

# History and Nature of Rum

A lecture on "Rum" was given by Mr. John A. Metcalf, chairman of the Rum Importers Association, at The Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, on Tuesday. In addition to students of the Licensed House Staff Training Course, the lecture was attended also by members of the wine and spirit trade and brewery companies.

Mr. Metcalf recalled that a definition of "rum" was submitted by Sir Algernon Aspinall on behalf of the West India Committee in 1909 to the Royal Commission on Whisky and Other Potable Spirits. This definition, which was accepted by the Commission, was: "Rum is a spirit distilled direct from sugar cane products in sugar cane growing countries." This definition is still in force in Britain today.

## Originated in B.W.I.

"Spirit is produced from sugar cane or its by-products in almost every country where sugar is grown and some where it is not. It is produced in the British West Indies, Cuba, the French West Indies, Haiti, the Argentine, Peru, Mauritius, Queensland, Australia, Natal, South Africa, Java and India, and in many of these cases it is entitled under the terms of the definition given, to be called "rum." I prefer, however, to define rum more precisely as the produce of the British West Indian Colonies, because there are strong reasons for believing that the name "rum" was first used to describe the sugar spirit produced in these colonies.

"Sugar cane first appears in history in China. It was brought to Europe and Arabia in the third century A.D. It was cultivated in Cyprus, Sicily, Spain and Madeira, and only reached the West Indies after the discovery of America by Columbus. It follows that the manufacture of cane spirit probably originated in the East, but in the past three hundred years under the name of "rum" the British West Indian product has attained supremacy in this field.

## "Kill-Devil"

"At first, of course, it was raw and uncouth. The earliest known references to the British West Indian spirit in literature and history show that it was known as "kill-devill." In early attempts at distilling, the product probably contained a very high number of esters and when drunk young, well merited this name of "kill-devill."

"These crude early productions were not drunk by the planters but by the slaves who worked the plantations. Their masters preferred brandy. Gradually, however, the technique of manufacturing improved and possibly someone had the idea of maturing the spirit, and the drink came into its own. The name "kill-devill" is first found in a book on Barbados written in 1647 by a certain Richard Ligon, Gent., which he called 'true and exact history of the Island of Barbados' and embellished with a map and many interesting drawings of early machinery.

"Four years after Ligon's visit to the Island, 'Brief Description of the Island of Barbados' describes the spirit as 'Rumbullion.' It says, 'The chief fuddling they make in the Island is rumbullion, alias 'kill-devill,' and this is made of sugar canes distilled; a hot, hellish and terrible liquor.' Chambers' dictionary says 'rumbullion' can mean 'a great tumult or strong liquor.' Possibly the name was given to 'kill-devill' because of the great tumults which occurred after it had been too liberally drunk. Another word which the dictionary gives as identical in meaning with 'rumbullion' is 'rumbustion,' and this figures in a despatch in a Dutch newspaper dated 23rd February, 1652. We can also find a reference to 'rumbullion' in an order made at the Bermuda Assizes on 27th November, 1660.

## Recognised in 1661

"Very soon 'rumbullion' or 'rumbustion' was shortened to 'rum.' An intermediate form 'rumbo' is to be found in Smollett's book 'Peregrine Pickle.' Other people have tried to establish that the name is derived from the last syllable of the Latin word for sugar 'saccharum' but I see no reason to suppose that the word did not originate in the British West Indies whether it be Barbados, Jamaica or Bermuda, from the Devonshire word 'rumbullion.'

"One of the earliest references to the shortened name 'rum' occurs in an order of the Governor and Council of Jamaica, dated 1661; and about this date rum became the recognised term for sugar cane spirit produced in the British West Indies. By the early eighteenth century rum was becoming well-known in England, particularly that which was produced in Barbados and Jamaica. In 1708 Oldmixon referred in his 'History of Barbados' to the famous spirit known as rum which, by some persons, is preferred to brandy. He goes on, 'It is said to be very wholesome and has, therefore, lately supplied the place of brandy in punch. Indeed, it is much better than malt spirits and the sad liquor sold by our distillers.'

"Rum is distilled from fermented molasses, or sometimes directly from fermented cane juice; molasses is the residue of sugar syrup remaining after the cane juice has been boiled and the sugar crystals extracted. Rum can, therefore, be called the spirit of sugar.

## Production

"The canes, which are a kind of grass, are brought to the factory and crushed in roller mills after the leaves have been stripped off them, and simply the centre stalks, which look rather like green bamboos, remain. When the canes are crushed the juice runs off into clarifying tanks while the residual fibrous substance of the cane is diverted elsewhere to be used as fuel later on, under the name of 'bagasse.' The water in the clarified juice is then evaporated and the remainder becomes syrup.

"The syrup is boiled at a low temperature in a vacuum pan until granulation sets in. When sufficient crystallisation has been achieved, the contents of the vacuum pan, now called 'Massequite' is transferred to the centrifugals. Those are large drums with per-



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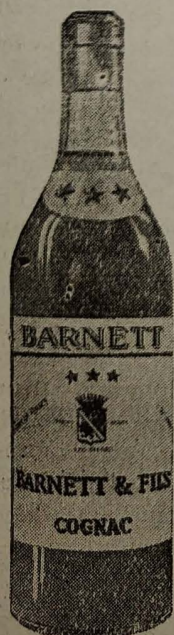
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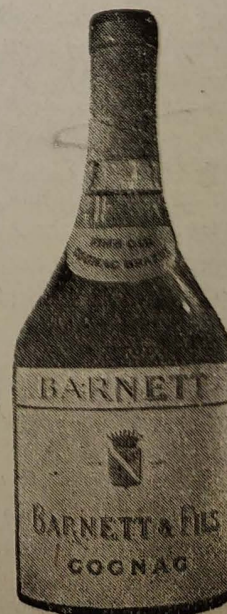


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forated or mesh sides which revolve about 1,500 times to the minute. The job of the centrifugals is to separate the molasses from the sugar. Usually the molasses is reboiled and a lower grade of sugar is produced. The molasses remaining after the second boiling is then transferred to the rum distillery from the sugar factory. It is mixed with water and fermenting agents. When this mixture or 'wash' is fermented out, it is distilled and rum produced.

#### Causes of Variation

"If complete distillation is carried out, pure ethyl-alcohol would be produced. It would make no difference whether the liquid distilled was wine or fermented molasses or anything else. The result would be identical, colourless odourless and flavourless. The rum distiller, however, does not wish to produce absolute alcohol any more than the maker of brandy or whisky. The variation between the produce of one distillery and another in the same colony, and even more between the produce of different colonies, is due to three main causes. Firstly, the strain of yeast used as fermenting agent, secondly the number of secondary products (esters, aldehydes, etc.), which pass over the still with the alcohol vapour, and thirdly, the type of caramel which is used to colour the rum.

"Enlarging upon these causes, we find that the fermentation in British Guiana, which lasts only for about forty-eight hours, is almost entirely due to budding or natural yeasts which are contained in the molasses. In Jamaica, however, the fermentation is started by adding to the wash the residual lees left over from the previous year's distillation, known as 'dunder,' in which all the local micro-organisms have remained alive. Fermentation is allowed to continue for ten to twelve days giving these bacteria every chance to survive.

#### Secondary Products

"The number of secondary products which pass over into the final spirit depend on the type of still. In the old-fashioned pot still, more secondary products pass over with the alcoholic vapour than in the more modern continuous still, which refines these secondary products away and produces a spirit of higher strength.

"Like most other spirits, rum is colourless when it leaves the still. It may take up some colour from the casks in which it is matured, but additional colour in the form of burnt sugar or caramel is also added. This caramel varies according to the method of preparation and, to a lesser extent, affects the taste of the rum.

"Without entering into the technicalities, one can say that when the fermentation of the 'wash' is quick the continuous still is used, and the amount of caramel added is small, the rum will be fairly neutral. But when many bacteria are allowed to develop in the 'wash' and the pot still is used, which permits the maximum amount of secondary products to come over the still with the alcohol and a considerable quantity of colouring matter is added, the rum will be flavoursome.

"There are, of course, other sugar spirits made today which are not called rum. High strength spirit is being

used in Britain for rectifying into gin. Until 1939, gin was made in England from grain spirit. The shortage of grain during and since the war has compelled the rectifiers to look elsewhere for raw material and all gin made today for home consumption is produced from British Empire sugar spirit. Another use which is found for the spirit produced from molasses is power alcohol.

"In spite of the definition accepted in England, so-called rum is produced in some countries from imported molasses. I believe New England was the first country to start this more than two centuries ago, and recently this practice has extended to Canada. In 1738 Mr. Burke remarked that 'the quantity of spirits which they distilled in Boston from molasses which they import, is as surprising as the cheapness at which they sell it, which is at under 2s. a gallon. But they are more famous for the quantity and cheapness than for the excellency of their rum.' This, of course, is not necessarily an indication of present-day quality."

## Liverpool Lecture on Scotch Whisky

An address on "Scotch Whisky" was given by Mr. Cochran MacLennan of Glasgow, at the City of Liverpool College of Commerce recently, to students of the Liverpool Licensed House Staff Training Course and members of the local wine and spirit trade who also attended.

Mr. MacLennan's lucid explanation of the process of distillation and the development of "Scotch Whisky" production into the major industry we know to-day, was greatly appreciated by the large audience.

A vote of thanks to Mr. MacLennan and to Mr. George A. McKnight, who had so kindly arranged the lecture was proposed by Mr. Ernest Smith, and if the numerous questions asked were insufficient proof of the success and popularity of the lecture, then the applause which concluded the vote of thanks left the matter beyond any doubt whatsoever.

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