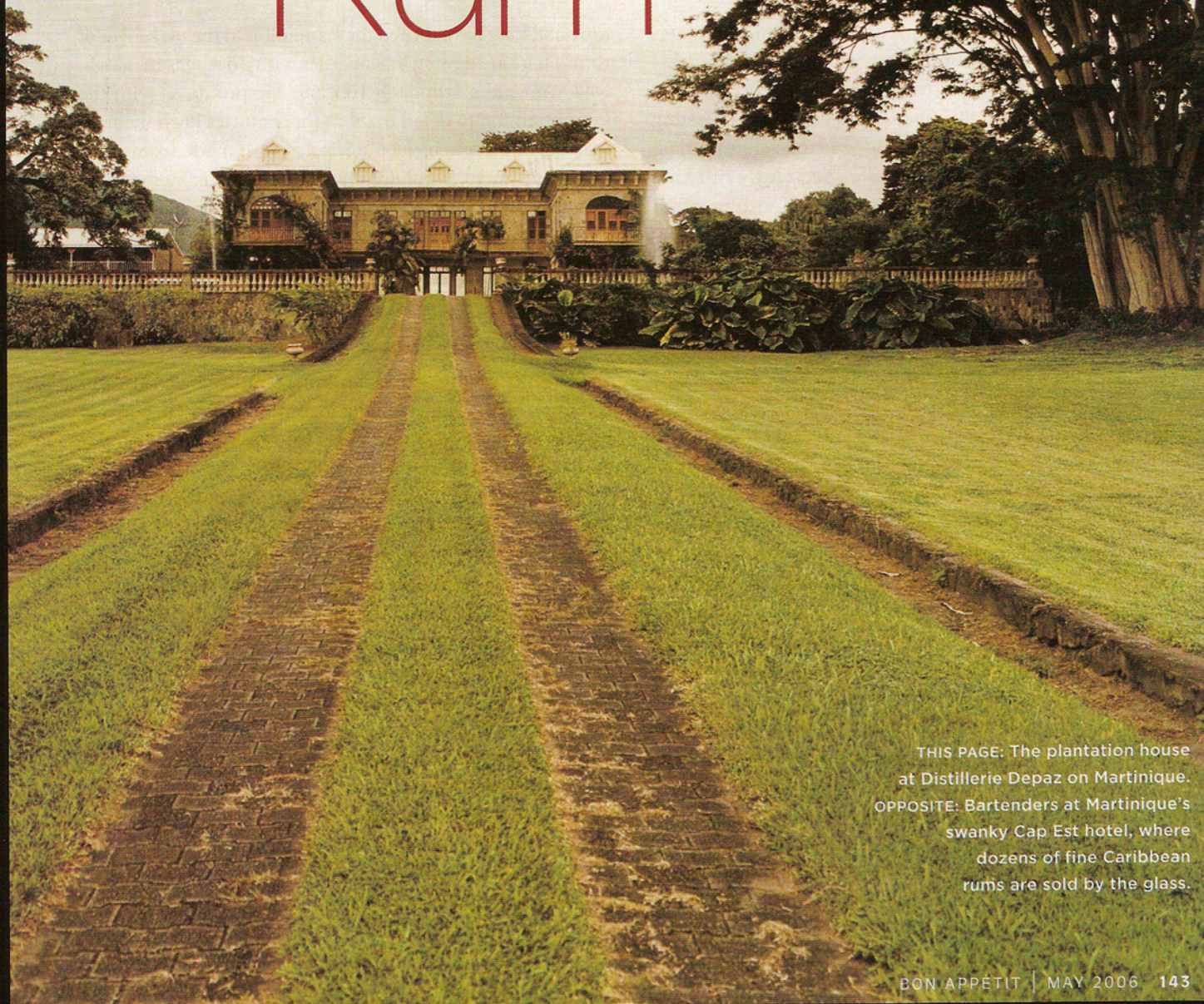


# In Search of Real Rum



THIS PAGE: The plantation house at Distillerie Depaz on Martinique.  
OPPOSITE: Bartenders at Martinique's swanky Cap Est hotel, where dozens of fine Caribbean rums are sold by the glass.

# I'M WAITING FOR A TRAIN AT THE DISTILLERY DOMAINE DE SÉVERIN ON THE ISLAND OF BASSE-TERRE IN GUADELOUPE. DESPITE THE PROMISE OF A LOCOMOTIVE TOUR OF THE *RHUMERIE*, I DON'T SEE ANY TRACKS

and the scheduled departure time came and went 15 minutes ago—but any means of conveyance will be a welcome relief from my dust-covered rental car. The roads have been bumpy to say the least, and on this, the second day of a rum-tasting trip, I'm not feeling so hot. Head foggy, stomach unsettled, I'm thinking spit buckets would be a good idea. With each distillery less accessible than the last, the rum-tasting circuit is becoming more off-road adventure than the tropical equivalent of a wine jaunt through Napa.

I catch in the air the yeasty, sulfurous, caramel whiff of cane being churned into pulp and distilled into rum. At this moment of need (need for a ride, need for a drink), I find myself longing for what the locals call *un décollage*, or “lift-off.” The ultimate hair of the dog, it's just a short glass filled with cane syrup, 100-proof rum, and a thimble of lime.

The French Caribbean—particularly the sister islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique—has long produced some of the world's finest rums. These are sipping rums so complex and luscious as to banish umbrella-drink memories of spring breaks past. While most rum begins with molasses left over from processing sugar, here cane is cut only for rum. Once it's distilled, the fresh-pressed juice is often aged in oak casks (like fine wine, Cognac, and single malt Scotch), developing over time into a rich digestif. This is called Rhum Vieux, and it must be aged at least four years. Unaged rum is called Rhum Blanc. In France, whose Cognac-making traditions took hold during the early days of colonization, they appreciate this fine rum for what it is: a true artisanal Caribbean product.

And what the French and Creole islanders have long known about high-quality rum, the American public is now poised to discover. The same big players who transformed vodka from a throwaway mixer into liquor's super-premium

top-shelf king have turned their attention to the makeover of rum. There are new stylized bottles with price tags to match. New rums, like Trinidad's 10 Cane, are produced with the same attention to detail that has for centuries been the hallmark of the French *rhum agricole* (rum made from fresh sugarcane juice). Although Martinique rum is increasingly exported to the States, the only way to taste much of the best is to head to the source. Which is what I've done, in search of rum that makes Cognac connoisseurs swoon and piña colada fans forever swear off the blender.

The “train” finally arrives and turns out to be a series of tramcars made to look like a locomotive. Except for this little gimmick, Séverin is like a lot of what you'll find at any of the distilleries on Guadeloupe and Martinique: centuries-old jungle-shrouded plantations nestled in valley nooks or perched high on cliffs overlooking the sea. Guadeloupe's rums, like the island itself, are a bit rough around the edges—Armagnac to Martinique's Cognac. Though much larger than its more prosperous neighbor, production on Guadeloupe is less developed.

The French who settled here in the 17th century began handcrafting rum not long after they first sailed in. Sugarcane is not native but arrived from the East Indies with the region's early Spanish and Portuguese settlers. Famed 18th-century missionary Père ►

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Cane growing at rum plantations resembles rows of grapevines at a vineyard; Jean Luc and Hervé Damoiseau, whose family has been producing rum on Guadeloupe since the 19th century; the formal dining room in the Clément plantation house, used for special tastings.

Jean Baptiste Labat began the process whereby the fermented by-products of sugar production turned from something rough and raw—fit for seafaring pirates—into a refined, nuanced colonial spirit. Then, in the 19th century, when France stopped importing sugar from the Caribbean, there was a rum-producing boom. I taste the end result of all this history at the end of the feeble little train ride: a sample of Séverin's fresh and potent signature rum.

Later that day I visit the Distillerie Damoiseau, a magical, overgrown ramble with the rusted detritus of retired machines scattered like sculptures among bright yellow flowers and tall drooping trees. An ancient windmill—a distinctive feature of Guadeloupe's landscape—looms on a hill. In the tasting room, the man pouring me rum schools me on rum *terroir*: "Here we have much drier land," he says, pouring me my first amber taste in Damoiseau's *cabane à rhum*. "That means more sugar in the cane, which produces a more delicious rum."

And then it's on to Damoiseau's more humble concoctions, which are immune to such highfalutin epicurean ruminations. Most distilleries produce a wide range of products, many of them for the local market. Among Damoiseau's bottled rum cocktails, I opt for a taste of Kimbé Red, infused with ginger and ginseng. "It means 'stay upright' in Creole," explains my bartender guide as my head starts to spin. "It's our local Viagra." After three or four more samples (including white and dark rums and something called shrub, a delicious Grand Marnier-like Christmas infusion), it becomes clear I'll be needing an Advil.

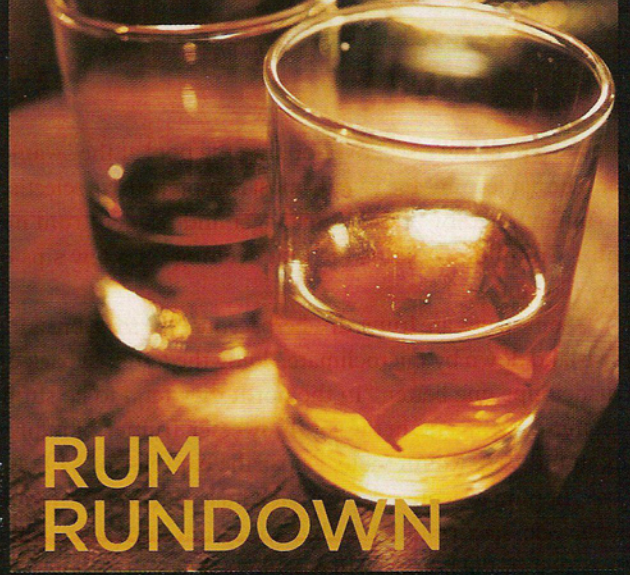
The next morning, Advil promptly deployed, I'm off to Martinique, a short plane ride away from Guadeloupe. Martinique is widely considered the finest producer of aged rum. A major exporter to France, the island makes rum under the same exacting government standards—the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée—applied to French cheeses and wine. Here the distilleries are thriving, the rum—and the rum-tasting experience—much more polished.

In the town of Ste. Marie I stop at the Saint James distillery, which, bizarrely, also has a train ride. Saint James's modest Musée de Rhum—with its clunky vitrines (posters, shot glasses, a reared plastic snake)—holds far less appeal than the *petit* train tour offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays. At the end of the tour, we taste a rich and nuanced Rhum Vieux.

After several days of sampling rum while standing around

**Heritage gallery:** Rums at the Cap Est hotel bar have labels that intrigue and entertain—history in a bottle in more ways than one.

the tasting rooms of far-flung *rhumeries*, it's time to do something novel: drink rum while sitting down. My hotel on Martinique is the Cap Est, the island's ➤



**WHILE YOU'LL NEED TO TAKE A TRIP TO THE ISLANDS TO TASTE MOST OF THE RUMS IN THIS STORY, THE HIGH-END, PURE-CANE CARIBBEAN RUMS LISTED HERE SHOULD KEEP YOU PRETTY HAPPY STATESIDE.**

**Pyrat, Superior Blanco, Anguilla (\$17).** New to the American market, this light rum from the producers of Patrón tequila is smooth and fruity with a slight herbal finish.

**Pyrat, Planter's Gold XO Reserve, Anguilla (\$26).** A luscious Cognac-like sipper with an intense caramel nose and a burnt-orange finish. Aged 15 years in oak, this one's for savoring slowly.

**Saint James, Extra Old, Martinique (\$27).** One of the French island rums most widely available in the U.S. Complex and buttery, with a long finish.

**Cruzan, Single Barrel Estate Rum, St. Croix (\$30).** This aged amber rum from the U.S. Virgin Islands has the color and flavor of light maple syrup, with a sugary high-alcohol finish.

**La Favorite, Rhum Agricole Blanc, Martinique (\$30).** At 100 proof, this rum—from one of Martinique's tiniest distilleries—packs a punch. Beneath an aroma of fresh-cut cane lurks a distinctive peppery flavor.

**10 Cane, Trinidad (\$35).** This new light-golden rum was developed by Moët Hennessy. It's rich, fragrant, and viscous, with an intense cane aroma.

**Angostura, 1824 Rum, Trinidad (\$49).** Who knew the famed bitters producer also made rum? Their top-of-the-line 1824 blend (the year their bitters were first developed) is aged for 12 years in used bourbon casks. It features a funky molasses finish and an intense camphor aroma.

**Gordon & MacPhail, Demerara Rum, Vintage 1974, Guyana (\$140).** Guyanans have been handcrafting high-quality rum since the days of the swashbucklers. This limited-edition 30-year-old bottle (available in small quantities in the U.S.) is the ultimate gift for the true connoisseur. With hints of apricot and prune, and butterscotch and charcoal aromas, this rum's strictly for sipping like the single malt Scotch it resembles.

finest. Here I snag a seat overlooking the pool at the swanky bar. The bar features the island's most comprehensive selection of rum, curated by assistant manager and resident rum nut Gilles Trouillot. He joins me that evening for a few sips of very old rum.

"Some rums are fruity, dry, herbaceous," he says, breaking the island down by microclimate, doing the *terroirist* back on Guadeloupe one better. "In the north they tend to be stronger, more astringent; in the south, sweeter, fruitier." I inquire about the 1929 Rhum Vieux Depaz the bar sells for \$1,800 a glass, hoping to score a sip. No such luck. But don't be fooled by the year, says Trouillot. Unlike wine, rum stops aging when it's sealed in the bottle. "There is no real reason to buy a '29 except bragging rights," admits Trouillot. The only number that really matters is the number of years aged in oak, which may show up in the label's fine print or nowhere at all.

The next day I visit Distillerie Depaz and find an enchanting place—not only for its sheer beauty, but also for its dramatic history. In 1902, the now idle volcano of Mont-Pelée, upon which the plantation is built, rained lava and ash on the north of the island, killing 30,000 people, including the Depaz family. The sole survivor, young Victor Depaz, had been away at school in Bordeaux when calamity struck. He returned home and eventually rebuilt the plantation and learned to make rum. Today the imposing manor house is used by the corporate principals who bought the property from Victor's last heirs. My self-guided tour ends, as usual, with more tastes of rum. Was the 110 proof more viscous than the less potent 100? It's all becoming a blur.

As if the rum gods had realized my fatigue, I happen upon a rum-tasting experience that approaches perfection. It is at Habitation Clément, not far from my hotel, that I find a rum distillery fantasia that Walt Disney would've designed if he weren't a teetotaler. The man behind this, Bernard Hayot, a prosperous businessman from one of the island's original colonial families, has turned Clément into a major attraction. The property is impeccably manicured and dotted with impressively large trees. Beyond the palms lie swan-filled ponds. Halls for aging hold stacks of pristine oak barrels imprinted with the turn-of-the-century likeness of founder Homère Clément. On the hilltop stands the plantation home where framed photos attest to the spot's enduring allure—Catherine Deneuve in a movie shot on location, François Mitterrand and the first President Bush at a big banquet lunch.

Clément, like many producers, has recently introduced spiffy new bottles and heavy crystal carafes, and attached familiar superlatives cribbed from Cognac—XO and VSOP. "We wanted to give consumers a point of reference," the distillery's general manager, Charles Larcher, says while walking me through a tasting that concludes with a luscious 1976.

Last year Clément made its first foray into the American

market. For U.S. drinkers they lowered the alcohol content and created Première Canne, a super-premium white rum made from the cream of their annual crop. Clément has also begun snapping up the competition. Three years ago they purchased JM—Les Héritiers de Crassous de Médeuil (JM for short), a tiny distillery known to connoisseurs as the real king of aged rum. I plan to visit the secluded facility in the savage north of the island the next day.

On the final day of my rum-tasting tour, I make my way down endless roads in search of JM. An unexpected downpour blows in from the ocean. The rain obscures my progress. Finally, at the end of a mud and rock track, I arrive at an example of the *rhumerie* as it was before the boom. Here is a distillery in its truest, unadorned, pre-marketed version. Despite such humble appearances, "We are the Rolls-Royce of rum," boasts longtime distiller Nazerre Canatou as he pours me a taste of the 1996 Rhum Vieux in the shop. While the rum

## MY SELF-GUIDED TOUR ENDS, AS USUAL, WITH MORE TASTES OF RUM. WAS THE 110 PROOF MORE VISCIOUS THAN THE LESS POTENT 100? IT'S ALL BECOMING A BLUR.

revolution is heating up elsewhere in the Caribbean, at JM there are no T-shirts, rum punches, or other distractions—just very good rum (until recently there wasn't even a shop). I sample several rums before deciding on the one I will take home. It's the eight-year-old '96. I buy it not only because it is delicious but also because it's the true spirit of the Caribbean rum-tasting experience: unpretentious, visceral, and eye-opening. I also know that at my corner liquor store—despite its 30 single malts, its 10 top-shelf tequilas, its 40 artisanal vodkas from every corner of Europe—I won't be able to find this rum on the shelves. Not for now at least. ■

Jay Cheshes has written for *Travel + Leisure*, *Radar*, and *GQ*.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A sugarcane press at Clément; a patron at Le Joséphine bar in Fort-de-France, Martinique, savors a regional rum the best way: on the island where it was made; testing rum at Damoiseau; the grounds of Clément.**