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The Rum Diaries

The next old thing: New & Old Rum Makers

BY COLIN S. SARGENT

Craft distilling in Maine has become the newest revival of one of Maine’s oldest industries. Bob Bartlett, Keith Bodine, and Ned Wight agree that, for them, they particularly enjoy the mystique and the unique challenges of forging the true spirit of the New World–Caribbean molasses perfected as Made in Maine rum.

Keith and Constance Bodine of Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery in Union were the first to have a Maine craft rum to hit shelves. Their Three Crow Rum is a wonderfully French-toasty, warm spirit that began as an experiment. “We started with gin and apple brandy, but all of our neighbors liked to drink rum. My neighbors kept asking why I don’t make a rum. So I decided to do a barrel,” Keith says. “That’s how it started. Last year it was so popular we sold out of what we thought was going to be a couple years’ supply. We’re not going to release a rum again until next spring, when we open up...
GETTING YOUR RATION—Beginning in October, Portland’s New England Distilling will sell Eight Bells Rum at RSVP in Portland, Bootlegger’s in Topsham, and other liquor stores in the state of Maine. Three Crow Rum has sold out for the season, although it “would be worthwhile to take a peek at your local liquor store’s shelf, to see if there are still unsold bottles,” says Keith Bodine. Rusticator will be available in the spring. “Hannaford and Shaws only reset their liquor once a year,” says Wight, “but Eight Bells is on the list for next year!”

DOWN TOOLS AND UP SPIRITS—Ned Wight’s Eight Bells Rum refers both to the beautifully stormy painting Eight Bells and the practice of timekeeping aboard ships before the advent of cheap clocks. An hourglass would be turned every half hour and the ship’s bell rung on the turning, adding one ring for each turn of the glass. At ‘Eight Bells’ the cycle would reset, making it a four-hour cycle—putting the most rum-appropriate ‘Eight Bells’ at the stroke of midnight. Rum was actually customarily served to sailors aboard ships at 11am and 5pm—six bells.

DO WHAT I SAY, NOT WHAT I DO—Adjacent to the ‘sentimental’ announcement of Kitty Kentuck’s death from intoxication—and violence—is an ad for ‘The Delicious Tonic,’ gin.
Ed Wight, whose Eight Bells Rum hit shelves in September, agrees that it’s not all about the sea. Much of the rum produced in Maine was likely produced in stills in the back of public houses, produced not for bottling and off-site consumption but to be drunk on the premises by the patrons. “To me, that’s the real essence of Maine’s connection to rum, less than sailing or piracy. I don’t have much connection to the sea,” Wight says. “Instead, I like to think of taverns here in New England, the meeting rooms and the arguments between part-time philosophers where our country was first born. They were drinking rum drinks.” Of course, it also took a splash of rum to rev up the Boston Tea Party. “The tea tax was really just the straw that broke the camel’s back—the real grumbling had been over the tax on rum!”

That tax began as the Molasses Act in 1733, although it was so poorly enforced that the Sugar Act of 1764 cut the tax in half but tried to add more teeth to collection efforts. That came down hard on the New England distilling industry that had sprung up after ships from Britain and her colonies were granted the right to deliver slaves from West Africa to the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. Traders accepting payment for these people in molasses (the cheapest storables and transportable sugar-cane product) could get the best deals. Rum made here from this molasses could be traded for furs in North America or for guns and luxuries in Europe—all of which, along with rum, was used to purchase more slaves in West Africa, and so start the loop again.

“Rum would be stored in oak barrels,” says Wight. “Oak is a naturally waterproof wood, and further, when rum is stored in it, there are terrific flavor compounds released from the wood—vanillin, in particular, which is particularly nice for rums.” Wight thinks that necessity may have been the mother of the first good rums. “Rum was an important part of the triangle trade, where boats would travel between here, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Not all of the rum would always be traded or offloaded—some would be designated for the crew—and especially when convoying to avoid privateers, round trips of the triangle could have kept that cheap rum sloshing around in oak barrels, exposed to temperature changes. I can’t be sure if that’s where it first got started, but from a distiller’s perspective, that would absolutely have worked to produce rum that had been really improved.”

The rough and rowdy history of Maine rum turned violent in the 1850s, as under the growing temperance movement spearheaded by mayor Neal Dow, ‘the Napoleon of Temperance,’ alcohol production and sale of liquor was prohibited. However, it was discovered four years after the passage of the law that Dow himself was keeping large stocks of brandy set aside for ‘medicinal’ purposes—necessary to maintain the temperaments of solid, respectable citizens, of course. But for the working population of the city, alcohol was often their only escape, and many of the rioters decried Dow’s attack on what they viewed as their culture.

“It sounds like it was probably undrinkable,” says Bartlett Winery’s Bob Bartlett, with a laugh, whose Rusticator Rum will be released for the first time af-

Eight Bells Rum is a wonderfully warm dark rum with power and presence. It has dark rum’s toasted sugar flavor with vanilla and cinnamon, and provides a smooth finish of caramel with a touch of a rich fruitiness.
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GOOD SWILL HUNTING–George Smith Hunt (b. 1829), great-great-grandfather to actress Helen Hunt, owned the Eagle Sugar Refinery on Fore Street in Portland as well as a fleet of ships that traded Maine lumber and Caribbean sugar and molasses. A high-profile trader, Hunt testified before the U.S. Senate in 1886 that molasses imports should be placed on a reduced schedule, arguing that it was a raw material and not a finished product. Rum started going the other way. Indeed, rum-runners would float ashore casks, probably to the Breakwater Court (now The Colony) in Kennebunkport or to the palaces of Bar Harbor, or meet lobster boats anchored offshore just outside the limit. “Maine, Gloucester–anywhere with a large population of fishermen.

TEATOTALLERS
The Temperance movement in the United States was successful in ending the U.S. Navy’s rum ration in 1862. ‘Black Tot Day,’ the last rum ration served aboard Royal Navy ships–was in 1970. The Royal New Zealand Navy continued the practice until 1990–by then, the concerns were no longer about the moral well-being of sailors, but about their ability to operate sophisticated machinery such as, well, guided missiles.
Bill McCoy’s so-called Rum Row stretched all the way from Florida to Maine, and sent ashore Canadian whiskey and Caribbean rum. “He was famous for not watering down his booze—he’s the guy who popularized ‘The Real McCoy.’”

Tastes changed during Prohibition, however, and sweeter mixed drinks became much more common. After Prohibition, the large breweries and distilleries with alphabet-soup names and production in the tens of millions of units took over the national market, including Maine, where family distilleries could only struggle.

“We have to make a craft spirit, something lovely to drink,” says Wight. “We couldn’t compete on economies of scale. They can sell rum for less than I buy molasses. But Maine is a more sophisticated place—it started hardscrabble, and now as Maine has changed, its rum should change, too.”

And that’s how these new rums carry on the tradition of the old spirit of Maine. By making such a beautiful, artisanal, local product, Bartlett, Bodine, and Wight have a shot to nip at the heels of the big producers by warming bellies and minds. And isn’t that, in a way, the new rum-running?