

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

### ***Rumbullion: Rum's Early History***

**(or Rum Before the *Daiquiri*, the "Hurricane", "Bali Ha'i at the beach" and the "Hand Grenade")**

"The chiefe fuddling they make in the island is *Rumbullion*, alias *Kill-Divil*, and this is made of sugar canes distilled, a hott, hellish, and terrible liquor".

This description by a visitor to Barbados in 1651 is the first recorded mention of any variant of the term "rum", although John Josselyn wrote about his visits to New England and of Captain Thomas Wannerton, "who drank to me a pint of kill-devil Rhum at a draught" in 1639. This historic toast, however, was not written down until 1674, and Josselyn's memory may have been a bit cloudy. Richard Ligon, gentleman, who penned *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados ...* in 1657, wrote that "kill devil" was "not very pleasant in taste".

It wasn't until the early 1880s that one read the words "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!" in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Rum's association with piracy began with English privateers trading this valuable commodity. Often the privateers became buccaneers and pirates, and their love of the fiery spirit remained. The following is an entry from the journal of "Blackbeard, the Pirate", Edward Teach:

"Such a Day, Rum all out – Our Company somewhat sober: - A damn'd Confusion amongst us!"

Once known as *rumbo*, *rumbowling*, *rumbustion*, or *rumbullion*, "rum" almost surely came from the Devonshire word *rumbullion* meaning a great tumult or uproar. Some have suggested that *rumbo*, the name for punch used by Tobias Smollet in *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* is the origin of the word, but this was a good half-century after the first recorded use of "rum" ... and *rumbo* seems more an expansion of "rum" and "rum" a verbal reduction of *rumbullion*. In its monosyllabic form, "rum" made its appearance in 1661 in an order of the Governor

and Council of Jamaica. Distillers in French Martinique believed that "rum" entered the language during the island's English occupations and that French encyclopediasts added an h to it (*rhum*) in order to make it sound more pharmaceutical. In 1887, Homère Clément pioneered Martinique's "*Très Vieux Rhum Agricole*", a natural style of rum. "Today, *Rhum Clément* is sipped and savored, or chosen for signature cocktails at the finest establishments all over the world".

Ramboozle is a popular British mid-seventeenth century alcoholic beverage, similar to rum. The drink, and its variation, *rumfustian*, were made by mixing eggs, ale, wine, sugar, and various spices, and then distilling. "Rum" and the above-mentioned names, both British slang, have been connected with the *Romany* (gypsy) word *rum* meaning strong or potent (for its high alcoholic content), or alleged links to "rum" or "scrum" for a fight or "rumbustious" meaning noisy, exuberant and unruly.

Others claim "rum" comes from the name for large Dutch drinking glasses known as *rummers*. Other possibilities include contractions of the Latin *iterum* for "again, or one more time", or *arôme*, the French word for aroma. According to New Orleans drink historian Stanley Clisby Arthur, North American Indians called it *coow woow*, "a sort of improvement on their customary war whoop."

Etymologist Samuel Morewood suggested in 1824 that "rum" might have come from the British slang term for "the best", as in "having a rum time" or (in the case of the alcoholic product) "to denote its excellence or superior quality". But given the harsh, "hellish, and terrible" taste of early rum, this should be ruled out. Some scholars suggest that "rum" was taken from the ending to the medieval Latin word for sugar, *saccharum*, but this is highly unlikely. Linnaeus didn't give sugarcane its scientific name until the eighteenth century. According to Linguist Joan Coromines, in 1770 the Spanish took to calling "rum" *ron*, as in "*Ron Rico*" (rich rum). Coromines also pegged 1651 as the first recording of *rumbullion* and 1654 for "rum".

"Rum" has been called "devil's death", "demon water", "pirate's drink", "navy neaters", "Barbados water", "redeye", "rumscullion", "rumbustion", "tafia", "Screech" (in Newfoundland) and "Nelson's Blood" (which stems from the body of famous naval hero being preserved in a barrel of rum on its way back from Trafalgar). Sailors were rumored to have drunk from the barrel. "Rumbustion" is a seventeenth century word believed to have originated in the sugar plantations of Barbados, and "tafia" is a name often given to a cheap, low-grade West Indian rum (from an old French name for fermented cane juice).

"Rum" was known as "kill-devil" for centuries, with the Danes recording it as *kiel-dyvel* in 1674. The Dutch in Surinam called it

*keldiuvél* in the late eighteenth century, and the French transformed “kill-devil” to *guildive* (still the name for the still in Haiti). Kill-devil also lends its name to a town in North Carolina, where the Wright Brothers actually took off. Kitty Hawk is often cited as the location of the brothers’ first controlled, powered airplane flights on December 17, 1903, but the flights actually occurred in what is now Kill Devil Hills. Shipwrecks were common during the colonial era, and many of the ships were transporting barrels of rum (kill-devil) up and down the Eastern Seaboard. When a ship foundered, local scavengers would pilfer the rum before it sank, hiding it among the large sand dunes.



This much is known for sure. By the middle of the seventeenth century, rum usage was breaking out all over ... everywhere the Dutch, Spanish, English and French were engaged in the New World. The distillation of rum first took place on the sugarcane plantations of the Caribbean where it was discovered that “dunder” and molasses (a by-product of the sugar refining process) could be fermented into alcohol. “Dunder” is taken from the Spanish word *redundar* meaning to

overflow (applied to the dregs of cane juice used in the fermentation process). Think of “redundant” as meaning “more than one needs”. With improvements, impurities found in these alcoholic by-products were removed, producing the first true rums.

Most historians (in the absence of records to the contrary) believe that the first rum was produced on the island of Barbados. Bajans (natives of Barbados) even today spend the night “old-talking” (reminiscing) in the brightly painted rum shops. Mount Gay Rum is still bottled there.

Laws controlling its sale and use popped up in Bermuda (1653), Connecticut (1654) and Massachusetts (1657). Sugar was a luxury prior to the eighteenth century, but in the 1600s started to become a necessity. Those were exciting times when sugar was in high demand, especially to sweeten those “brand new” beverages: coffee (which arrived in Great Britain in 1650), chocolate (1657) and tea (1660). Bet you didn’t know coffee arrived in England before tea.

So what are the or the real origins of rum? Fuddling minds want to know.

It all began with sugarcane, any of six to thirty-seven species of tall perennial true grasses of the genus *Saccharum*. Native to the warm temperate to tropical regions of South Asia, its use eventually made its way to the West. Spanish and Portuguese exploration and conquest in the fifteenth century carried sugar around the globe. Henry the Navigator introduced sugarcane to Madeira in 1425, while the Spanish, having eventually subdued the Canary Islands, introduced cane there. Christopher Columbus, on his second voyage in 1493, carried cane seedlings to Hispaniola (the large island that today contains the Dominican Republic and Haiti). The spread of cane sugar’s cultivation and manufacture to the West Indies took off like wildfire. Slave labor from Africa powered a labor-intensive plantation system that resulted in a most profitable business venture. There were certainly cane fields and sugar mills on Hispaniola by 1516, at Porto Seguro in Brazil by 1520, and in Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico by 1595. By the mid-1700s, no fashionable London party was complete without a Rum punch bowl. Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), “a sugar planter expects that the rum and molasses would defray the whole expense of his cultivation” (a profitable endeavor indeed).

As a fermented spirit, there is evidence that sugarcane spirits may have occurred either in ancient India or China and spread west from there. There was a drink called *brum* produced by the Malay people dating back thousands of years. The coincidence of *brum* sounding similar to “rum” cannot be ruled out as an origin. And Marco Polo back in the fourteenth century wrote of his personal experience with a “very

good wine of sugar" that was offered him in what is today known as Iran.

In colonial Spain, around the time *ron* was first being used for "rum", the term *aguardiente de caña* (liquor from cane) was also being used. A portmanteau of "*agua*" and "*ardiente*", the word means "firewater" ... or literally "burning water" (as it "burns" the throat of the imbiber). On October 8, 1769, a proclamation by Spanish Colonial Governor of Louisiana Alejandro O'Reilly allowed twelve taverns, six billiard halls and one *limonadier* (lemonade seller) to dispense alcoholic drinks. He ordered these establishments closed at 8 pm, but these hours would fluctuate through the years and for a small bribe the night watch of New Orleans could always look the other way. In 1770, Governor O'Reilly decreed a tax on rum imported into the Louisiana colony. Most of the *aguardiente de caña* came from Cuba into the port of New Orleans. Trade with the French, Spanish and British West Indies was central to the economy of New Orleans during Spanish colonial times. A 1970s study of Spanish regulation of the liquor trade by Jack D. L. Holmes uncovered that the local authorities realized more than \$16,000 in revenue from the rum duty.

Within ten years after Étienne de Boré produced the colony's first "commercial" crop of sugar, Louisiana sugar planters began to amass fortunes. William Charles Cole Claiborne, who became Governor of Louisiana in 1803, wrote to then President Thomas Jefferson "that the facility with which the sugar planters amass wealth is almost incredible." It appears that a great number of the planters around the Crescent City found it even more profitable to manufacture rum. In 1802, the surrounding parishes supplied the New Orleans market with an astounding 14 million gallons of the spirit once known as "kill-devil".

The island nation of Barbados (in the Lesser Antilles) is twenty-one miles long and as much as fourteen miles in width. The Portuguese named the island "Los Barbados" (bearded ones) most likely for the long, hanging roots of the "bearded" fig trees lining the coast. When Spain and Portugal came through the Caribbean, they either overlooked Barbados or bypassed it. But in 1625, Captain John Powell landed near modern-day Holetown to claim Barbados for England in the name of King James I. Many of the early settlers were misfits of society or second sons of wealthy English families. Many came to work as indentured servants for two to ten years. But the plantation system needed more and more labor for it to function efficiently, and the importation of slaves from Africa seemed to be the only solution. As an example, before 1650, more than three-quarters of the island's population was white. In 1680, the median size of a Barbados plantation had increased to about 60 slaves. To give one an idea of how important the sugar trade was in those times, by 1650 (although Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, had already been established in North America) there were 44,000 English people in

the Caribbean, compared to only 12,000 on the Chesapeake and 23,000 in New England. The most substantial English settlement at that time was at Barbados.

Barbados was probably the first center of large-scale rum production in the New World, and by 1687 the British Royal Navy was issuing rations of rum to its sailors. The association of rum with the Royal Navy began in 1655, when the British fleet captured the island of Jamaica. With domestically produced rum, the British switched the seamen's daily alcohol ration from French brandy to rum. By 1740, it was decided that the half-pints (two gills) of rum were too extreme an allotment for the sailors twice each day, so the rum was mixed with water or small beer (a weak beer) and called "grog". Admiral Edward Vernon was responsible for this measure and the term "grog". The Admiral, you see, was known as "Old Grog" because in rough weather he always wore a cloak made of grogram, a type of rough taffeta. The Royal Navy's rum ration remained in effect until 1970 (and Navy rum was 95.5 proof or 54.6% alcohol). Citrus juice (usually lime or lemon) was added to cut down on the water's foulness. This made the sailors healthier (thanks to daily doses of vitamin C from the limes and lemons that prevented disease, mainly scurvy). This was first noticed in 1601 when Captain James Lancaster instituted lemon juice doses among his crew while at the Cape of Good Hope. His men were the only crew not decimated by scurvy. This citrus custom, over time, earned the British the nickname "limeys". And too much "grog" could, of course, make one "groggy".

A biographer of author Daniel Defoe disputed the derivation from "Old Grog" since Defoe used "grog" in 1718, but this was in error due to a miscitation in Defoe's work (in which he wrote "makeè ginger" instead of "makeè grog").

The practice of serving grog twice a day carried over into both the Continental Navy and United States Navy. Second U.S. Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith (1757 – 1842) tried substituting native rye whiskey for imported rum. American sailors liked the new "grog" better, and Smith made the change permanent. The sailors took to calling the new concoction "Bob Smith".

Admiral Vernon, Barbados and rum had an even more remarkable influence on our nation and the first President of the United States.

In 1751, "the father of our country" traveled by ship to the island of Barbados with his half-brother Lawrence Washington, who was now very ill with tuberculosis. They stayed several weeks. This was the only ocean voyage taken by Washington during his lifetime and the only country he visited beyond the borders of the future United States of America. He found Barbados beautiful:

"In the cool of the evening we rode in the country and were perfectly enraptured with the beautiful scenery which every side presented our view. The fields of cane, corn, fruit trees in a delightful green ..."

But George Washington himself became sick with smallpox on the island. Although it left his face slightly scarred, the disease left him stronger and effectively inoculated him against what would be the greatest killer of the American Revolution.

Lawrence Washington had earlier served as a Captain of the Marines in 1741 on the flagship HMS "Princess Caroline" (an eight-gun three-decker), commanded by none other than Admiral Edward Vernon of "grog" fame. Lawrence was a survivor of the expeditions against the seaport of Cartagena in Colombia and participated in the 1741 British landing at Guantanamo (Cumberland Harbor), Cuba. This was during the War of Jenkins' Ear. It was Lawrence who was the first to live at Washington's Mount Vernon estate, which Lawrence named after his commanding officer. Sadly, Lawrence died there of tuberculosis in July 1752 (the year following his visit to Barbados).

*Bumbo* (also known as *Bombo* or *Bumboo*) is a drink made from rum, water and nutmeg. Cinnamon is sometimes added to or substituted for the nutmeg. Bumbo was extremely popular during the "Pirates of the Caribbean" days, mostly because it tasted better than Navy grog. Also, pirates and merchantmen did not suffer from vitamin C deficiency as frequently as British sailors, since their voyages were shorter and their diet included an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables.

*Bumbo* was a vital electioneering tool in colonial British America, a freebie given to voters known as "swilling the planters with *bumbo*". Even George Washington used this practice. His personal papers state that he used 160 gallons of rum to treat 391 voters to *bumbo* while campaigning for the Virginia House of Burgesses in July 1758.

Rum's popularity continued after the American Revolution, with George Washington remembering his earlier visit to the island, insisting on a barrel of Barbados rum at his 1789 inauguration.

"There's naught, no doubt, so much the spirit calms as rum and true religion." Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, 1819

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