The Spirit of the Caribbean
a brief history

Rum, spirits made from sugar cane, sugar cane syrup or molasses, is more tightly woven into the fabric of America than any other spirit. In the second half of the 18th century more than 40 colonial New England distilleries were busy making rum from Caribbean molasses. Then the British Parliament passed the Molasses Act of 1774, raising the duty on the blood flowing in the veins of the fledgling colonial economy. The Act also prohibited importing the sticky, black raw material from anywhere other than British islands. French Caribbean planters suddenly lost a market for their molasses and enthusiastically allied with the New England colonies in the Revolutionary War, and cannons echoed all the way to the smoky halls of the British Parliament. When George Washington planned his inauguration party, he ordered a hogshead of the finest, aged Barbados rum for the festivities.

Sugar cane, originally from Papau New Guinea was taken to Asia where it was cultivated and carried to Africa, India and then Spain. European explorers came to the West Indies lured by legends of El Dorado, a city paved with gold. Ironically, the tall sweet grass that Columbus brought to the Caribbean in 1493, and the sugar and rum made from that sugar cane, was ultimately worth more than all the lustrous metal taken from the Caribbean basin.

In the early days, mature sugar cane stalks were cut by hand in the fields and carried in ox-drawn carts to wind- or animal-powered mills where they were crushed and the juice boiled in a series of progressively smaller copper pots. Today the conical stone foundations of wind mills and boiling houses can be seen on almost every island in the Caribbean.

After boiling a few hours, the thickened, dark syrup was put in clay pots to cool. Molasses, the heavy black liquid that didn’t crystallize, was separated from the crystallized sugar by opening a hole in the bottom of the pot. After a week or so the sugar pots were broken and the coarse dark sugar called ‘muscovado,’ was collected.

In the 17th century, thousands of sugar works dotted the island landscapes and nearly every plantation employed a copper pot still to make alcohol from the fermented skimmings and molasses. The molasses wine was heated and the alcohol-rich vapor condensed to make what Robert Lignon in 1651, described as ‘. . . a hot, vile liquor. . . called kill devil.’ Sales of the potent liquor to the Navy not only brought extra coins to the planter’s ledger, but more importantly, it attracted a naval presence that deterred pirates lurking in the area. When the British Parliament finally made rum an official part of the sailor’s daily ration in 1687, generations of sailors and planters had already consummated the improbable marriage between the planters and the Royal Navy. By 1775, a ton of sugar from Nevis was worth more than 20,000 of today’s dollars. Sugar was king!

Over the next two hundred years the sugar making process was mechanized with the introduction of the centrifuge and better filters. As sugar production techniques improved the amount of fermentable sugar in molasses declined while concentrations of minerals like sulfur and iron were increased in the black liquid. Today, most rum is made from fermented imported molasses but distillers still like to talk about the quality of the cane.

Most molasses-based rum is distilled to about 95% alcohol by volume, neutral spirits. After aging a year or so, some of this neutral spirit is carbon-filtered and bottled as white rum. Other rum is aged, though some rums born as neutral spirits are flavored with raisins, oranges, coffee, chocolate and other additives before being bottled as aged rum.
In contrast to the neutral spirits made at rum refineries, French Caribbean rhum agricole is made from freshly squeezed sugar cane juice, before any sugar has been extracted. To preserve as much fresh juice flavor as possible, rhum agricole is distilled to only about 70% alcohol by volume in single-column copper stills. And since rhum agricole can be made only when the tall cane stalks are at the peak of maturity, production is limited to the short tropical dry season, the first weeks of the year.

Rhum agricole is bottled as several different products depending on how long it was aged. Straight from the still, most rhum agricole is allowed to rest a few months in large vats before being bottled at 50% abv. Unaged, flavorful clear rhum agricole is known as Rhum Blanc. These unaged rhums are the key ingredient in the traditional creole cocktail – ti’ punch, – short for petit punch. Stir a little raw sugar, a small squeeze of lime and a measure of rhum agricole. Add ice and stir again for a taste of the tropical French Caribbean.

After aging up to 2 years in oak vats or casks, rhum agricole acquires a golden color and is called Rhum Paille, Ambre, Dore or Élevé Sous Bois. These straw-colored rhums are also bottled at 50% abv and are used to make ti punches and rhum agricole cocktails. The best of these rhums can be enjoyed over ice.

Once the flavorful rhum agricole is aged in used oak barrels three years or more, rhum agricole takes on a rich, smoky vanilla flavor and earns the name Rhum Vieux – old rhum. Not only is rhum agricole distilled to a lower proof, it is also aged at a lower proof, 60% as compared to 80% for most molasses-based rums. And since they’re aged closer to the bottled strength, typically 40-45% abv., there’s less dilution of proof, flavor and color before bottling. The best of these aged rhums rival the finest cognacs and armagnacs in aroma, character and finesse and are best enjoyed with a little water or an ice cube. Rhum Vieux can also be used to make a punch vieux, but with slightly less sugar and lime.

In addition to the country of origin, required on rum labels, see if the importer tells you where the spirit was aged and bottled? In attempt to cut distribution cost, many distillers ship their products in bulk containers to be bottled closer to the intended consumers. Only when spirits are bottled where they’re distilled or aged can you be assured of the highest quality control. Since most spirits are diluted before they’re bottled, differences in the water used at various bottling locations are commonly discernable in premium spirits.

Only rhum agricole bearing the Appelation d’Origine has been produced to the highest standards in the French West Indies and bottled on the island stated on the label. Every aspect of rhum agricole production, from growing and harvesting the cane, fermenting the fresh juice, distilling, aging and bottling, is done at the family estates that make every bottle of rhum in the Caribbean Spirits portfolio.

Look for the words RHUM AGRICOLE, APPELATION D’ORIGINE, and imported by CARIBBEAN SPIRITS for the best rhum agricole from the French West Indies and raise your glass to a higher standard.