





RUM RUNNING

Sipping rum — responsibly — from one end of Puerto Rico to the other gave me a primer on what gives Puerto Rico its spirit.

BY JOSEPH GUINTO
ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL COX

LA FACTORÍA IN OLD SAN JUAN HAS THE LOOK OF A typical Caribbean groggery: black-and-white tile floors; cinematically low lighting; a battered, dark wood bar; hazy, antique mirrors; decaying walls. But on this steamy Saturday this old-school place feels au courant, at least as far as cocktails are concerned.

A team of bartenders is shaking and stirring and serving up cucumber smashes and rum Old Fashioneds and Algonquin cocktails and other decoctions of strong waters.

The name of the bar's previous incarnation is stenciled on a nearby wall: Hijos de Borinquen. A bearded, 20-something bartender slides one of those rum Old Fashioneds in front of me, and I ask him to explain the bar's former name. "Borinquen was the Taíno Indian name for Puerto Rico," he says. "So in English, the name means 'the Sons of Borinquen.' In Puerto Rico, we are Boricuas. That's why we kept the sign."

It's the only sign here. Like a lot of craft-cocktail joints

across the U.S., this 3-year-old bar is unmarked. I couldn't even find it on my phone's GPS. But Boricuas have had no such problem. They've been packing the place since it opened in 2012, and it remains the hottest bar in all of Puerto Rico.

I've wedged my way into a corner seat at La Factoría tonight because I want to see what kind of cocktails a well-regarded Puerto Rican bar can craft using Puerto Rican rum. Puerto Rico bills itself as the Rum Capital of the World, and right now the world is in the midst of a rum renaissance. Rum-themed bars have popped up everywhere from New Orleans' French Quarter to Paris. Global rum sales are surging. Puerto Rico is riding that wave, even though rum aficionados and cocktail geeks sometimes dismiss the rums made here. In his book, *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails*, author Wayne Curtis puts it this way: "It's no great

surprise that the piña colada was invented in Puerto Rico, where so much rum was meant to be hidden rather than heralded.”

The operative words there are *so much*. He does not say “all.” Curtis praises one rum, Ron del Barrilito, that’s been made here since 1880 by a family that traces its roots back 250 years to a Spanish naval officer. And now, here in the rum capital, new rum traditions and brands are also being created. New distillers on both sides of the main island have just uncorked their first barrels, and a family-owned firm that’s been selling rum for 150 years is trying to redefine the mild mixer Puerto Rico is most known for.

Or so I’ve heard. I call Federico Hernández, who created and heads up Puerto Rico’s annual Taste of Rum Festival, to ask his advice on how I might get to know more about the cultural and historical significance of rum in Puerto Rico and the outsized, crucial role it plays in the local economy — Puerto Rico gets approximately \$400 million a year, or five percent of its annual budget, from U.S. taxes on rum. “Rum is our spirit,” Hernández tells me, intending “spirit” to have a dual meaning. “And there is so much happening right now with rum in Puerto Rico. But the only way to understand it is to go meet the people who make it.”

Taking his advice, I’ve mapped out a rum trail that will take me from the Atlantic to the Caribbean coasts and straight across the Cordillera Central mountain range in the middle of the island. I’m expecting to sample — responsibly, of course — everything from molasses-based moonshine to rum right out of the barrel to rum that’s older than I am. I might also drink a piña colada. But first, I’m going to see if Carlos can make something spectacular. Something with Puerto Rican rum. “My friend,” he says. “I have the perfect cocktail for you.”

My journey begins.



FROM TOP: The pool bar at the Caribe Hilton in San Juan was the birthplace of the piña colada. Destilería Serrallés, in Ponce, has been making rums like these for 150 years.



THE NEXT MORNING, I MAKE a two-hour drive up through a treacherous, winding road in the middle of the island. There I meet with Jose Cruz, whose Destilería Cruz just opened in 2012 and makes a legal version of Puerto Rico’s rum-based moonshine called Pitorro that is loved by locals. Cruz tells me locals love rum in general. “When I started, I asked the government for statistics, and I found that there are 1 million rum drinkers here,” says the 64-year-old Cruz. That’s out of a population of 3.7 million people.

That data backs up the anecdotal evidence I see later that day: In San Juan’s locals-heavy Santurce neighborhood, there are rum drinks everywhere. In an area of town named La Placita, a daytime food market morphs into an evening party scene. Bar and restaurant patios are jammed full on the weekend, and people are sometimes literally dancing in the streets.

Mostly, their fun is being fueled by very simple rum concoctions. There are

a lot of mojitos being poured from pre-made pitchers. And plenty of glasses of Cuba Libre — rum and Coke with a hefty squeeze of lime.

I stop in La Placita at Jose Enrique, a restaurant named for its chef/owner that’s wildly popular with locals and in-the-know tourists. Like La Factoría, there’s no sign out front of the eatery, which was built into a home on a residential street. When I arrive in early evening, there is a 90-minute wait for a table. The bar is open, so I nosh on Enrique’s modern takes on traditional Puerto Rican foods, like crab stuffed in fried pastry shells and a suckling pig confit that’s cooked in several ways, including the of-the-moment method of *sous vide*.

There, I see two gentlemen at the bar finish their meal with top-shelf rum: DonQ Gran Añejo, a long-aged, dark rum made by Destilería Serrallés, a family-owned distillery that has been making and selling rum in Puerto Rico since 1865. DonQ is sold as a white rum, gold rum, flavored rum, an añejo and that

top-shelf Gran Añejo. The brand is the most popular rum brand in Puerto Rico, easily outselling Bacardi here. As one distiller here tells me, "A lot of people think that in Puerto Rico, the rum we drink is Bacardi. It's never been Bacardi. It's always been DonQ."

These days, it's even more than DonQ. In 2012, Serrallés introduced a super-premium rum that it hopes can change perceptions about Puerto Rican rum. Called Caliche, it's a long-aged rum that's filtered to remove color and is more refined and richer in taste. Caliche was made in conjunction with Rande Gerber, the Miami-New York nightlife industry entrepreneur behind the Whiskey bars and the husband of supermodel Cindy Crawford. "Rum is really hard to make," says Roberto Serrallés, a sixth-generation master distiller, when I speak to him later from his office in Ponce, an hour's drive from San Juan through spectacularly lush hills. "We do everything that bourbon and scotch folks do. We distill, ferment, age, blend. But unfortunately, rum doesn't get the respect as a category that vodka does and whiskey does."

The guys at the bar at Jose Enrique are certainly giving rum some respect. They're drinking it neat and paying a premium. After the DonQ Gran Añejo, they move on to Trigo Reserva Añeja, a rum made in Toa Baja on the northern coast, 45 minutes west of San Juan. Trigo comes in a bulbous bottle once traditional to Caribbean rum but now, like Trigo itself, rare. You will not find this rum in your local liquor store, unless you're local to Puerto Rico.

That's why I follow their lead on the Trigo. It turns out to be smooth and mellow and warm and slightly sweet and smells like the wood it was aged in. This is sipping rum — not the stuff you put in a frozen daiquiri.

Trigo's makers don't distill rum. They buy it from Bacardi or from another distiller in the Caribbean. To be legally labeled Puerto Rican rum, rum need not be distilled in Puerto Rico. It just needs to be "substantially changed"

here, including at least one year of barrel aging. (That's not uncommon, even in the U.S. Check the back of that fancy new bottle of rye you just bought and chances are good it was actually distilled by a company in Indiana and not wherever you thought it came from.)

In the case of one new Puerto Rican rum, proximity to a still is good enough. Rum Caray just opened in 2013 in Juncos, a town in the valley below El Yunque. Or rather, reopened. Caray was made from 1915 to 1942 by Don Lope Hormazábal, but it went out of business when the U.S. government started buying up Puerto Rican molasses. In 2009, Hormazábal's grandson, Luis Alberto Mantero Hormazábal, decided to bring the brand back, although he chose not to rebuild what remained of the old still. Rum Caray makes spiced rum in a variety of flavors, including coffee.

You know who else makes spiced rum? Captain Morgan, the well-marketed brand from London-based Diageo. Until 2012, when it set sail for the U.S. Virgin Islands, Captain Morgan was made here in Puerto Rico. As I'll find out when I head back up into the mountains, it's no coincidence that Puerto Rico's mini boom in rum production has happened in the wake of Captain Morgan's departure.

THE NEXT MORNING, WHILE driving in an undersized, underpowered rental car, I'm slowly climbing a mountain road in east-central Puerto Rico. Just uphill from the Certenejas neighborhood, I arrive at my destination: Club Caribe, one of the newest distilleries in Puerto Rico.

In Cidra, Club Caribe operates in what was a GlaxoSmithKline plant that once employed a few thousand people — nearly 5 percent of the local population. Pharmaceutical and other manufacturing has been the backbone of the Puerto Rican economy ever since the Caribbean's sugarcane industry collapsed after World War II. But many pharmaceutical companies and other



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manufacturers have shut down or scaled back during a severe recession that's now entering its ninth year. Unemployment in Puerto Rico is now double the average for the U.S. as a whole.

Rum is bringing a small handful of jobs back. Destilería Cruz employs 10 people in hard-hit Jayuya and hopes to add more employees soon. At Club Caribe, several hundred people are again at work on the former pharma site, either employed by a large canning operation or at the distillery, both of which are owned by a conglomerate called CC1 that has operations in South Florida, Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean.

Inside Club Caribe, I've just completed a tour of the lab and its high-tech control center that monitors the multi-column distillation process. Club Caribe's first distillation is actually done in Central Florida, where CC1, the company that owns Club Caribe, runs one of the biggest U.S. distilleries you've never heard of. Once the high-proof base rum is shipped from Florida, it is "substantially changed" here by redistillation and barrel aging. Felix Mateo, Club Caribe's master distiller, gives me a sample of the rum in the process of aging — right out of the barrel. It's highly astringent and tastes like wet bark.

When I sit at the poured-concrete bar that anchors a large outdoor event space in the center of the distillery, I'm a little nervous about what I'm about to be served. That turns out to be a modern take on the piña colada, the national drink of Puerto Rico. Club Caribe's brand ambassador/bartender, Jonathan J. Thomas, sporting the official uniform of craft cocktail bartenders everywhere — a too-tiny fedora and suspenders — tells me that, "Most piña coladas are too sweet, too heavy. You can have one and then you don't want more. This, you can drink all day."

I'll have to take his word for the all-day thing. I've driven here, so I can only allow myself a few sips. But he is right that this piña colada is light, balanced and easy to drink. Thomas' trick is swapping coconut water for the heavier

coconut cream that's more typical in a piña colada. He's also included Club Caribe's coconut-and-pineapple-flavored rums to amp up the flavor. But the boozy backbone of the drink comes from the distillery's Puerto Rican rum, first released in October 2014, after spending a full year aging in one of the barrels I just sampled. Outside of the barrel, I find it much easier to drink.

By law, to be designated Puerto Rican rum, a spirit has to be distilled from molasses and has to be aged in oak barrels for at least a year. For white rum, the product is then filtered through charcoal to remove the colors that develop from contact with the barrel. "The barrel smoothes out the flavor," Mateo says. "That barrel you tasted from has a long way to go before it's ready." Mateo would know. He spent more than three decades working at Bacardi, the multibillion-dollar, Bermuda-based industry behemoth that operates the largest distillery in Puerto Rico and makes the best-selling rum in the world. Bacardi first perfected the style of light rum that is now most associated with anything designated Puerto Rican rum — highly distilled white rum whose flavor profile is clean-tasting, with a bit of sweetness and just a hint of woody flavor.

The original tiki craze in the 1950s first spiked demand for that style (and made Bacardi into a giant — some 250,000 people visit its distillery here each year) as bartenders clamored for light rum that was easy to mix into cocktails like the mai tai, the zombie, the blue Hawaiian and the piña colada. The last of those was invented in 1954 by a bartender at the Caribe Hilton in the then rapidly developing Condado neighborhood, wedged between the Atlantic Ocean and the Condado Lagoon.

As it happens, I'm spending part of my time in Puerto Rico at the Caribe Hilton. So after returning from my too-brief tasting of Club Caribe's modern



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piña colada, I try the more historic version. (For the record, Barrachina restaurant in Old San Juan also claims to have invented the piña colada. They date the invention to 1963.)

There, at the newly renovated, semicircular beach bar, a fedora-free, suspenderless bartender named Jose combines pineapple juice, cream of coconut and heavy cream in a blender. Then Jose turns a bottle of Bacardi Superior rum upside down over the blender. He pours the contents for so long that I fear he thinks I'm buying piña coladas for everyone on the beach. I'm not, but the resulting blend is so voluminous it must be poured into two

different plastic cups. This is all for me. Thankfully, it's nearly sunset, and I've already parked the rental car.

Since it'll be a while before I can finish my drink and three-quarters, I sit at the bar and take in the ocean breezes while I do some eraser chewing on this Captain Morgan situation.

The rum industry in Puerto Rico returns millions of dollars to the islands every year thanks to a special U.S. tax law. The U.S. government levies a federal excise tax on every drop of spirits sold in the U.S. and returns almost every dollar of those taxes (with the exception of taxes on U.S.-made rum), no matter whether the rum was made in Jamaica or Puerto Rico.

The two territories split the money unevenly. Whichever one sells more rum in the U.S. gets more of the money. In 2009, when Captain Morgan announced it was leaving, Puerto Rico got 83 percent of the cover-over money, or \$450 million. The Virgin Islands got \$100 million. Last year, with Captain Morgan gone, Puerto Rico got 65 percent of the cover-over money — \$400 million. The Virgin Islands got almost \$200 million.

So suppose these new distilleries make even a small dent in the U.S. market. That would bring millions of dollars here. Club Caribe, for instance, says it will produce 10 million gallons of rum per year at some point. If it sold even half that rum in the U.S., that could produce \$66 million in revenue that would end up in Puerto Rico's general fund, the majority of which goes to fund schools, roads, the conservation land trust and other public services, while a smaller portion goes to promote rum makers in Puerto Rico.

Somehow that makes this Big Gulp-sized piña colada I'm drinking seem a whole lot more important.

IT'S AFTER 1 A.M. IN THE NUYORICAN Cafe, an Old San Juan institution where salsa and plena and bomba bands play ear-piercingly loud music and people dance deep into the night and early into the morning. I've just

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arrived and I've asked for a glass of Ron del Barrilito, a rum made in Bayamón, about 20 minutes south of San Juan.

Like Fernet-Branca is the standard shot of choice by U.S. bartenders when off-duty, Ron del Barrilito — a dark, aged rum that can be sipped by itself — is the industry pour of choice in San Juan.

Alas, they don't have Barrilito. Or they're out of it. I have no idea because I can't hear anything the bartender is saying. So I order a whisky and coco — blended Scotch and coconut water, a favorite among puertorriqueños when they aren't drinking rum. The coconut water makes the drink taste something like chocolate. If nothing else, it's interesting. But I'd still have preferred the Barrilito, which I have developed a taste for during my stay.

I'm not alone. "I love Barrilito," Carlos, the La Factoría bartender tells me. "Actually, I think I might be obsessed with Barrilito."

Hacienda Santa Ana, where the rum is made, is the kind of place that could inspire obsession. The hacienda itself was built in the late 1700s on a plot of land given to Fernando Fernández by the Spanish government as a reward for his service in the navy. For almost 100 years, the Fernández family made its living off agriculture, raising cattle and a sugarcane plantation surrounding the hacienda. The Serrallés family also raised sugarcane, acquiring some 10,000 acres in and around Ponce at one point.

Both families added rum operations to their business ventures before the turn of the 1900s. That proved prescient: By the 1950s, just as the Cuban Revolution that would send Bacardi packing for Puerto Rico and beyond was getting underway, the Caribbean sugarcane industry began to decline. By the late 1970s, most of the sugarcane fields in Puerto Rico were plowed under. And today, all the rum made in Puerto Rico is made with imported molasses.

That's about to change. The Puerto Rican government has just embarked

on an initiative to plant nearly 20,000 acres of sugarcane fields on the main island over the next decade. Only 900 acres have been planted so far, but the hope is that once other fields are identified and operational, they'll supply 80 percent of the molasses used by distillers here.

They won't likely be planting any sugarcane near where Barrilito is made. The Fernández family long ago sold off most of its land, and today, Bayamón is an industrial town, not an agricultural one. Even though the ancestral home

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and a massive, red-brick windmill built in 1827 are still standing at Hacienda Santa Ana, the Fernández family is now surrounded by a Goya plant, a highway, a police station and a prison.

"I'm glad you found us," says Monica Fernández (the great-granddaughter of Pedro Fernández, who first started selling Barrilito in 1880) when I arrive at Hacienda Santa Ana. "Most people get lost."

The Fernández family company does not have a website, does not give formal tours and does no advertising for its product. "Still," Monica says, "every week somebody shows up here. I tell people that this company exists because the product is good. If it wasn't, it would have disappeared years ago."

I'd like to know what makes Barrilito good enough for bartenders to

obsess over, but Manuel Fernández, the president of the corporation and the grandson of Pedro Fernández, won't tell me or anyone else. As he leads me into the barrelhouse, where the air is intensely perfumed with the sweet aroma of rum, the friendly, soft-spoken, mustachioed gentleman gives up very little. He does say that his grandfather invented the formula for Ron del Barrilito. That formula is blended into a white rum that's made to the Fernández family's specifications by Bacardi. (The Fernández family's distillery was closed during Prohibition, after which the family was unable to rebuild it.) After the formula is prepared, the rum is transferred for aging into 132-gallon used oak wine barrels. Barrilito is also aged longer than most other rums here. There's a two-star version that is aged three years and a three-star version that is a blend of rums aged from six to 10 years. The aging and whatever is in the formula creates a rum that many people compare to fine cognacs — definitely something meant to be heralded and not hidden.

It's estimated that the Fernández family produces only 10,000 bottles a year. That makes it hard to find in the U.S. And that's why I conclude my trip — back again at La Factoría — with a glass of Barrilito on the rocks, served with a twist of lemon peel. That's the way Manuel Fernández drinks it.

To me, this is Puerto Rico in a glass, a rum connected directly to the island's history before it became a U.S. territory and one that's a small but important part of the island's financial present. Yes, this rum, like so many I've had here, is Puerto Rico's spirit — in two senses of the word. And the best thing about it: Unlike the beaches and the mountains and the tropical breezes and the people dancing in the streets that you can only experience here, this spirit of Puerto Rico can be bottled up and sent home with me. ■

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