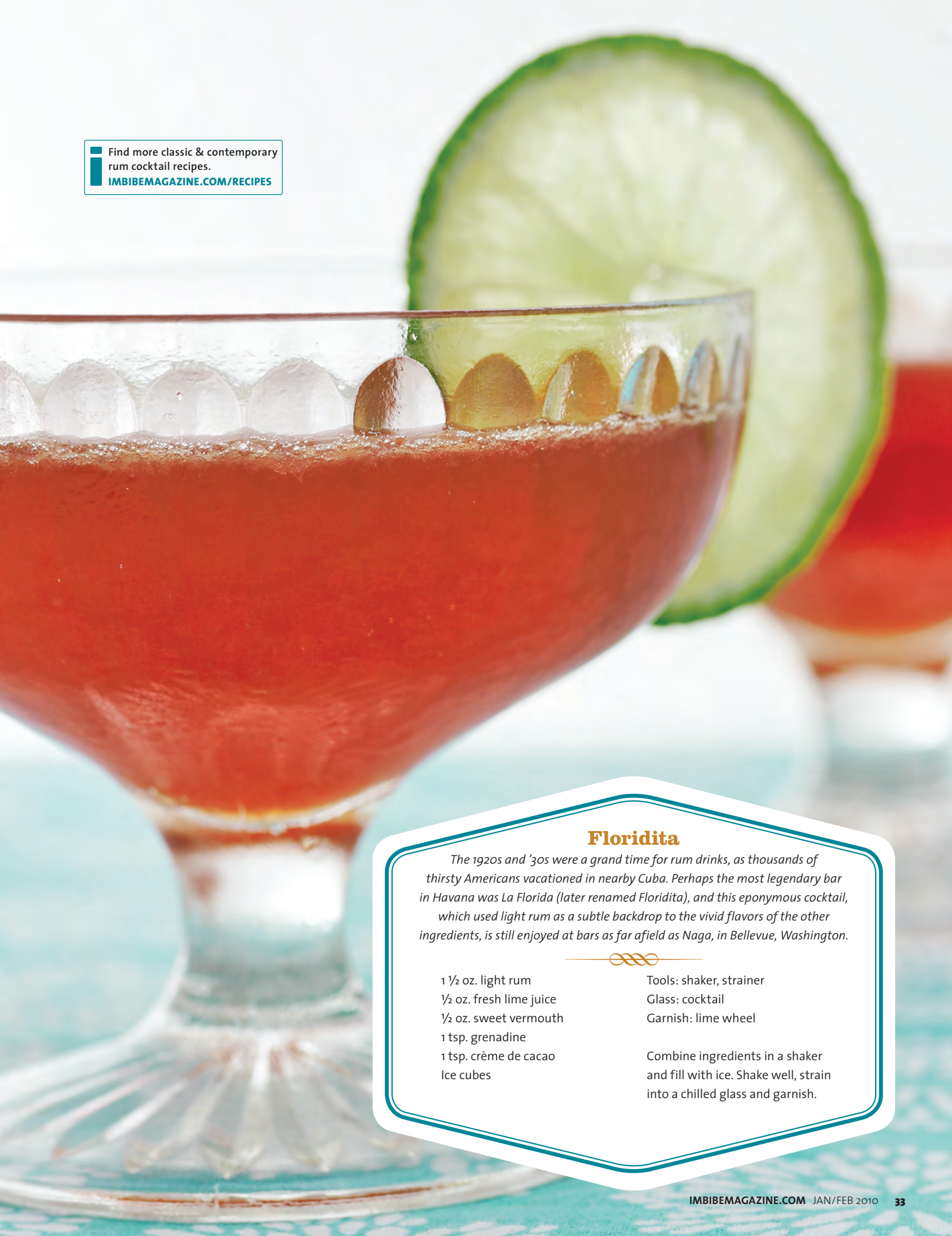
"I started [promoting our rum in the United States] in 2005, and no one at that time knew what rhum agricole was—we really were starting from square one," says Benjamin Jones, managing director for Rhum JM and Rhum Clement, two prominent brands of Martinique rum. Other brands of rhum agricole include La Favorite, Neisson and Depaz, from Martinique, and Batiste, from St. Barts. Barbancourt, from Haiti, is also produced in the French island style from fresh sugarcane juice, and many

consider it a rhum agricole. "Today more people have heard of it, and they can understand and appreciate that rhum agricole is quite different," Jones says. "It's now viewed like mezcal is in the agave category and genever is in the gin category—it's gained its own identity."

Part of this identity is from the AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) designation that the French government assigned to rhum agricole from Martinique. Similar to the rules that define Cognac and Calvados, the AOC designation establishes clear guidelines on the production and aging of rhum agricole from Martinique—for example, stipulating the types of sugarcane that may be used, the methods of aging that are allowed, and that all rhum agricole must be made in a pot still and distilled to a lower proof than most molasses-based rums. While not covered under the terms of the Martinique AOC, rhum agricole from other islands are produced and aged in a similar style.

Rhum agricole has such a distinctive character that simply substituting it for a molasses-based rum in a cocktail may produce unexpected results, but some bars have made cane-based rums a part of their bar program. Slanted Door in San Francisco prepares an Agricole Rhum Punch made with La Favorite amber rhum, and Sambar in Seattle serves an agricole-based La Bohémienne with maraschino liqueur and amaro. While the caramel and vanilla richness of many molasses-based rums make them easy to love, rhum agricole can take some getting used to—but as with all elements of the spirits world, the learning process is something to be savored.

Find more classic & contemporary
rum cocktail recipes.
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Floridita

The 1920s and '30s were a grand time for rum drinks, as thousands of thirsty Americans vacationed in nearby Cuba. Perhaps the most legendary bar in Havana was La Florida (later renamed Floridita), and this eponymous cocktail, which used light rum as a subtle backdrop to the vivid flavors of the other ingredients, is still enjoyed at bars as far afield as Naga, in Bellevue, Washington.



1 ½ oz. light rum
½ oz. fresh lime juice
½ oz. sweet vermouth
1 tsp. grenadine
1 tsp. crème de cacao
Ice cubes

Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: lime wheel

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake well, strain into a chilled glass and garnish.



Center of the Galaxy

Smuggler's Cove owner Martin Cate drew inspiration for this drink from a news report suggesting that a chemical compound at the center of the galaxy smells like rum and gives raspberries their flavor.



2 oz. Demerara rum
1/2 oz. fresh lime juice
1/2 oz. rich simple syrup
(2:1 Demerara sugar to water)
1/2 oz. honey syrup
(equal parts honey and water)
1/4 oz. raspberry liqueur
1 small pinch cinnamon
Ice cubes

Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: raspberry and lime wheel

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake well and strain into a chilled glass. Spear a raspberry in the center of a lime wheel and float in the center of the glass as a garnish.

Martin Cate, Smuggler's Cove, San Francisco

With no reliable guide to what's in a particular bottle, it's a small wonder that customers are sometimes apprehensive about trying an unfamiliar rum. "In a retail setting, you're likely to buy the wrong kind of rum—one that's too flowery for your taste, or too funky, or too strong, or any number of things," Cate says, noting that rum tasting and education programs such as the one at Smuggler's Cove give drinkers the opportunity to try many styles of rum and find the ones that suit their tastes, whether it's a rich, sweet rum such as Zaya or a dry, earthy rum such as aged rums from Barbancourt. "I don't want a customer to find the wrong rum and be soured on the whole category."

Multiple Personalities

Even the seemingly simple world of white rums—which are also referred to as "silver" or "light" rums—can be surprisingly complex. "In white rums, there's tremendous variety once you get off the bottom shelf," Robold says.

The length of time white rums are aged varies, with popular spirits such as Bacardi aged for one year, and others for much longer: the white rum from Grenada-based El Dorado is aged for three years, while Nicaraguan distiller Flor de Cana ages its white rum for four years.

In addition to aging, the type of still also affects the character of rums, with traditional pot stills producing rums that have a bit more depth and body, whereas rums made on column stills are typically crisper and lighter—and to complicate matters even further, some distillers use a combination of stills to produce their rums. "You can have a really light, crisp style of spirit like Bacardi, while rums like Myers Platinum [from Jamaica] or Mount Gay Eclipse Silver [from Barbados] have some pot-still distillate in them, and they taste remarkably different and play up very differently in a Daiquiri," Cate says.

Aging and blending also have an immense impact on the character of a rum, and each rum-producing area has its own approach to the process. At the risk of grossly exaggerating each region's differences, rums tend to fall into a few general categories that in many cases somewhat align with each region's colonial history.

Rums from former Spanish island colonies, such as Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, tend to be lighter and more delicate in flavor. Many bar manuals refer to this style simply as "Cuban rum," as that island dominated the style before the Cuban revolution; popular brands from these islands include Brugal, Ron Matusalem, Havana Club, Don Q and, of course, Bacardi.

The former British colonies of Barbados and Jamaica, on the other hand, make rums that are somewhat richer and heavier. Barbados rums such as those from Mount Gay and Cockspur have a nutty, buttery quality while Jamaican rums such as those from Appleton Estate and Smith & Cross have a characteristic heaviness and an engaging aroma that can only be described as "funky."

The former Spanish Main—which includes Venezuela, Nicaragua and Guatemala—along with the nearshore island of Trinidad, produces many richer and more robust rums, including many sipping rums that are the most approachable for novices. Some darker rums, such as Zacapa from Guatemala, or Zaya, now made in Trinidad, have a heavy, chocolaty sweetness, while Venezuelan rums, such as Ron Diplomático or Ron Pampero, are medium-bodied and voluptuous but still relatively dry. And the Demerara rums from Guyana are dark, heavy and smoky, with a powerful flavor that many rum lovers find irresistible.

French islands and former colonies such as Martinique and Haiti produce rums that are so different from the rest that they've been given their own subcategory of the rum world (see *rum agricole* sidebar on page 32);

TASTING NOTES

Angostura 1919

This medium-bodied rum's aroma and flavor can be summed up in one word: vanilla. Rich with flavor yet surprisingly light and crisp, it's a versatile mixer and a good sipping rum for those just starting to explore the spirit. \$20, [drinkupny.com](#)

Appleton Estate Reserve

Appleton Estate Reserve is medium-bodied with an aroma of orange peel and brown sugar, and a taste of caramel, almonds and warm spice. \$25, [benashliquors.com](#)

Appleton Estate Extra

Deeper and with a heavier body, Appleton Estate Extra has a scent of nutmeg and orange peel, and a buttery texture rich with brown sugar. \$35, [hitimewine.net](#)

Bacardi Superior

Bacardi takes a lot of heat from rum connoisseurs, but give the brand its due: it helped define the contemporary world of rum. Bacardi Superior is the company's hallmark white rum; with a barely detectable aroma and a faint flavor of vanilla, this is about as light as rum gets. \$19, [shoppersvineyard.com](#)

Bacardi 8

This rum shows engaging complexity, with a pronounced vanilla character and light traces of nuts, dried apricots and toffee. \$19, [hitimewine.net](#)

Barbancourt Reserve Speciale

A sugarcane juice-based rum from Haiti with a brisk aroma of cut grass and a complex, smoky flavor of walnuts and vanilla. \$25, [drinkupny.com](#)

Cruzan Single Barrel Estate

Soft but luscious, this blend of 5- to 12-year-old rums from St. Croix is redolent of caramel and has a flavor of brown butter, toffee and toasted almonds. \$30, [bevmo.com](#)

Don Q Grand Añejo

This aged rum from Puerto Rico offers up smooth, rounded flavors of tobacco, toffee and spice with a touch of fruity sweetness. Great for sipping. \$60, [crownwineandspirits.com](#)

El Dorado

The El Dorado 12-year-old Demerara rum (\$25, [drinkupny.com](#)) has a sweet, heavy character of tobacco, dried figs and toasted coconut; at 15 years old, the El Dorado Special Reserve (\$29, [shoppersvineyard.com](#)) adds cinnamon and crème caramel to the rich Demerara character; and the 21-year-old Special Reserve (\$84, [drinkupny.com](#)) offers a smoky, honeyed flavor and a long molasses-rich finish.

Flor de Cana Grand Reserve

A good bridge between lighter Cuban-style rum and heavier rums. Lighter in body but with crisp notes of caramel, coffee and raisins, this is a versatile mixing rum. \$24, [bevmo.com](#)

TASTING NOTES

Matusalem

Matusalem Platino (\$18, shoppersvineyard.com) has a full, buttery character that is lightly sweet and tinged with orange peel. Matusalem Clasico (\$23, crownwineandspirits.com) is slightly richer, with notes of vanilla, chocolate and toffee, and Matusalem Gran Reserva (\$35, drinkupny.com) is an elegant aged rum, with a light body and crisp flavors of toasted almonds and caramel.

Mount Gay Extra Old

Barbados has long been synonymous with excellent rum, and Mount Gay Extra Old keeps that tradition alive with its rich aroma and flavor of coconut, toffee and toasted almonds. \$40, beltramos.com

Mount Gay 1703

The distillery recently released Mount Gay 1703, which contains rums up to 30 years old and which turns up the flavor volume while adding notes of tobacco, leather and dried roses to the spirit. \$86, beltramos.com

Rhum J.M.

Rhum J.M. Rhum Agricole Blanc (\$40, klwines.com) has a light aroma of fresh grass and a dry, peppery character that is lightly sweet and bracingly refreshing. Still very dry but with aged notes of pineapple and wildflowers, Rhum J.M. Eleve Sous Bois Gold Rum (\$40, morrellwine.com) is aged for one year in oak. A blend of 4- and 5-year-old rums, the Rhum J.M. Vieux VSOP (\$58, klwines.com) has a richness of butter and toffee along with a tangy character of dried mango and hay, and the Rhum J.M. Vieux 1997 (\$99, klwines.com) has a delicate vegetal complexity that can't be found among molasses-based rums.

Smith & Cross Traditional Jamaica Rum

Living up to its name, this 114-proof blend of pot-still spirits has the characteristic gamey, molasses-tinged aroma of classic Jamaica rum, along with a robust flavor of dried mango, burnt sugar and winter spices. \$29, drinkupny.com

Zacapa Sistema Solera 23

Deep, rich and indulgent, with notes of brown sugar, chocolate and macadamia nuts. \$40, beltramos.com

Zacapa XO

Slightly drier than the Solera, though still sweet with notes of maple and honey, this rum has an elegant finish of dried papaya and dates. \$90, beltramos.com

Zaya Gran Reserva

Zaya Gran Reserva, formerly made in Guatemala but now produced in Trinidad, is dark and heavy, with lush flavors of chocolate, toffee and candied orange peel. \$32, drinkupny.com

similarly, Brazil produces a close sibling to rum called cachaca, made from sugarcane juice. And rum distillers in places ranging from Hawaii to Australia to Africa produce unique spirits that fall somewhere on the scale from light and crisp to rich and smooth, giving the rum world a truly global flavor.

Raising the Bar

Not surprisingly for a spirit that lent backbone to pre-Colonial punches and spawned the 20th-century tiki phenomenon—and that fuels the oceans of rum-and-Cokes and day-glo frozen daiquiris that are poured each weekend across the world—rum is made for mixing, and its stylistic breadth is a big factor in its versatility. “Rum’s diversity is pretty much bottomless, and that’s what makes it so fun,” Cate says.

Primordial rum drinks, such as punches and smashes, utilized the robust body and rich aromatics of aged rums from Barbados, Jamaica and Santa Cruz (now known as Saint Croix), as well as the now-defunct rums once made in Medford, Massachusetts. By the early and mid-20th century, changes in distillation, aging and filtration methods along with the advent of drinks such as the daiquiri and the mojito—not to mention lesser-known classics, such as the El Presidente and the Floridita—helped make white, Cuban-style rums more prominent.

Today, bartenders are branching out to prepare more complex and creative rum-based cocktails in addition to the classics. At Smuggler’s Cove, Cate prepares the Center of the Galaxy, a Demerara rum-based drink inspired by a recent discovery by astronomers that the center of the galaxy has a chemical compound that smells like rum and gives raspberries their flavor. And in Chicago, bartenders at The Violet Hour prepare a Hush & Wonder, made with Dominican rum, crème de violette and grapefruit bitters.

In New Orleans, bartenders at Cure often use rum in place of whiskey in classic cocktails, noting that barrel-aging gives both spirits similarly rich vanilla and caramel flavors. In addition to dashing fragrant rums, such as those from El Dorado and Brugal, atop an array of cocktails to lend an additional aromatic touch of vanilla and spice, Cure bartenders make a variation of a Dark & Stormy using two types of rum—either the robust Matusalem Classico or the vegetal Rhum Barbancourt, and a float of Cruzan Blackstrap rum for its heavy molasses wallop. They also serve original drinks like the Brugal-based Clermeil, which bartender Maksym Pazuniak created to combine the citrus and spice component of classic tiki drinks and rum punches with the complexity of Chartreuse and maple syrup.

While many classics, such as the Daiquiri, are traditionally made with one style of rum, as many cocktails—especially exotic recipes that originated at tiki palaces such as Don the Beachcomber’s or Trader Vic’s from the 1930s to the ‘60s—combine two or more styles of rum to create an entirely bespoke flavor. Classic drinks in this tradition include the Zombie and the Jet Pilot, which each use three types of rum, and contemporary versions of the Mai Tai, with two types of rum. “Sometimes two ounces of a black rum can be overpowering, and a blend can take it back a little bit—maybe put some Martinique rum in for floral and grassy notes, or some amber Barbados rum,” Cate says. “That’s what makes rum such an exciting spirit: not only do you have so many styles [to choose from], but you can blend exactly what you want.”

Rum’s diversity makes it challenging to understand, but ardent fans of the spirit work with the enthusiasm of true believers to introduce new enthusiasts to the entrancing world of rum. “The rum for you is out there,” Cate says with certainty. “My mission is to put it in your hand.” ■



The Clermeil

Cure bartender Maksym Pazuniak took classic rum punch ingredients, lime juice and spice, and introduced them into this powerfully flavored cocktail.



1 1/2 oz. aged rum
3/4 oz. green Chartreuse
3/4 oz. fresh lime juice
1/2 oz. maple syrup
1/8 oz. St. Elizabeth's Allspice Dram
Ice cubes
Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake well and strain into a chilled glass. Pazuniak notes that sweetness levels vary among brands of maple syrup, so you may want to use as much as 1/4 ounce, depending on the brand.

Maksym Pazuniak, Cure, New Orleans

Jay Jones mixes a Prospector cocktail at Pourhouse.





TEAM CANADA

Vancouver's innovative bars
are vying for a place on
the world cocktail podium

Story by PAUL CLARKE
Photos by LARA FERRONI

According to the murky vagaries of legend

—and to Wikipedia, which can be pretty much the same thing—Rome was founded when a basket bearing the infant twins Romulus and Remus, sons of the god Mars, was snagged by the roots of a fig tree as the basket floated down the River Tiber. Nursed by a she-wolf on Palatine Hill, the twins are said to have established a city that would one day be the heart of an empire.

The founding of Vancouver, British Columbia, happened pretty much the same way—except instead of a basket on the Tiber, one of Vancouver's early founders came in a dugout canoe on Burrard Inlet. Instead of twins with divine parentage, he was a former steamship pilot known as "Gassy Jack"—his sobriquet a nod to his loquaciousness.

And instead of a city that would dominate and define Western civilization for centuries, Gassy Jack built a bar.

In the not quite 150 years since Gassy Jack Deighton erected the Globe Saloon, Vancouver has become a multicultural metropolis, a city of verdant parks, glass towers and a seemingly infinite number of takeout sushi spots. Like nearby Seattle, the Vancouver region is defined by sparkling bodies of water and snow-capped mountains, the latter so popular with skiers and snowboarders that this winter the area will host athletes from around the world who've come to compete in the Olympic Games. And as tens of thousands of Olympics spectators and fans venture out for evenings on the town, they'll find that Vancouver's top bartenders have been working on their best game as well. In a city that traces its origins in part to a talkative man who sold whisky to sawmill workers, Vancouver's bars are primed to compete on the world stage.

"I think the cocktail situation has reached the point where we've achieved some momentum, and it's just going to continue to grow," says David Wolowidnyk, bar manager at West, one of the city's top restaurants and bars. A career bartender, Wolowidnyk helped launch the Canadian Bartender's Guild last year and says that with the recent debut of craft-cocktail bars, such as The Diamond, Pourhouse and Corner Suite Bistro De Luxe, Vancouver is taking its cocktail culture to the next level. "With these places that have recently opened, the snowball is turning into a massive avalanche—it just keeps going."

That avalanche started around the turn of this century, when bartenders such as Chris Stearns, Jay Jones and Jamie Boudreau began to introduce creative cocktails to the then humdrum world of Vancouver bars. Challenged by obstacles like breathtakingly high import duties that make products such as tequila outlandishly expensive, and a lethargic government-run liquor system that means spirits that are considered essentials by American bartenders (such as straight rye whiskey, Cherry Heering and yellow Chartreuse) are either scarce or nonexistent in their bars, Vancouver bartenders have created a Galapagos of mixology, a place where cocktails have evolved independently from the rest of the drinking world. Using esoteric and hard-to-find products, such as Giffard liqueurs from France and niche vermouths from Italy, and raiding farmer's markets for Okanagan produce and restaurant kitchens for other ingredients, Vancouver bartenders have cultivated a cocktail scene that is distinctive yet robust—just in time for the Olympic crowds to order a round.



Tequila Martinez

Bartenders at The Diamond craft this twist on the classic Martinez by substituting tequila for gin, and by freshening up the drink with a mix of light aperitif wines and peach bitters.

1 ½ oz. tequila reposado
½ oz. Dolin Blanc vermouth
1 tsp. Lillet Blanc
1 dash Fee Bros. peach bitters
Ice cubes

Tools: mixing glass, barspoon, strainer

Glass: coupe

Garnish: orange twist

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled glass. Garnish.

Josh Pape, The Diamond



CLOCKWISE FROM
BOTTOM LEFT: Josh Pape at
Diamond, David Wolowidnyk
at West, Nick Devine at
Cascade Room and Jay Jones
at Pourhouse.

Gastown

Fittingly, several of Vancouver's top bars are in Gastown, the recently down-at-heel neighborhood of old brick buildings and odd-angled streets that was named for Gassy Jack and that grew up around his long-departed saloon, and that is enjoying a current-day renaissance. "Gastown has an amazing community feel," says Simon Kaulback, bar manager at Boneta, a restaurant and bar that opened in 2007 at the corner of West Cordova and Carrall. Kaulback says the bartenders who work at Gastown's growing number of craft-cocktail bars have developed a relationship that is collegial, not competitive, and that works to their mutual benefit. "We're such good friends—it's rare that a restaurateur will see the guy across the street as a friend. I've worked places where you wouldn't dream of going next door to borrow a bucket of ice; here, it'd be considered an insult if you didn't. You don't see that in a lot of places."

Boneta occupies a large, airy space, with works of local artists adorning the walls. The dinner menu is carefully crafted modern locavore, with fresh seafood, regional cheeses and house charcuterie, and the cocktail menu—created by Kaulback and co-owner Mark Brand, also a recognized craft bartender—shares the same level of devotion. The March '33, made with Alberta Premium 10-year-old Canadian whisky and Amaro Montenegro, a mildly bitter Italian amaro, is a revisioning of the classic Manhattan, and the Armada strikes into new territory, accenting tequila and oloroso sherry with Cinzano Orancio, an orange-flavored vermouth.

Just a block away is another recent addition to the city's cocktail scene: The Diamond, a classic bartender's bar with a crew of veteran Vancouver bartenders. Created by Brand and his partners Josh Pape (formerly the bar manager at Chambar) and Sophie Taverner (who tended bar at The Cascade Room), The Diamond opened last June in a second-floor space overlooking Gassy Jack Square, which is replete with a statue of Deighton perched atop a beer barrel. In addition to their regular dinner and drinks service, The Diamond offers occasional spirits seminars, hosts visiting bartenders and features other special amenities for dedicated cocktail aficionados.

The cocktail menu leans heavily toward contemporary classics, along with Diamond's interpretations. Modern standards, such as the scotch-based Penicillin and the Right Hook (a twist on the Red Hook that features Canadian whisky), are joined by house creations, such as the Tequila Martinez (made with blanco vermouth and peach bitters) and the lightly sweet and delicate Pera Floridita, with Havana Club rum, pear nectar and crème de cacao among the ingredients. (And while The Diamond is a great cocktail destination, its Asian-themed kitchen shouldn't be overlooked; the diners packing its 60-seat room are there for more than just the drinks.)

In the Crosstown region between Gastown and downtown, the Belgian restaurant Chambar offers cocktails creative enough to compete with the restaurant's impressive beer list. Bar manager Wendy McGuinness designed a drink menu that features cocktails such as the Strong Sour Type, which includes

Brews of Gold

WHILE VANCOUVER IS QUICKLY TURNING INTO A CENTER FOR ADVENTUROUS MIXOLOGY, its beer scene should not be ignored. Many bars and restaurants serve a selection of craft Canadian beers, such as those from the nearby Whistler Brewing Company or the nearly ubiquitous brews from Granville Island Brewery, as well as beers from Washington and Oregon breweries such as Pike Brewing or Rogue Ales.

Few bars stray from a modest selection of beer, but there are some notable exceptions. In addition to its great cocktail list, Chambar features a serious beer list composed entirely of Belgian imports. There is one exception: in September, Chambar introduced its own Belgian-style Chambar Ale.

For full immersion in Vancouver's craft beer scene, visit the Alibi Room in Gastown. Open since 1998, the Alibi Room was purchased in 2007 by then-employees Nigel Springthorpe and Raya Audet, who revamped its drinks program to place a heavy emphasis on craft-brewed beers. With 25 taps and three cask ales, plus a recently added cellar downstairs for aging beers, the beer selection at Alibi Room is awe-inspiring, and the selection features beers from select British Columbia brewers such as the local R&B Brewery, Central City Brew Pub in Surrey, and Swan's in nearby Victoria.

Springthorpe tries to ensure that only stellar brews are served at Alibi Room; to this end, he works directly with brewers to source the beers they feel most proud of, frequently traveling to out-of-the-way breweries on Vancouver Island and other regional destinations to find out what seasonal and monthly projects are under development. "Within reason, what we have is what the brewer wants—I don't deal with sales guys," Springthorpe says. "When I'm working directly with the brewer, that's how you get the best beer."

On occasion, this close relationship results in one-of-a-kind opportunities. Last summer Springthorpe was approached by the brewer at Storm Brewery in Vancouver, who offered Alibi Room the opportunity to serve an aged cherry lambic that had been made 12 years earlier and then forgotten until it was of a rare, rapturous maturity. "It was like the Loch Ness monster—nobody believed it existed," Springthorpe says. "I don't want to sound corny, but it was an honor for us to carry that. That's something he made when he first started out, and he's letting us carry it. He knew there'd be care taken with that product."

bourbon, oloroso sherry and apricot liqueur, and the Kingston Crown, with allspice-infused rum, mango juice and ginger beer.

On a busy pedestrian street a half-block from Gastown's landmark steam clock, Pourhouse, which opened in late September, is the area's newest cocktail destination. Remaining true to the neighborhood's historic character, Pourhouse evokes the era around the turn of the last century. The bar area is designed saloon style, with a bronze mirror wrapped with mahogany above the bar and a vintage boiler (adapted to dispense draught beer) centered on the back bar, with ice stations on either side. The bar is made from reclaimed Douglas fir first utilized in the 1920s, with a rustic appearance that matches the space's fir beams and cedar ceiling.

While the emphasis is on creative cocktails, the menu is tiny—three classic cocktails, plus another three original drinks—and the bar has been designed so that most bottles are out of sight. The goal, says co-owner Jay Jones, is to free customers from feeling constrained by menu options or the look of a stylish bottle, and to instead let the bartender custom-make a drink just for them. "Our guests' experience will always include a little bit of us; we don't want them to be influenced by the look of a bottle," Jones says. "We'll have an arsenal of drinks we hang our hat on that exemplifies our style, but the mood and style of the guest should determine the drink that's best for them."

Cocktail Kitchens

Vancouver has long had one of the most vibrant culinary scenes in North America. So it's no surprise that some of the city's best bars are located in excellent restaurants.

In an expansive, indulgent space in the South Granville neighborhood south of downtown, West is a world-class dining destination with a bar that's as impressive as its menu. Backed by an imposing wall of wine accessed by library steps, the bar is helmed by David Wolowidnyk, who oversees a drink program that manages to overcome the challenges posed by the province's liquor regulations by working closely with the restaurant's chefs.

"Since we can't get the diversity of alcohol products [that many bars in the U.S. can], a lot of us have embraced the kitchen," Wolowidnyk says. "We've done our best with taking flavor profiles that might not otherwise be associated with the bar, and running with that. We try to add a level of complexity, because perhaps we are at a loss of complexity when it comes to the availability of liquor."

West's four-page cocktail menu includes classics, such as the Delmonico and the Straights Sling, along with originals, such as Clearly the Heir—a stripped-down interpretation of a Bloody Mary with the British Columbia-made Victoria Gin, tomato water and celery bitters—

and the Passage to India, made with mango liqueur, jalapeño and curry on a base of Havana Club rum. While the flavor combinations may look surprising on paper, in the glass they work in a remarkably elegant way.

In downtown Vancouver, the bartenders at MARKET by Jean-Georges—which opened early last year in the Shangri-La Hotel—also incorporate kitchen ingredients with great success. The house cocktail menu is the same as that at other restaurants operated by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, but bar manager Justin Tisdall encourages guests to let the bartender create something best suited to their tastes. "It's always a good idea to ask the bartender for something special," he says.

Market-fresh drinks and cocktails made with house ingredients can sometimes be exceedingly complex, resulting in flavors that seem murky or chaotic. Tisdall, however, uses a light hand to keep the flavors crisp and nuanced in drinks such as the Agua Turbias, which balances a mix of tequila, vermouth and Amaro Montenegro with a honey syrup flavored with cinnamon and allspice; or in a late-summer drink that matches bourbon with fresh watermelon, black pepper and lemon juice.

Further south, on a stretch of Granville Street with more than its fair share of boisterous bars and cacophonous clubs, bartenders at The Refinery also raid the restaurant's impressive kitchen. While the food menu features cured meats, pâtés and seafood, the bar offers drinks such as L'Épice Verte, made with Victoria Gin, Lillet, cucumber water and fresh chili. The bartenders also give vavoom to a base of Whistler Wheat Beer with doses of lemon juice, blackstrap molasses and a spicy house ginger beer; the result is a fire-and-brimstone effect that gives renewed vibrancy to the tired shandy.

According to general manager Lauren Mote, The Refinery is somewhat incongruous with its immediate neighborhood, but as more guests try the restaurant's innovative drinks, they're carving out a space for themselves. "Trying to create a food space on Granville is difficult, and creating a cocktail culture on Granville that doesn't include flavored vodkas and shooters is a challenge," Mote says. "Things like bitters and egg whites are weird here, but you can see the clientele coming around."

Classic Traditions

Vancouver's craft cocktail bars offer a curious mix of contemporary market-fresh drinks and by-the-book classics—sometimes in the same establishment. In the trendy Yaletown neighborhood, George Lounge has a techno-thumping ambience during the peak hours late at night, but at a slow point in the early evening, this dimly lit bar with twisting glass sculptures overhead offers an unparalleled cocktail experience.



Pear-agon

David Wolowidnyk uses the natural richness of pears to form a foundation for this crisp gin-driven drink.

1 oz. gin
1 oz. pear liqueur (Wolowidnyk uses Giffard; Rothman & Winter or Marie Brizard also work well)
½ a ripe pear
½ oz. fresh lime juice
½ oz. simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water)
2 sprigs fresh tarragon
Ice cubes
Tools: muddler, shaker, strainer, fine-mesh strainer
Glass: coupe
Garnish: tarragon leaf

In a cocktail shaker, muddle the fresh pear to a purée. Add remaining ingredients and fill with ice. Shake well for 10 seconds and double-strain through a fine-mesh strainer to remove small particles. Garnish.

David Wolowidnyk, West



Prospector Cocktail

This rich and fragrant cocktail matches the deep character of Cognac with the engaging complexity of Chartreuse, accenting the combination with orange and chocolate. Pourhouse co-owner Jay Jones named this drink for Gastown's pioneering saloonkeeper Gassy Jack Deighton, who counted prospecting among his earlier careers.

1 ½ oz. Cognac
½ oz. green Chartreuse
½ oz. Cointreau
½ oz. white crème de cacao
Ice cubes

Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer

Glass: double rocks

Garnish: lemon twist

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled double rocks glass. Add several large cubes of ice and garnish.

Jay Jones, Pourhouse

Bar manager Shaun Layton keeps a large kitchen island behind the bar stocked with fresh herbs, fruits and house infusions, drawing from them to create drinks on an ambitious menu that includes classics, such as the Aviation, Martinez and Last Word, to originals, such as the rich and bitter Northern Lights and the Orchard Sour, made with bourbon, Giffard apricot liqueur and apricot puree.

In the Kitsilano neighborhood, bar manager Danielle Tatarin recently revamped the cocktail menu at DB Bistro, adding drinks such as Sleepy Horses—with bourbon, tamarind and poppy-seed tincture—and Sweet Intentions—with Canadian whisky, sweet vermouth and vanilla-infused green Chartreuse—to a classics-rich menu that includes the Hemingway Daiquiri and the Vieux Carre.

Those seeking to hew closer to classic-cocktail orthodoxy have several choices. In the South Main neighborhood, the Cascade Room can be slightly disarming at first, with a dark dive-bar vibe offset by an ambitious kitchen menu posted on a chalkboard over the bar, and a décor dominated by bits of British arcana, such as wartime “Keep Calm” posters and the visage of Queen Victoria glowering from the lampshades. Bar manager Nick Devine, who came to Vancouver after working at some of London’s top bars, created a five-page cocktail menu in the guise of a CD cover, with drinks ranging from standards such as a Sazerac and Ramos Gin Fizz to more obscure classics, such as the gin-based Journalist.

Uva, in downtown Vancouver, is perhaps better known to locals as a wine bar with an emphasis on Italian and Canadian wines, but its cocktail program—designed by bar manager Brad Stanton—is modest yet impressive. In a spare, elegant space with modernist light fixtures offset by a 100-year-old terrazzo floor, Stanton prepares modern classics, such as the Red Hook and the Gin Gin Mule, along with vintage, aperitif-style drinks, such as the Astoria and the Campari-laced Lucien Gaudin.

In the heart of downtown, another of the city’s newest additions places its flag firmly in the classic-cocktail camp. Co-owned by New York transplant and former Boneta bartender Steve Da Cruz, the Corner Suite Bistro De Luxe occupies a space just a block off busy Robson Street that is dominated by a long zinc-topped bar wrapped in black leather at its base.

“I love mixology and the invention of new drinks, but having that go-to list of standard bearers is essential,” Da Cruz says of “The Genuine Article,” Corner Suite’s awesome 21-page drink menu. Including familiar drinks such as the White Lady and the Metropole, the menu also veers deeply into the back catalog of mixology with forgotten classics such as the whiskey-fired Police Gazette and the red-wine topped New York Sour.

When compared to pioneering cocktail destinations, such as New York or San Francisco, Vancouver has taken its time to embrace the cocktail renaissance. But if the recent changes in Vancouver are any indication of momentum, this northern neighbor is about to claim its place at the global bar. Maybe Gassy Jack sparked the development of an empire, after all. ■

Where to Go

ALIBI ROOM

157 Alexander St. (Gastown) | 604-623-3383
alibi.ca

BONETA

1 West Cordova (Gastown) | 604-684-1844
boneta.ca

THE CASCADE ROOM

2616 Main St. (South Main) | 604-709-8650
thecascade.ca

CHAMBAR

562 Beatty St. (Between Downtown and Gastown)
604-879-7119 | chamber.com

CORNER SUITE BISTRO DE LUXE

850 Thurlow (Downtown) | 604-569-3415
thecornersuite.com

DB BISTRO MODERNE

2551 West Broadway (Kitsilano) | 604-739-7115
dbbistro.ca

THE DIAMOND

6 Powell St. (Gastown) | (604) 408-2891
di6mond.com

GEORGE LOUNGE

1137 Hamilton St. (Yaletown) | 604-628-5555
georgelounge.com

MARKET BY JEAN GEORGES

1115 Alberni (Downtown) | 604-695-1115
shangri-la.com

POURHOUSE

162 Water St. (Gastown) | 604-568-7022
pourhousevancouver.com

THE REFINERY

1115 Granville St. (Downtown) | 604-687-8001
therefineryvancouver.com

UVA

900 Seymour St. (Downtown / Yaletown)
604-632-9560 | uvawinebar.ca

WEST

2881 Granville St. (Granville) | 604-738-8938
westrestaurant.com