



RICHARD CARLETON HACKER

RUM'S REVOLUTION

Connoisseurs are rediscovering the spirit that fueled the British Navy.

July 31, 1970 was a sad day for the seafaring ways of the so-called Demon Rum. On that date, which became known as Black Tot Day, the British Navy's 330-year-old tradition of issuing a daily half-gill ration, or "tot," of rum to every "jack tar" aboard Her Majesty's ships came to an end. Appropriately, sailors sported black armbands to mourn the end of this cherished custom.

Four years later, an entrepreneur named Charles Tobias, sailing his yacht around the world, tied up alongside a British frigate in Gibraltar harbor in search of a repair part for his craft. The Canadian-born Tobias and the British commander hit it off and Tobias left not only with his needed part, but with a sealed porcelain jug of Admiralty rum. "I can't use it anymore," the dejected com-

mander told him, "so you might as well have it." At sunset, after Tobias dropped anchor for the evening, he cracked open the jug.

"The flavor was distinct, very full and rich, and the proof powerful," he told me. "But other than just the good taste and a full, rich flavor for which the rum is known, there was something spiritual about being able to partake of such a wonderful piece of maritime tradition. I remember thinking, 'I'm drinking liquid history.'"

Tobias ended up purchasing not only the Royal Navy's recipe for this rum, but the original distilling equipment as well. As a result, he recreated Pusser's (a derivative of "Purser," the ship's officer who used to be in charge of rationing the "tots"), a 95.5-proof British Naval Rum. And thus began the new age of premium sipping rums.

Today, there are rums specifically created for crystal sniffers. These premium spirits are pot-distilled and barrel-aged, and most run the spectrum from rose gold to amber. Their color comes from charred oak barrels and, often, molasses, which is added for deepening color and taste. One of the best and richest-tasting examples of this is Pyrat Planters XO, another pioneer in premium rums.

Along with Pusser's Naval Rum, there is Pusser's Fifteen Year Old, coming in at a gentler 80 proof (the longer rums age, the more their proof diminishes). It is distilled in the only two large-capacity wooden stills in the world. Interestingly, these stills also produce El Dorado 12-, 15-, and 21-year-old rums, with the 21 Year Old being my favorite — thick, with

a full composition of fruitcake, chocolate, and coffee. It will require some searching to find, as will Gosling's Family Reserve Old Rum, a top-of-the-line spirit from the family that makes Gosling's Black Seal in Bermuda, a staple of the classic Dark 'N Stormy cocktail (Gosling's and ginger beer). Sixteen-year-old Gosling's Family Reserve Old Rum is full of cedar, vanilla and a whiff of smoke. A bottle of Gosling's Old Rum, which is dipped in wax, individually numbered, and handsomely boxed, makes an ideal gift for anyone laboring under the delusion that rum only goes with Coke.

Zacapa 23, from Guatemala, with nuances of smoky spice, is a semi-sweet yet muscular blend of rums aged six to 23 years in barrels warehoused in mountains rising 8,000 feet above sea level. Even more candied is the toasted marzipan of 12-year-old Zaya from Trinidad. The coal-tar color of Cruzan Blackstrap is a great attention-getter in a glass, but as I discovered in an English Notting Hill bar, it is not as overpowering as it looks. For one of the oldest rums currently available, try the ginger, orange peel and rarely encountered maple overtones of Appleton Estate's 30 Year Old from Jamaica.

But if you really want to get back to the roots of what the British were drinking while trying to forget their loss of the Colonies, a small number of wicker-covered earthenware jars of 18th-century rum were recently uncovered at E.D. & F. Man & Co., official purveyors of rum for the British Navy since 1784. They are being offered for sale at \$1,200 each, a price that clearly elevates fine sipping rums into the Cognac class. ○

Photo: Richard Carleton Hacker



The luxurious Four Seasons Biltmore in Santa Barbara, CA provides the perfect setting for late afternoon sipping, as a gentle tropical storm moves in and beckons one to seek shelter under a palm tree with any of these classic rums.