



# The Rum Slinger

ON THE BAR SCENE, RUM IS MOST DEFINITELY THE NEW BLACK, SAYS THIS YEAR'S BEST BARTENDER CHARLOTTE VOISEY. SHE TELLS BEN MCCORMACK WHY RUM DESERVES ITS NEW-FOUND POPULARITY AND MIXES HIM A FEW STUNNING COCKTAILS IN THE PROCESS

**R**um's time has come. The last time you ordered a cocktail, there's a high chance that you asked for a Mojito, which, reputedly, has overtaken the vodka-based Cosmopolitan to become the Western world's most popular cocktail. But did you realise that what you were drinking was made out of rum?

'Not everyone knows that the Mojito is a rum cocktail,' says Charlotte Voisey, bar manager of Apartment 195 in Chelsea. 'People know that it has lime, sugar and mint in it, but not necessarily rum. Last year, a few customers asked for a vodka Mojito. I had to point out that it wouldn't be the same cocktail, or as nice.'

Charlotte is someone whose advice you should take: not only was the 27-year-old voted Best Bartender at The Bar Awards 2004, but Apartment 195 was the *Evening Standard's* Bar of the Year 2003. What's more, Charlotte is a big fan of rum. 'I like the way it tastes. Rum is made from sugarcane and I have a very sweet tooth.'

But Charlotte likes rum for professional reasons too. 'Rum is so versatile,' she explains. 'There's a fantastic range of rum available these days: from white rums that can be used in a similar way to vodka, to golden rums that bring a richness to cocktails, and aged rums that are sipped like Cognac or whisky.'

Charlotte describes young light rums, such as Bacardi Superior, Appleton White and Havana Club Añejo Blanco, as 'very accessible, very mixable white spirits that can be combined with a range of flavours'. Unlike vodka, though, these rums bring their own flavour and sweetness to whatever they're mixed with.

Golden rums, such as Appleton Special, Bacardi 8, Havana Club Añejo 7 Años and Matusalem Clásico, have been aged in oak barrels, generally for between three and 10 years. The wood gives the rum its golden colour, while the ageing adds an extra depth of flavour to a Daiquiri or Mojito, say.

Dark rums usually get their deeper colour because they have been aged for longer than golden rums and sometimes because caramel has been added. This makes the rum more syrupy and adds an extra dimension to cocktails because the caramel gives the rum a different texture as well as flavour. 'Alternatively,' Charlotte says, 'dark rums can be sipped on their own and rolled around the mouth to touch all the taste points.' Dark rums include Charlotte's all-time favourite, the 23-year-old Ron Zapaca Centenario – 'that's older than

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some of my staff!' – as well as Myers's and Porfidio Añejo from Mexico, which has a fresh flavour that Charlotte describes as being 'like chewing on sugarcane'.

To illustrate the differences between the three types of rum, Charlotte makes me three Mojitos. In the light rum Mojito, she uses Matusalem Platino, Apartment's house rum, although she says you could just as easily use Bacardi or Havana Club. It's the classic Mojito, as refreshing as a glass of lemonade. For the golden rum Mojito, Charlotte uses Havana 7, which gives the cocktail a slightly darker appearance and a noticeably sweeter flavour. And for the aged rum Mojito, she uses the Zapaca. It tastes entirely different to the other two drinks. The sugar crunch and the mint flavour are there, but instead of the clean, refreshing sensation there is something altogether richer that I'm not sure I'd recognise as a Mojito in a blind tasting.

Charlotte agrees: 'I once made a Zapaca Mojito for one of our regulars and he asked what the extra flavour I'd added was. But it was just the rum.' She makes the point that a 23-year-old rum is likely to have more in



## DOS AND DON'TS OF RUM

- DO** experiment with different types of rums when you order cocktails
- DO** enjoy a good rum cocktail with a decent cigar
- DO** try an aged rum as a late-night sipping drink
- DON'T** think of rum necessarily as a sweet drink – it can work in sour cocktails too
- DON'T** think that just because you don't like white rum, you won't like any rum – there's a whole lot more
- DON'T** think that rum needs mixing with other flavours. It can work well on its own



“ WHILE MOST COCKTAILS ARE EITHER VERY FEMININE OR VERY MACHO, THE MOJITO IS THE ULTIMATE UNISEX DRINK ”

common with a 23-year-old Cognac or whisky than it does with one-year-old rum because of the complex character that develops over the years through contact with the barrel. The moral of the story? If you feel your Mojitos are lacking in flavour, move to a darker rum.

But you don't have to be muddling mint and crushed ice to get into rum. Charlotte recommends that rum virgins try mixing young white rum with their favourite fruit juice at home. 'Most fruit has a natural sweetness,' Charlotte reasons, 'so I can't think of any particular fruit that wouldn't be a good match for rum. Even citrus fruits tend to balance the sweetness, rather than clash with it.' There's hope, too, for a much-mocked combination: 'Something as simple as a rum and Coke can be a great drink with a squeeze of fresh lime.'

Of course, rum can be appreciated on its own. Charlotte advises adding a splash of water to open up the spirit. With the Zapaca, this transforms an almost chocolatey drink into something that tastes citrusy before the rich sweetness asserts itself.

Or you could take a leaf out of the Latin Americans' books. 'In Brazil, you'll see people on their doorsteps drinking Caipirinhas. That's where I learnt how to make them,' Charlotte says (rolling the 'r' of 'Caipirinha' to prove it). In Cuba, Havana Gold costs 50p a bottle – cheaper than Coke, cheaper than beer, and often offered at the table without a charge. 'When I went to Cuba,' Charlotte recalls, 'I went out on an expedition and saw that a lot of the locals drink Piña Colodas with a bottle of rum on the side. To them, drinking rum is like using salt and pepper, because it's so cheap and so widespread.'

Rum's association with Latin America is one reason for its growing popularity in the UK, Charlotte believes. 'Rum has become more accessible in recent years. People have been travelling to the Caribbean and South America more and they appreciate the lifestyle.' Buying a bottle of rum is a nice way to recapture those memories: what better way to remember balmy nights in Barbados than with a bottle of the island's Cockspur rum?

But the biggest boost for rum appreciation in London has been the opening of Floridaita, Sir Terence Conran's homage to the legendary Floridaita bar in Havana, the favourite hang-out of Ernest Hemingway. The popular Soho venue stocks more than 40 different rums in its two bars. 'Floridaita will help a lot,' Charlotte reckons. 'It's bringing rum as a concept to a wide audience. In fact, we're also toying with the idea of turning the salon at Apartment 195 into a Mojito room with a humididor.'

So, to what does Charlotte ascribe the current popularity of Mojitos? 'While most cocktails tend to be either very feminine or very macho, the Mojito is the ultimate unisex drink. Also, the smell of fresh mint at the bar is so enticing,' she says. But there is a downside: 'Mojitos are time consuming to make, so, for bartenders, it's a love-hate relationship.'

Charlotte and her all-female team make 200 Mojitos every night. 'These skinny, pretty girls came to me for work, and now they've got big muscles from all the muddling and shaking they do.' Sounds like a rum do! **SM**

## WHERE TO DRINK RUM

Apartment 195, 195 King's Road, SW3. Tel: 020 7351 5195

Floridaita, 100 Wardour Street, W1. Tel: 020 7314 4000

Lab, 12 Old Compton Street, W1. Tel: 020 7437 7820

Trailer Happiness, 177 Portobello Rd, W11. Tel: 020 7727 2700