

Rum Running IN MARTINIQUE

Getting to know this rugged Caribbean island through its long history of rum production

BY MARGARET SWAINE



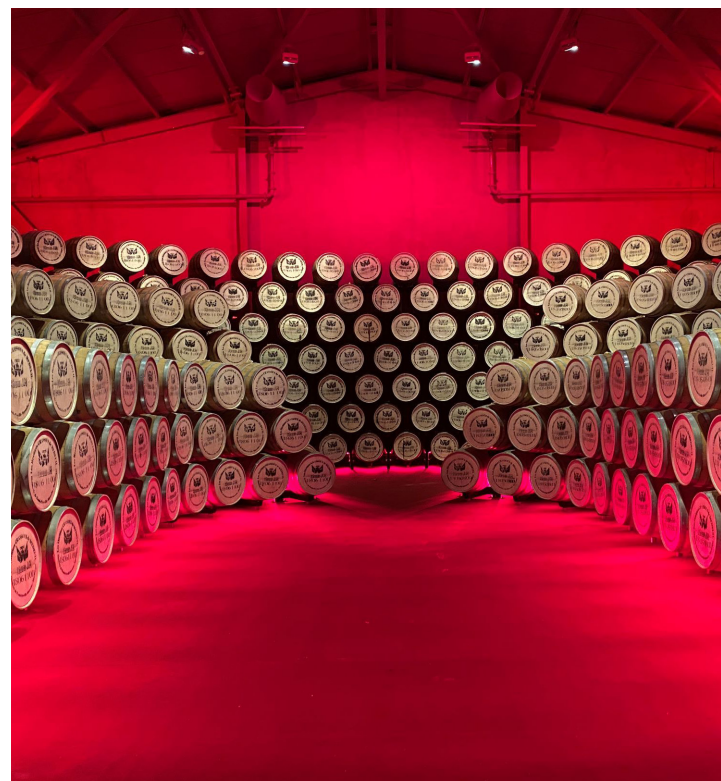
I stepped out of the taxi and breathed in air filled with the tantalizing aroma of freshly crushed sugar cane intermingled with the sweet treacle smells of open tank fermentation. The clang of old machinery at work and the roar of sugar cane laden trucks assaulted my ears. This was a distillery in full action mode, turning cane juice into rum as I watched.

I was in Martinique, and while a majority of vacationers seemed to be here for its incredible nature trails and unspoiled beaches, I was among those who chose to follow its routes to

rum. The island's guidebook stated, "All roads lead to rum could be the motto of Martinique." While there is no longer a rum distillery in every community of this rugged Caribbean island, there are about a dozen still in production.

The third-largest island in the Lesser Antilles, Martinique is just a few blocks smaller than New York City. Sugar cane and banana plantations occupy much of the agricultural land of this fertile volcanic island. Some parts roll on as far as the eye can see, though permanent crops are less than ten per cent of the land use. Much of this green paradise is forests, woodlands and nature preserves.

Its rum production is unique and protected. Most of the world's rum is produced by



fermenting and distilling molasses, a by-product of sugar production. In Martinique, the “agricole rum” is made from fresh-cut sugar cane brought directly from the distillery fields, crushed to extract the juice, and then fermented immediately.

Martinique is an overseas department of France. In November 1996, the island’s agricole rum received the prestigious French “appellation d’origine contrôlée” (AOC) designation, guaranteeing the products’ origin and quality. The rum blanc is a young white rum, most often used in cocktails. Rum vieux, which must be aged at least three years in wood barrels, is more for sipping. All of the distilleries I visited offered much longer aged AOC agricole rhums as well as ones aged or finished in a variety of different barrels, including those from French Cognac houses.

My visit in February of this year coincided with the start of the harvest, which continued until June. It was a perfect time to visit the distilleries to see rum being made in front of my eyes. The ones I toured all offered a good tour experience with free tasting samples and a wide choice of rhums for purchase.

Distillerie J.M. (rum-jm-la-distillerie.com), surrounded by lush green vegetation at the bottom of the River Roche valley, was the one where I saw rum production in its full glory. My self-guided, follow the numbers tour, started in a sugar cane garden where several cane varieties were grown, continued by the sugar mill where the juice was extracted, and then by the ovens where the dry cane residue burned to heat the stills.

Next, I went by the open fermentation tanks, bubbling away as yeasts converted the sugar cane juice into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Point six on the map housed the stills where the magic of changing



fermented juice into agricole rum happened. Number seven was the barrel room where barrels were charred with fire to caramelize their interior, which enhances the flavour they impart to the rum. Then I saw the cellar where rum was aged, the laboratory to analyze and test the products, and a sensory room where I could smell the seven characteristic notes found in J.M rum.

Finally, the eleventh stop was the tasting room where I could sample and, of course, buy. J.M has collaborated with three French spirit houses to create its new “Finish” range of rhums. I purchased an excellent one that first spent nine years ageing in former bourbon barrels before being finished for several months in 400-litre casks that previously contained Delamain Cognac.

The first Saint James distillery (rum-saintjames.com/en/) was built in 1765 in Saint-Pierre, a

town which was wiped out by the volcanic eruption of 1902. It relocated after the tragedy to Sainte-Marie on the Atlantic coast. Next to the distillery is a splendid colonial house which houses its museum and tasting room. In the second-floor museum, I saw a documentary film about rum production and a display of artefacts which told the history of Saint James. Another building, their new House of Distillation contained ancient alembics depicting the evolution of stills over 255 years.

Depaz Distillerie (www.depaz.fr/en), rebuilt by Victor Depaz in 1917 after the Mount Pelée eruption in 1902 destroyed the original property, was nestled at the foothills of Mount Pelée. There I saw the oldest steam-powered engine on the island, a paddlewheel, steam museum and the shop tasting room.

My final visit was to Trois Rivières Plantation (plantationtroisrivieres.com) near Sainte-Luce on the

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road to the southern beaches of the island. Its name comes from the three rivers that border its acres of sugarcane fields. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the plantation specialized in the production of sugar. In 1907, it turned solely to making agricole rum. Today it has a comprehensive and impressive range of rhums: single cask, vintage-dated and special labels. Cuvée de l’Océan, one of the first mono-zonal rhums, has a sea saltiness from its fields close to the water. Triple Millésime is the first multi-vintage rum from Martinique and Cask Strength is bottled without dilution and aged in new American oak casks.

Touring these rum distilleries, I learned a lot not only about production, but also about the island’s history and culture. Sipping fine agricole rum while expanding my knowledge made the lessons go down so easy.