

"A Taste of Ten Rare Single Casks"

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RUMTASTIC HAPPENINGS AT TALES OF THE COCKTAIL 2015



It's 8:45 AM on the second full day of Tales of the Cocktail 2015, and I'm in bed, dreading the imminent alarm clock. Only a few hours earlier I'd been drinking 140 proof Jamaican Rum and cask-strength rye at an impromptu hotel room get-together, followed by a nightcap at the Monteleone's Carousel bar, before finally falling into bed at 2:30 AM. What I really need is more sleep, but I'm scheduled to drink more rum in an hour. Ordinarily I'd miss the rum and opt for more shut-eye but this is no ordinary tasting. No sir! Plantation Rums had reached deep into their rum reserves, picked of their best casks from all over the Caribbean, and bottled just enough for two dozen people to enjoy at Tales. At 10 AM. The things I do for rum....

Tales of the Cocktail spreads the love for spirits of all styles and sizes. Big brands show up to spend vast sums of money on parties and promotions, while new upstart brands work furiously to get the attention of the crowd.

Whisk(e)y, tequila, vodka, gin, brandy – all make appearances at Tales, but rum was exceptionally well represented this year, both in tastings and in other events, and the global rum family showed up in force. Among the rummy crowd I personally saw:

From the producer/distributor side:

- Shaun Caleb (Demerara Distillers Ltd)
- Luca Gargano (Velier)
- Richard Seale (Foursquare)
- Alexandre Gabriel, Guillaume Lamy, and Paul McFadyen (Plantation/Pierre Ferrand)
- George Freegard (Pussers)
- David Morrison (Appleton)
- Eric Seed (Haus Alpenz – Smith & Cross)
- Don Pancho Fernandez and Carlos Esquivel (PILSA)

Tiki Legends:

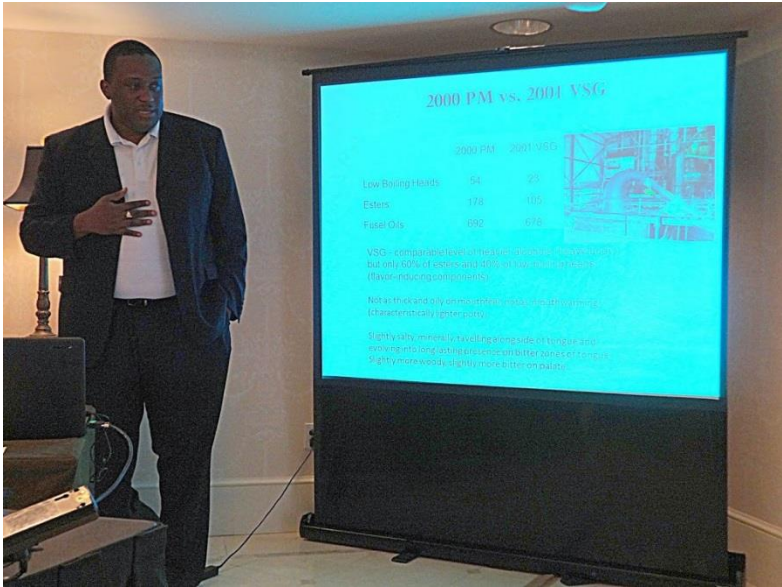
- Martin Cate (Smuggler's Cove, Whitechapel)
- Paul McGee (Lost Lake, Three Dots and a Dash)
- Jeff "Beachbum" Berry (author, Latitude 29)

And from the rum media:

- Robert A. Burr and Robert V. Burr (Miami Rum Renaissance)
- Ian Burrell (Global Rum Ambassador)
- Paul Clarke (*Imbibe* Magazine)
- Alexandre Vingtier (Rumporter)
- Helena Tiare Olsen (A Mountain Of Crushed Ice)
- Peter Holland (The Floating Rum Shack)

Last, but certainly not least, Steven Remsberg, he of the world's largest private rum collection (thousands of bottles), was at several of the rum-related sessions.

Of all the rummy goodness that went down at Tales, my highlights were three super-exclusive tasting sessions, limited to twenty attendees and costly at \$130. Absolutely worth it if you're wonky about finding the next exotic rum experience. I won't dive into everything I experienced at these sessions – I'm saving that for subsequent posts—but I'll offer a short synopsis here. Also, all of these tastings had multiple presenters, but for brevity I'm confining the description to the primary speakers.



Shaun Caleb of DDL



Rare DDL rums

Wednesday's session, "Rare & Heritage Rums of Demerara," featured eight rums from Demerara Distillers Limited (DDL, aka "El Dorado"), all at cask strength, and from one of DDL's several unique stills, including their double wooden pot still and wooden Coffey still. None of these rums are sold straight from the barrel like we tasted them, making this a truly memorable session. At 106 proof minimum, they all packed serious, swoon-inducing flavor and a boozy punch! Shaun Caleb, DDL's Master Distiller, spoke in-depth about their unique stills and made my rum-loving heart beat faster as he described how many PPM (parts per million) of heads, hearts, and tails each rum contains. The final rum was the new release of El Dorado 25 year, a beautiful blend of some of the rums we tasted, which retails for around \$500 US. As I commented to Robert V. Burr afterwards, El Dorado 25 is candy after all the high-octane barrel samples we had tasted earlier.



Paul McFadyen, Alexandre Gabriel, Robert A. Burr

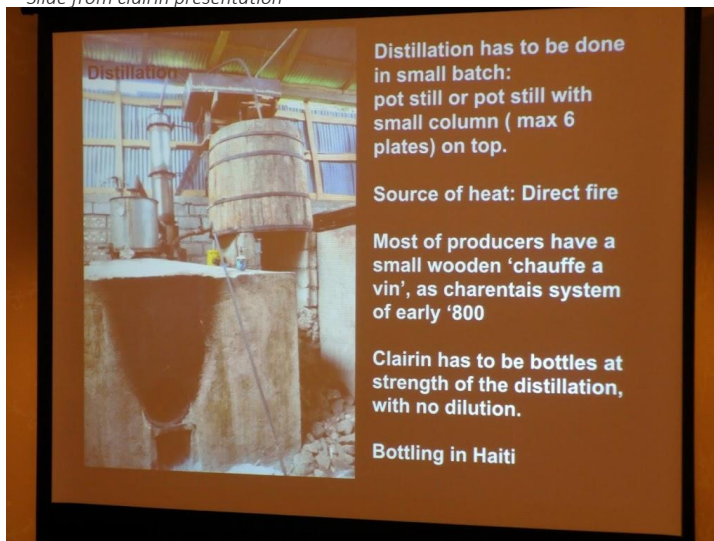
*Rare Plantation Rum single casks*

On Thursday, Plantation Rum's session, "A Taste of Ten Rare Single Casks," rolled through ten magnificent rums acquired around the Caribbean by Master Distiller and CEO Alexandre Gabriel, then further aged at the Maison Ferrand estate in the Cognac region of France. Plantation ambassador Paul McFadyen began with session with a very lively overview of

Plantation's "elevage" process, which involves additional aging in Cognac and other types of barrels. In addition to the single-country samples, there were two blends, including an experimental "Navy Style" blend from Barbados, Trinidad, and Belize. As with the El Dorado tasting, none of the rums we sampled are currently for sale in the US, and each arrived in hand-labeled sample bottles.

*Ian Burrell, Robert A. Burr, Luca Gargano, Alexandre Vingtier, Peter Holland*

Slide from clairin presentation



Saturday's exclusive tasting, "Clairin – Authentic Rhums of Rural Haiti," was hosted by Robert A. Burr and featured Luca Gargano, passionate Italian mastermind behind Velier'srhums, talking about clairin, an ultra-old school, artisanal rum made in very small batches from sugar cane juice in rural Haiti. There are several reasons why clairin isn't called "rum" like you might expect – a subsequent post

on this session will delve into why, but two key elements of clairin are that fermentation can only occur with natural, air-borne yeasts, and that it's distilled to the proof it's bottled at, i.e. undiluted. The three (very generous) pours of different clairin samples were somewhat agricole-like, but with marked differences. All are available from Velier, although unfortunately not yet in the US. (Time for another international trip!) There was a bonus fourth sample, Capovilla PMG Liberation 2010, a four-year rum agricole from Marie Galante. While quite enjoyable, the three clairins were the clear stars of the show.



David Wondrich demonstrating initial reaction to Stiggin's Fancy. Martin Cate on right.



Deconstructed Plantation Rums

Although not super-exclusive, narrowly focused tastings, Tales also featured other rum-focused sessions that captivated large, enthusiastic crowds with plenty of rums to sample. At “Tapping Rum’s Past for Rum’s Future,” an all-star panel of David Wondrich, Martin Cate, Alexandre Gabriel, Jeff Berry, and (moderator) Paul Clarke covered (among other things) searching in dusty old liquor stores for rums called for in old Tiki and proto-Tiki recipes. (Mrs. Wonk fears I have a new weekend hobby.) The centerpiece of the session was the tasting of the deconstructed components of two Plantation rums that pay homage to rum’s past: deconstructed Stiggins’ Fancy (which I’ve written about previously) and Plantation 3 Stars, a blend from Barbados, Trinidad, and Jamaica. A lively Q&A at the end could have gone on for hours had time allowed – yours truly asked Martin Cate whether the Tiki crowd over-fetishizes the ghost of the Jamaican J. Wray & Nephew 17-year rum that’s called for in Trader Vic’s original 1944 Mai Tai recipe.

As luck would have it, the only two men on earth who possess bottles of Wray & Nephew 17 were in the room— Martin Cate and Ian Burrell. Short answer: Quite possibly, yes.

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Richard Seale, Robert V. Burr, Ian Burrell



George Freegard, Eric Seed, David Morrison

At “Jamaica’s Influence on Cocktail Culture,” Global Rum Ambassador Ian Burrell first prepared the rum with a smoke machine “to lend a Jamaican vibe,” then led a panel consisting of George Freegard (Pusser’s international brand manager), Eric Seed (Haus Alpenz owner), and David Morrison (Appleton senior blender). Beyond a cursory introduction of Planter’s Punch, the spiritual basis for many Tiki recipes, this session focused on the rum samples in front of we attendees. The high point was a special blend (only six bottles!) made for Tales of the Cocktail 2015 by Appleton and accompanied by a video from Appleton Master Blender Joy Spence (Mrs. Wonk rightly notes that Spence, a chemist, was the first woman to hold the title of master blender in the distilled spirits industry. You go, girl.)

At the end of the session, Foursquare’s Richard Seale talked for twenty minutes about rum categories and authenticity; essentially a condensed version of his session from Miami Rum Renaissance earlier this year. The highlight was the audience trying to identify which of three unlabeled samples was authentic Jamaican rum. A number of people picked the second sample, which Richard subsequently revealed to be vodka flavored with rum extract, as you’d use for baking. (Whoops. Thank you for playing.) Richard’s point was clear: Some companies sell heavily adulterated spirits as real rum, misleading consumers and dragging the whole category down. (While it was fantastic material that everyone should hear, it seemed a bit orthogonal to the session topic.)



Carlos Esquivel, Don Pancho Fernandez, CocktailWonk



Hand rolled cigars at the Don Pancho event

Another rummy Tales highlight was “Don Pancho: The Godfather of Rum,” a tasting for Don Pancho’s Origenes rums, the highlight here being the well-regarded 18-year expression. Both Don Pancho and Carlos Esquivel, the men behind Panama’s PILSA, were on hand chatting with visitors and posing for countless photographs with fans. In addition to free-flowing samples of the Origenes 18, a cigar maker sat at a table hand-rolling cigars using (presumably Panamanian) tobacco leaves for guests as souvenirs—that’s some nice swag there! I took advantage of a lull in people requesting photographs to talk with Carlos and Don Pancho, tying up some loose end in my understanding about the Copacabana 1940, a rum made by PILSA which I reviewed recently.

*Plantation Stiggins' Fancy at the Spirited Awards**Stiggin's Mai Tais pre-batched at the Spirited Awards*

Plantation Rum was seemingly everywhere at Tales. In addition to the single cask session, Plantation's much loved Stiggins' Fancy was the star of a tasting room session, "Plantation Pineapple Rum Rides Into Town" which unfortunately coincided with Ian Burrell's "Jamaica's Influence on Cocktail Culture" session I attended. Also featured at Friday's "Daiquiri Time Out Happy Hour," Stiggins Pineapple Daiquiris are—dare we say?—almost commonplace now, but at Saturday night's Spirited Awards they took it to a whole new level with a twist on the Mai Tai, dubbed the "Mai Oh Mai Stiggins Fancy." I confess to having lost how many Mrs. Wonk and I imbibed during the five-hour event. The recipe, which I presume follows the classic 1944 Mai Tai ratios.

- Plantation Stiggins' Fancy Rum
- Pierre Ferrand Dry Curacao
- Lime juice
- Salted Macadamia nut syrup
- Fee Brothers Barrel Aged Whiskey Bitters
- Garnished with a savory blue-cheese-stuffed olive. Oh, yes.

*Daniyel Jones and David Delaney Jr. of Angostura**Angostura pool party*

The House of Angostura also put on a good showing at Tales. Their big event was the House of Angostura's 2015 U.S. Cocktail Challenge Finals, held at the House of Blues. Due to schedule conflicts, I could only stay for the first hour but took the opportunity to chat with Angostura Brand Ambassador David Delaney, Jr., about Trinidad rums and future releases. Angostura also sponsored the "Orange Bitters Pool Party" at the Monteleone's rooftop pool deck on Friday and a tasting room on Saturday. Because of my jammed schedule I only got a glimpse of the pool party – crazy loud and packed with Tales revelers, as you'd expect. I was also excited to see House of Angostura win the Spirited award for "Best new spirit or cocktail ingredient" for their (rum-based) Amaro di Angostura, which I reviewed here previously.

*Latitude 29**Nick Detrich, Martin Cate and Paul McGee*

Home base for the rum crowd during tales was Jeff Berry's Latitude 29. I'd lay good money on at least one of the above rum crowd being there every moment it was open. Jeff Berry and his wife Annene Kay were even the official Tales of the Cocktail 2015 Ambassadors. If you didn't find someone at the bar at Latitude 29, odds are they were at Cane & Table, another New Orleans bar specializing in "proto-Tiki"—tropical drinks that predate Tiki's origins in the 1930s, but still hew (mostly) to the rum, lime, and sugar boilerplate. Cane & Table's back courtyard hosted "Tremendous Trinity Tackles Tiki Titans," a pop-up bar featuring libations served up by Martin Cate, Paul McGee, and Cane & Table's own Nick Detrich, creating Tiki masterworks like the Jet Pilot for a long line of enthusiasts. We'd have stayed later, but Mrs. Wonk and I had torush off to a Spirited Dinner sponsored by Old New Orleans Rum, whose distillery we visited earlier in the week.

Although I knew about many tastings and sessions prior to arriving, I was surprised by how many opportunities arose for the rum crowd to convene. There were certainly more happenings than I listed above – Tales has just too much going at the same to do it all. Tito Cordero from Diplomatico was in town, for instance, but I again missed my chance to meet him. It was great seeing friends like Peter Holland, Alexandre Gabriel, and the Burrs, and finally meeting face to face with fellow rum geeks like Jeff Berry and Helena Tiare Olsen. Between Miami Rum Renaissance and Tales of the Cocktail, I've made s many new rum friends– I can't wait to do them again next year!