

Where to Eat

THE ONLY BANGKOK RESTAURANT GUIDE
TO TELL IT HOW IT REALLY IS

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Primer on Booze: Rum
by The Wandering Gourmet

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Primer on Booze

RUM

Sugar Cane's
Contribution to the
World of Spirits

by the Wandering Gourmet



Rum, the popular spirit associated with the Caribbean, is made from sugar cane. It is usually produced by fermenting molasses, a by product created when sugar cane is transformed into sugar. It can also be made by directly fermenting sugar cane juice, a method frequently employed in the French speaking areas of the Caribbean.

Although native to the South Pacific, by 600 AD, sugar cane had migrated to Persia, and when the Arabs conquered the Persians in 640 AD, they spread it to Syria, Spain and northern Africa. Eventually, it made its way to the Canary Islands, just off the northwest coast of Africa. When Columbus stopped at the Canaries on his second voyage to the New World, he collected some sugar cane cuttings and took them with him.

**Rum, the popular spirit associated with the Caribbean,
is made from sugar cane.**

Columbus' cuttings thrived in the tropical conditions of the Caribbean, and by the 17th century, sugar cane was established as a major crop in the West Indies. At about the same time, it was discovered that molasses, a by-product of making sugar, could be fermented and distilled into a potent spirit. This made growing cane sugar more profitable and created a new kind of hard liquor that quickly became very popular. Unfortunately, it also helped perpetuate the enslavement of Africans by making the selling of human beings more profitable.

Ships from Europe picked up slaves in Africa and transported them across the Atlantic to the Caribbean where labourers were needed for the cane plantations. The Africans were then sold into slavery at an enormous profit and the ships loaded with rum, molasses and sugar for transport to North America and Europe. Frequently the molasses was off loaded in the British colonies in North America and distilled into rum for domestic consumption or export to Europe.

Fairly early in the history of rum, the British navy began



making grog to serve its sailors by mixing rum with water and lime juice. This practice endured until the middle of the 20th century when someone decided it wasn't wise to encourage young sailors to tipple.

Although rum is still very much a Caribbean beverage and product, sugar cane is no longer used to make sugar for Europe's masses. In 1747, a Prussian chemist learned to create sugar from sugar beets. Although the industry was slow in getting established, sugar beets now supply 40% of the world's sugar. Furthermore, the sugar cane used to make sugar now comes primarily from Brazil and India.

Rum is usually made in a single column still and distilled until about 85% alcohol and is then diluted to the desired proof. Like virtually all spirits, when rum comes from the still, it is clear and without color. White rum, because it is rarely aged in wood, remains this way and is sometimes called silver or light rum. Its only flavours are the subtle nuances retained after distillation and filtering. This makes it similar to vodka and ideal for making the numerous rum cocktails that are blended with tropical fruit juices.

When rum is aged for six months to two years in casks previously used to age whisky, brandy or wine, it changes in character. The color darkens and it becomes softer and more enjoyable as a separate drink. Known as golden or oro rums, these brews are used in making hot toddies or for sipping with a little ice.

Dark or black rums, are usually the most expensive, and are aged for over two years in oak casks. The long aging softens the bite and imparts flavours from the oak to the rum. Although occasionally used in cocktails, the best of these rums rival cognac and fine whisky in flavour and are a delight when served at room temperature in a brandy snifter. These rums are a premium beverage and mixing them into cocktails seems like a waste of an expensive and unique product.

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The flavour of rum marries very well with tropical fruit juices and has led to the creation of several very popular flavoured rums. Malibu, rum flavored with coconut, is popular throughout the world, and a big favourite in Bangkok. Bananas, oranges and pineapple are other fruits used to make popular flavoured rums.



Although Caribbean rum is still primarily made with molasses, rum made in Martinique from sugar cane juice is of premium quality. Called rum agricole, one of its leading brands, Rhum Dillon, is available in Bangkok.

Speaking of Bangkok, it is worth noting that Thais drink large amounts of rum – often without knowing it. Several of the country's "whiskies" are actually rum.

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Mekhong, the best known internationally of Thailand's spirits, is reportedly made from sugar cane, making it rum rather than whisky. Although frequently called whisky, the fine print on a bottle of the popular Saeng Som indicates that it is rum. However, since Thais usually drink their spirits with lots of mixer, categorization really doesn't mean much.

Rum is the world's tropical spirit and as such is well suited for Thailand's hot and humid climate. The next time you saddle up to a bar in the Land of Smiles try a rum based cocktail. They are full of flavour and are a natural for the country's ambiance and climate.

by The Wandering Gourmet

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