

# Rum Sweet Rum, when ah call yuh...

By Anton L. Allahar



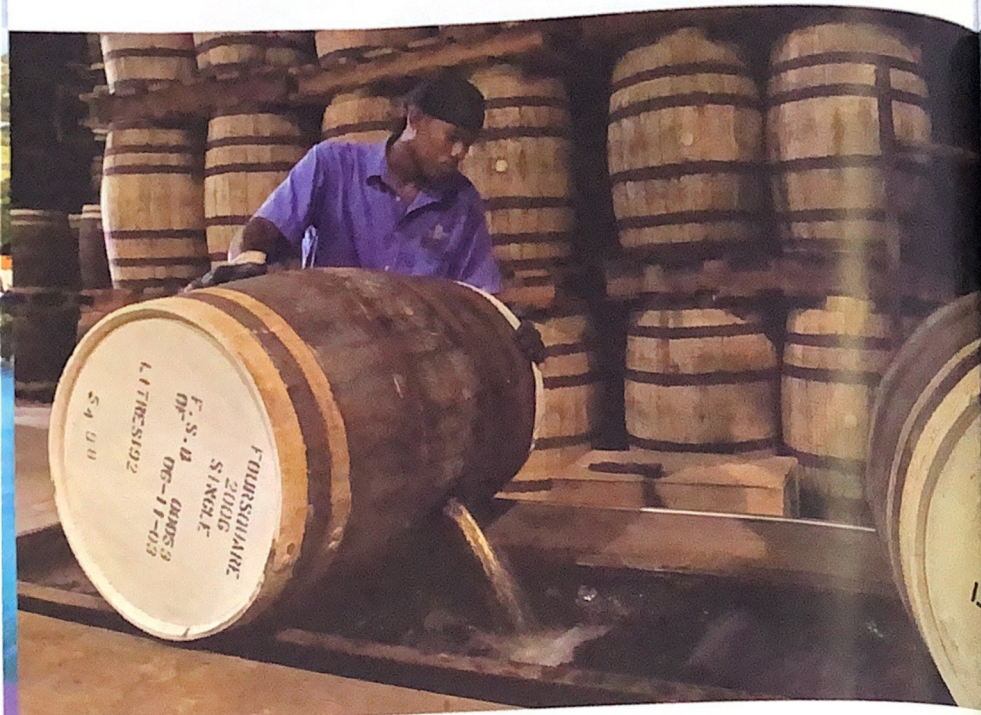
When Bob Marley asked us to “emancipate our minds from mental slavery” (Redemption Song), it was in reference to our collective condition as ex-colonial peoples whose conceptions of ourselves, whose tastes and attitudes were formed and given to us by outside others.

Colonialism produces in the colonial subject a sense of inferiority, a sense that theirs is never quite good enough and that they cannot measure up to the colonisers. We unquestioningly look up to the master, even for ideas of ourselves. These habits of the mind and heart are bred into the ex-colonial subjects who continue to look to the departed masters for approval in a wide variety of areas.

These ‘truths’ apply even to the choice of our different forms of food, drink and recreation. In the case of rum, for example, that very Caribbean of beverages, it has long been invested with the stain of inferiority, certainly in comparison with other popularly consumed, imported beverages such as whisky or Scotch whisky, and lately spirits such as brandy, vodka, tequila and wines. Perhaps it is because of its humble origins and the fact that it is widely identified as the beverage of poor and the masses and is consumed in those dens of Caribbean iniquity, the local rum shop, that rum has been so negatively stereotyped. Because also of the fact that rum is a by-product of sugar cane, which is not indigenous to the Caribbean and which is synonymous with slavery and indentureship, colonial domination, racism, harsh manual labour and even sin, it has always had to struggle for acceptability. The so-called ‘demon rum’ that is associated with public drunkenness, pirates (those ‘old brigands’

of adventures of the high seas) and lower class others, who operate outside the pale of what is socially respectable and acceptable, all conspire to label rum and those who enjoy the seductive allure of its tastes and smells brigands themselves.

This is a heavy legacy that Richard Seale has sought personally to combat as managing director of R. L. Seale & Company Limited, owner of the Foursquare Rum Distillery in Barbados. “The mistake rum producers have made,” he told me, “was that they have not traditionally taken pride in their product. They have permitted the consumer to dictate the standards and quality of their product.” Comparing rum to Scotch whiskies, blended and single malt, Richard is at pains to detail the various qualities and flavours that the consumer has come to identify as satisfying their personal tastes. Thus, connoisseurs of blended Scotch whiskies are as familiar with the unique differences among



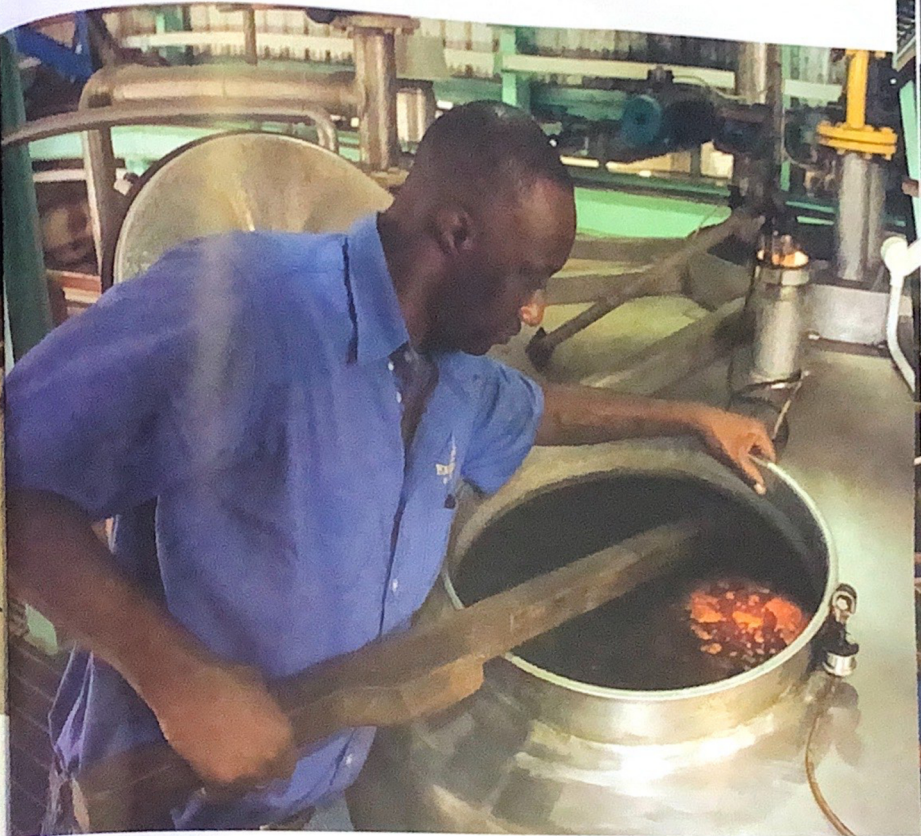
Johnnie Walker Blue, Green, Gold, Black and Red, as they are with the distinctive flavours and bouquets of single malt scotches such as Glenfiddich, Glenmorangie or an Abolour. If it is not the consumers of these spirits who tell the manufacturers what they want, Richard asks, why then should the manufacturers of rum permit rum drinkers to do so? In passing, I ask the reader to note too the class connotations and distinctions between the terms 'connoisseur' and 'drinker': the one suggesting refinement and the other hinting at crudeness, perhaps even vulgarity. The producers and sellers of rum have traditionally had an eye more to the market and to maximizing volume of sales, to the production and export of bulk rums, and in the process they have neglected to concern themselves with the production of a truly refined product. In other words, with inconsistent standards and qualities, they have allowed their product to be dictated by the consumer or by a mar-

ket mentality in which more is better and cheaper better yet.

Richard Seale is adamant that, like the Scotch whisky or brandy markets, standards for rum production must be set by the producer and manufacturer. The latter ought not blindly to pursue profit by any means, but to take pride in their product. It ought not to be a race to sell as much quantity as possible, but to produce a quality product in which the producer can take personal pride. Speaking with the pride and dedication of a master craftsman, Richard refuses to accept his product as inferior or to have it measured by some arbitrary standard set by brandy, eg "this is a good rum made in the tradition of brandy making", for he sees rum produced in the finest traditions as being on par with the finest brandies. Bearing in mind the competition from other spirits, he seems

to play on the well-known challenge which holds that "anything you can do I can do better", I can almost hear him saying "anything you can do, I can do at least, just as well". Thus, in the same way that another Richard, Hennessy in this case, has given us Cognac VS (Very Special), Cognac VSOP (Very Superior Old Pale) and Cognac XO (Extra Old), Hanschell Inniss of Cockspur fame has offered us Cockspur VSOR (Very Superior Old Rare) and our Richard, Seale in this case, offers us the exquisite Doorly's XO.

What these producers are saying to both the brandy and whisky competition and to the rum drinkers, is that they too are connoisseurs, albeit of rum, they too are sophisticated and discriminating in their taste, for their beverage of choice is just as complex and amusing in its taste as any brandy or whisky. In other words, rum



drinkers could justifiably feel themselves equal to consumers of other fine spirits. So if General Motors could have their Cadillac brand used as a synonym for top quality, as in 'the Cadillac of home builders', or 'the Cadillac of sailboats', and if the Champagne region of France could have their wine brands accepted as being synonymous with the very best quality, Canada Dry, for example, calls its ginger ale 'the Champagne of soft drinks', so too rum connoisseurs ought to be able to boast that their preferred beverage, rum, is the Cadillac of spirits.

But this will only happen when rum producers are able to set the standards of what

rums are produced, how they are distilled, how they are blended and how they are marketed. BMW has successfully done this in the automobile industry and they play second fiddle to no one in that business. There is no such thing as a cheap BMW, and because of this the consumer has come to trust that brand. One never sees a sale on BMW cars implying that their pricing is always fair, never arbitrary, determined by BMW themselves, and driven by a professional commitment to the highest standards of excellence.

After my personal tour of the Foursquare Rum Distillery, Richard invited me to sample

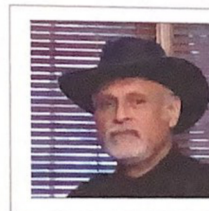
the fruits of his labour. When I sipped his exquisite 1998 blend, or his R.L. Seale 10 Year Old offering alongside his Doorly's XO, I was in a position to appreciate both the science and art of rum. In the distillation of the fermented molasses and honeys, spoke of the 'good fortune' of having both the copper pot still and the column still running together and simultaneously, which enabled him produce a blend of rums from both stills, combining advanced chemical techniques and physical apparatuses and the fine palate of a master blender. His passion for rum is a veritable vocation as his face lights up whenever he speaks of his craft, whether giving an im-



Images: Rum making at Foursquare Rum Distillery, Barbados.

promptu tour of the factory or in the more formal setting of one of his seminars on rum production. A mathematician by training, but with a flair for chemistry, he spoke knowledgeably and confidently to me of the chemical sophistication of today's rum operations as he detailed the process by which the use of lower pressure distillation and reduced temperatures can avoid the triggering of certain unsavory chemical reactions and unwanted by-products that can result from too high temperatures, while at the same time stabilizing the otherwise volatile alcohol in the stills.

After spending a couple hours with Richard Seale and savouring his wonderfully informed passion for rum making and blending I came away with an even deeper appreciation for my spirit of choice. Now I can hold my head high when I engage my presumptuous whisky- and brandy-drinking friends who loved to laud it over me. But that is now all in the past. For not only did I learn about chemistry and physics and how rum is made, but more importantly Richard taught me that I too am sophisticated and discriminating in my appreciation of rum sweet rum, and why when it calls me, I am bound to come! ☺



Dr. Anton Allahar was born in Trinidad and Tobago and holds a PhD in Political Sociology (University of Toronto). A rum connoisseur, he is a Professor at the University of Western Ontario, Canada and a former president of the Caribbean Studies Association. He holds 2 honorary professorships from Cuban universities, and has written/edited 12 books and over 70 refereed journal articles and book chapters. Email: allahar@uwo.ca