

# Redefining Rum

*From contemporary tiki drinks to sophisticated sippers, rum-based cocktails are going upscale*

BY SALLY KRAL

Rum is often tied to such 20<sup>th</sup>-century drinks as the Rum and Coke and Piña Colada, but rum's history in cocktails actually dates back even further—as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. “It’s rumored that in order to ensure sailors on trade ships received the right nutrients to avoid such common problems as scurvy, they drank a mixture of rum, citrus, tea, bitters, and sugar—the architecture for how we make modern punches today,” says Peter Ruppert, beverage director for the New York City café and bar Short Stories and brand ambassador for Philippines-made rum Don Papa. “Rum played a vital role in sneaking vitamins into their system by way of a Trojan horse in the form of the world’s first cocktails.”

But then, as Jason Dumas, bar director for Palm & Pine in New Orleans, notes, demand for rum began to wane. “As years passed and European sugar beet became a dominant crop to produce sugar, the Jamaican sugar industry began to fade and many of the island rum distilleries consolidated or closed,” he says. “Then an unlikely thing happened in post-Prohibition United States: Donn Beach, Victor ‘Trader Vic’ Bergeron, and other cocktail creators began using Jamaican rums in their ‘tiki’ cocktails, solidifying Jamaican rums’ placement in bars across North America.”

And the rest is history, as they say. “Today, we find that many mixologists are incorporating those same funky rums in the development of their own cocktails,” Dumas adds. “In the last few years, there’s been an undeniable surge in bring-



*An association with tiki drinks doesn't have to stifle creativity with rum. In Washington, D.C., Tiki TNT offers original tiki cocktails like the Thrasher's Wet Money (pictured) alongside reimagined tiki classics.*

ing Jamaican pot still rums and rum agricoles to the cocktail scene, and mixologists are redefining how and when we use these cane-based spirits.”

Thanks to increased demand for rum today, the market has never been more diverse. “Before I began tending bar, I only recognized Bacardi and Captain Morgan as major rum brands—now I see younger people calling out other brands and it’s so cool,” says Adam Aly, general manager at the Stampede Cocktail Club in Seattle. “Many different countries have been crafting excellent rum for ages and it’s finally time to let them shine.”

And with a wider range of rums at mixologists’ disposal, their rum-based cocktails have grown just as varied. “The landscape of commonly available rums in major markets has changed so much and that’s driven a lot of the change on the cocktail side,” says Kevin Beary, beverage director for the Chicago tiki bar Three Dots and a Dash and its high-end bar-within-a-bar The

Bamboo Room. “Now that more and more of these esoteric and interesting rums have become available, the implication on cocktails is immense.”

## Upgraded Favorites

Rum will likely always be associated with fruity and fun vacation-style drinks, which certainly isn’t a bad thing. “Escapism and rum are linked through tiki cocktails, so that’s what people are loving these days, especially considering how



*Featured on the bar's “Not So Classic Tiki Cocktails” menu, the Baby Bird at Tiki TNT showcases Thrashers Green Spiced rum with Aperol aperitif, simple syrup, and pineapple and lime juices.*



Jamaican rum offerings remain popular. Chicago's Three Dots and a Dash features Habitation Velier Worthy Park 2007 Jamaica Pure Single rum in the Revised Daiquiri (top), while Palm & Pine in New Orleans highlights Wray & Nephew White Overproof and Appleton Estate Jamaican rums in the Ojo del Tigre (above).

rough 2020 was," Aly says. "Tropical cocktails have a transportive element to them—people can imagine themselves in a better place or a better time when drinking a big, bold, juicy drink."

Palm & Pine's Dumas notes that he seeks inspiration from classic tiki cocktails of the '40s and '50s when working with rum. "I look at ingredients used back then and in turn strive to create something new," he says. "Ingredients like mint, cinnamon, vanilla, grapefruit, lime, or even fortified wines

are some of the classic pairings that I use as a stepping stone." His Ojo del Tigre (\$13) blends equal parts Wray & Nephew White Overproof rum, Appleton Estate 8-year-old Jamaica rum, and La Cigarrera Pedro Ximénez Sherry, plus Contratto Bitter liqueur, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, grapefruit and lime juices, house-made saline solution, and Bittermens 'Elemakule Tiki bitters. Bartender Will Lester's Bitter Pelican (\$10) is another tiki-inspired drink, featuring Plantation O.F.T.D. rum, Sfumato Rabarbaro amaro, pineapple and lime juices, house-made saline solution, El Guapo Polynesian Kiss bitters, and house-made "Herbstura," which is a mix of Herbsaint and Angostura bitters. The drink is then topped with HuHu Ginger Brew ginger beer and Atelier Vie Toulouse Rouge absinthe.

"The cocktail renaissance really made the tiki renaissance possible," says Beary of Three Dots and a Dash and The Bamboo Room. "The focus on crafting cocktails carefully with fresh ingredients and the proper proportions,

and really all the advancements that happened in the late '90s and early 2000s, paved the way for folks to start making really good rum and tiki drinks in bars." At both venues, Beary offers his Revised Daiquiri (\$15), featuring equal parts Habitation Velier Worthy Park 2007 Jamaica Pure Single rum, César Florido Manzanilla Sherry, and lime juice, plus Petite Canne Traditional Martinique sugar cane syrup, house-made falernum liqueur, and pineapple shaved ice.



The influx of quality rum brands in recent years has been a boon to bartenders, allowing them to focus on cocktails meant for sipping, such as in the Rum and Honey (left) from The Bamboo Room in Chicago and the Walk in the Park (right) from Short Stories in New York City.

When making rum-based cocktails, Todd Thrasher, owner of the rum distillery Potomac Distilling Company and its tiki bar Tiki TNT in Washington, D.C., says the most important thing is to relax and not get bogged down by guidelines or rules. "For example, at Tiki TNT we serve our own creative spins on traditional tiki drinks with our 'Not So Classic Tiki Cocktails'—just because you call it tiki that doesn't mean you have to put yourself in a box."

Indeed, while the menu does have some tiki classics like the Mai Tai and Zombie, it also features such originals as Thrasher's Wet Money (\$14), comprising equal parts Thrashers White rum and Espolón Blanco Tequila, plus Giffard Blue Curaçao, passion fruit and lemon juices, and salt water, and his Baby Bird (\$14), mixing Thrashers Green Spiced rum, Aperol aperitif, pineapple and lime juices, and simple syrup.

### Rum-based Cocktail Recipes

#### OJO DEL TIGRE By Jason Dumas

**Ingredients:**  
 ¾ ounce Wray & Nephew White Overproof rum;  
 ¾ ounce Appleton Estate 8-year-old Jamaica rum;  
 ¾ ounce La Cigarrera Pedro Ximénez Sherry;  
 ½ ounce Contratto Bitter liqueur;  
 1 barspoon Bénédictine herbal liqueur;  
 ½ ounce grapefruit juice;  
 ¼ ounce lime juice;  
 3 drops saline solution<sup>1</sup>;  
 3 drops Bittermens 'Elemakule Tiki bitters;  
 Mint sprig;  
 Lime wheel.

**Recipe:**  
 In a cocktail shaker, combine rums, Sherry, liqueurs, juices, saline solution, and bitters, then add ice. Shake vigorously and strain into a double rocks glass. Top with ice and garnish with a mint sprig and lime wheel.

#### RUM AND HONEY By Kevin Beary

**Ingredients:**  
 ¾ ounce Appleton Estate 21-year-old Jamaica rum;  
 ¾ ounce Chairman's Reserve The Forgotten Casks St. Lucia rum;  
 ½ ounce Neisson Reserve Speciale Rhum Agricole;  
 ¼ ounce honey syrup<sup>2</sup>.

**Recipe:**  
 In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine rums and syrup. Stir and strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube.

#### WALK IN THE PARK By Peter Ruppert

**Ingredients:**  
 1 ounce Don Papa Small Batch rum;  
 1 ounce Pallini Limoncello liqueur;  
 1 ounce Dolin Blanc vermouth;  
 Lemon peel.

**Recipe:**  
 In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine rum, liqueur, and vermouth. Stir for 30 seconds then pour into a rocks glass over a large piece of ice. Zest the drink with a lemon peel, then place the peel in the glass.

<sup>1</sup>Mix 1 part kosher salt with 4 parts warm water until salt dissolves. Pour into a dropper bottle. Refrigerate for 2 hours before using.  
<sup>2</sup>Mix together 3 parts honey to 1 part hot water, then let cool.

PHOTO BY (RIGHT) ARCHER LEWIS

Using such tiki signifiers as tropical fruit juices and floral components, mixologists are making their own contemporary twists on these types of drinks. At Forza Storico in Atlanta, bar manager Jose Pereiro's Queen's Park (\$13) blends equal parts Havana Club Añejo and Banks 5 Island rums, Chinola passion fruit liqueur, lime juice, simple syrup, mint leaves, and a Fernet-Branca float. And at Toca Madera in Los Angeles and Scottsdale, Arizona, the ¡No Mames! (\$16) mixes SelvaRey Cacao rum, Lejay crème de cassis liqueur, lemon juice, agave syrup, passion fruit purée, and muddled mint. The drink was created by Charity Johnston, director of operations for the venue's parent company, the Madera Group. "Because of the renewed interest in tiki, people have generally become more familiar with rum and are more open-minded when it comes to trying new rums," Thrasher adds. "Understanding that rum is not just for sugary drinks has opened it up to people who appreciate sipping spirits and other styles of cocktails."



## Beyond Tiki

There will always be a place for tropical rum concoctions on modern cocktail menus, but as consumers become more educated about the category, they're discovering all the different ways rum can be enjoyed. "God save the tiki, but people are beginning to see rum not only as a spirit found in tropical,

fruity, and often sweet cocktails," says Lane Compton, head bartender at The Roger Room in Los Angeles. "People are becoming more aware of the different brands, styles, and applications of rum." Her Kalimoxto Rum & Coke (\$15) is an elevated version of the standard, comprising Denizen Aged White rum, Uro Toro La Enfermera Tempranillo, Pure Cane Sugar Coca-Cola, and Fernet-Branca. Similarly a more complex take on a classic, her Below Daiq (\$15) blends Denizen Aged White, fresh lemon juice, house-made spiced simple syrup, Luxardo Maraschino liqueur, and Angostura bitters. "Rum is extremely versatile and that's why bartenders love using it," Compton

adds. "Guests respond positively to rum because of this as well. They often don't realize how delicious it is and how it can be used in so many different ways—being introduced to something new is a wonderful gift when sitting at a bar, no matter what level of patron you are."

Informative and passionate bartenders are certainly helping consumers gain new appreciation for rum beyond their go-to vacation sippers. "People aren't as afraid to try a stirred rum cocktail because they're beginning to learn that rum isn't the cloying spirit your grandma warned you about," Stampede Cocktail Club's Aly says. "Rum can accentuate the flavors in a bitter stirred cocktail just as well as those in any tiki build." He takes a more spirit-forward and bitter approach to the Rum and Coke with his Italia Libera (\$13), mixing equal parts Denizen Merchant's Reserve rum and CioCiaro amaro, as well as Topo Chico mineral water and Scrappy's Lime bitters. "A key part of my role as a bartender is to teach, so if someone has a narrow perception of a spirit or cocktail style, I love to challenge that," Aly adds. "I find that everyone loves rum—some people just don't know it yet."

Beary of Three Dots and a Dash and The Bamboo Room agrees that bartenders have played a major role in educating consumers about rum—but he notes that this never would have been possible without the recent influx of quality brands to the U.S. market. "Five or eight years ago it was tricky to go into a liquor store and find



While rum is on the rise in untraditional ways—such as the Rum Old Fashioned (left) from Palm & Pines in New Orleans—many bartenders are leaning into the elevated tiki trend, as Los Angeles and Scottsdale, Arizona restaurant Toca Madera does with the ¡No Mames! (right).



a high-quality bottle of rum, and that's very much changed," he says. "Until we had that common availability, I don't think the consumer was ever going to come around. The bar community is embracing these spirits—some are really funky and wild—and incorporating them in cocktails in ways that a guest is more likely to appreciate than if they were to just pull the bottle off the shelf and try it." At both Three Dots and a Dash and The Bamboo Room, Beary's Rum and Honey (\$18) highlights some of his favorite labels: It mixes equal parts Appleton Estate 21-year-old Jamaica rum and Chairman's Reserve The Forgotten Casks St. Lucia rum, plus Neisson Reserve Speciale Rhum Agricole and honey syrup.

"The great thing about rum is how different they all are and how much you can fiddle with blending different types," Palm & Pine's Dumas says. "There are 90 countries that produce rum and only three of those have codified production. The one element that ties them all together is that they're made from some sugar product, but that can range from sugar cane juice to jaggery to molasses. Many distillers use a combination." His Rum Old Fashioned (\$11) features Flor de Caña 7-year-old Gran Reserva rum, Duquesne Blanc Rhum Agricole, Casa DiAristi Kalani Coconut liqueur, The Bitter Truth Orange bitters, and El Guapo Cuban bitters. "When I think of rum, I think diversity and changeability—I don't think frozen Daiquiris and pirates," Dumas adds.

Also a rum-based Old Fashioned variant, the Rum Cocktail (\$16) at Scratch Bar & Kitchen in Los Angeles features Hamilton St. Lucia Pot Still rum, St. Elizabeth Allspice Dram,

Demerara syrup, and Angostura and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters. "An Old Fashioned, or a riff on an Old Fashioned, has always been one of the best ways to enjoy the complexity and depth of a spirit," says Gavin Humes, who created the drink and serves as the venue's food and beverage director. "Rum has too often been considered only for tiki drinks and fruity punches, but a great rum has as much complexity as some of the great whiskies in the world. The Hamilton St. Lucia Pot Still is a perfect example of one of those rums, and providing just enough support to allow it to shine in a cocktail yields amazing results."

The idea that rum is of the same caliber as whisk(e)y is still somewhat new for a lot of people, but it's certainly gaining traction. "For the most part, fine rum has moved from the top shelf and found its way into mainstream culture," says Ruppert of Short Stories. "It would seem that the days of flaming rum shots are long gone, making room for unique, select brands that are often enjoyed with just a few pieces of ice or beautifully crafted in a well-balanced cocktail." His Walk in the Park (\$16) is a simple rum sipper, blending equal parts Don Papa Small Batch rum, Pallini Limoncello liqueur, and Dolin Blanc vermouth. "From the early days of the sea trade up through the bootlegging routes of Prohibition to the modern cocktail movement, rum has been a key player throughout history," Ruppert adds. "I would never turn my nose up at a Rum and Cola, but in a short time we've come a long way in how we enjoy rum and I can't wait to see where it goes from here."



At the Roger Room in Los Angeles, head bartender Lane Compton is focused on elevating classic rum drinks now that consumers are branching out from overly sweet, tiki-style rum cocktails. Her Kalimoxto Rum & Coke (top) and Below Daiq (above) both feature Denizen Aged White rum to showcase the spirit's versatility.