



On the scene in Speightstown (left) and the spirit of choice with lime at John Moore Bar rum shop.

# Rum Luck

A spirited tradition gets fresh life in Barbados.

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**T**ROPICAL CLOUDBURSTS TOUSLE THE sugarcane fields at Mount Gay, urging their grassy scent toward a cavernous bond house filled with aging rum. Time turns slowly among the oak barrels, which are stamped with the name of the world's longest-running rum maker, in Barbados' rural Saint Lucy Parish. But inside a white-washed laboratory next door, master blender Trudiann Branker is distilling the future of her island's iconic spirit.

"Rum has had a marriage with the Caribbean cliché for many, many years," says Branker, the first female master blender at Mount Gay, which was established in 1703. "Now we're just more discerning drinkers." While a seventeenth-century visitor to Barbados called the local spirit "hot, hellish, and terrible," these days the island's rum is prized for its nuanced flavor profiles.

It's a remarkable turnaround for a drink first conceived as a way to use up molasses, a by-product of the sugar-making process. Connoisseurs have sought out fine rums for decades, but only in recent years have premium bottles elbowed in among the sweetened, spiced spirits that have long commanded shelf space in shops. On the ever-more-selective international market, great rum has finally made its own luck.

Along with a small cohort of ambitious distillers here, Branker is exploring the potential of the island's tropical terroir. The same postcard assets that draw

## Seat at the Bar

travelers to this garden island – powdery beaches and sheltering cliffs, bright reefs, and generous winter sunshine – conspire to create ideal distilling conditions: Layers of ancient coral beneath Barbados filter the groundwater that Mount Gay uses to remarkable purity, while the Caribbean climate speeds aging and develops richly layered aromas.

Although some Caribbean distillers smooth their rums' rough edges with a dose of sugar before bottling, Barbados custom dictates that spirits are left to stand on their own. "It's what we've been doing here for decades," says Branker, whose first signature, limited-edition release debuted last October. "And what you have is the perfect situation to make rum."

At the eastern limit of the Lesser Antilles, Barbados measures just 21 miles from end to end, so it's easy to explore in a day or two of driving. Winding lanes join the island's 11 parishes, which rise into hills between the west coast's beaches and rugged cliffs to the east. Here's where to taste on a trip to the island.



From top: Beachside on Barbados, Trudiann Branker at Mount Gay Distillery, and barrels at Foursquare Distillery.



### The Original MOUNT GAY RUM DISTILLERY

Get the world's oldest rum from the source at Mount Gay, where the first stop on a distillery tour is a centuries-old well bored deep into coral bedrock. Branker's team pulls from rows of barrels that span decades, and visitors can use those same spirits to create personalized blends in her rum laboratory. *Tours from \$125 per person. Church Hill Road, Saint Lucy; mountgayrum.com.*

### Limited Releases FOURSQUARE RUM DISTILLERY

Distiller Richard Seale bottles rums for a long list of labels, including Doorly's XO and R.L. Seale's Old Brigand, but it's his limited-release bottles that inspire bidding wars on the secondary market. A self-guided tour of Foursquare's warehouse-like distillery ends

with a generous tasting at the on-site Copper Still Bar. *Foursquare, Saint Philip.*

### Rum Shops JOHN MOORE AND NIGEL BENN AUNTY

Clicking dominoes and rattling ice welcome visitors to Barbados' neighborhood rum shops. Hundreds of these often one-room shacks washed in eye-catching hues dot the island – places to meet locals and enjoy a dose of Bajan hospitality. John Moore Bar in Saint James serves iced Mount Gay in a shack with sunset views. Try glasses of Old Brigand rum at Saint Andrew's Nigel Benn Aunty Bar, owned by the aunt of champion boxer Nigel Benn, whose photos line the wall and whose winnings bought the brightly painted watering hole. *John Moore Bar, Highway 1B, Saint James. Nigel Benn Aunty Bar, Highway 2, Saint Andrew.*

(TRUDIANN BRANKER) COURTESY MOUNT GAY DISTILLERY

## Seat at the Bar



From left: St. Nicholas Abbey distillery's grounds, Hunte's Gardens owner Anthony Hunte sips a rum punch, and Cobblers Cove.

### Sugar Purists ST. NICHOLAS ABBEY

A seventeenth-century Jacobean plantation house presides over cane fields at this family-owned operation. From a steam-powered sugarcane mill to a burnished pot-and-column still, their small-scale distilling pays off in elegant flavor profiles. The only distillery on the island that works exclusively with cane syrup, rather than molasses, St. Nicholas Abbey produces rum such as a 15-year-old single cask that has racked up awards for its satiny balance of fruit and warm spice. *Cherry Tree Hill, Saint Peter; stnicholasabbey.com.*

### Punch Point HUNTE'S GARDENS

Even purists like a good rum punch, made with the traditional rhyming recipe: one of sour, two of sweet, three of strong, four of weak. (That translates to a blend of lime, sugar, rum, and water spiked with spiced bitters.) Hunte's Gardens in Saint Joseph Parish serves an especially fine version on a breezy veranda overlooking the manicured grounds, where owner Anthony Hunte holds court as hummingbirds dart between blooms. *Highway 3A, Castle Grant, Saint Joseph; huntsgardens-barbados.com.*

## BARBADOS ESSENTIALS

Where to stay on the island.

- Wicker and candy-striped linen channel vintage ambiance at **Cobblers Cove** in Speightstown, where guests gather in the newly redecorated Great House for tropical tea parties and sunset rum punch. The 40-suite property's garden rooms open onto lush plantings, while oceanfront accommodations overlook turquoise water. *Doubles from \$888, including breakfast daily and one boat outing to swim with sea turtles.*
- At the **Port Ferdinand Yacht and Beach Club Residences**, all 46 villas offer dockside access to 50- to 90-foot berths for private vessels. Hawksbill

turtles swim just offshore here, so guests can wildlife-watch over a seafood dinner prepared in their villa by one of the property's chefs. *One-bedroom residence from \$1,047, including a full-service berth, breakfast daily, a \$100 resort credit, water taxi transportation, and Nikki Beach Club lounge spots.*

- Mahogany trees and 1,000 feet of silvery beach frame 113-room **Sandy Lane**, whose four restaurants range from café casual to intimate luxury. There's room to play at the family-friendly resort, with its Treehouse Club for kids and coastal breezes on three golf courses,

including two 18-hole Tom Fazio-designed courses. *Doubles from \$1,845, including round-trip airport transfers, breakfast daily, one 60-minute massage, and a complimentary round of golf.*

- A beachy palette at the **Fairmont Royal Pavilion** harmonizes with views of sand and sea from each of the 75 ocean-facing rooms. Afternoon tea is served in the beachside Taboras Restaurant, and activities range from sailing and catamaran cruises to swimming with wild sea turtles. *Doubles from \$1,275, including a welcome amenity, breakfast daily, and a \$100 resort credit.* VI