AND A BOTTLE OF RUM

A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails

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For my mother and father

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Introduction

[Molasses]

How beverage alcohol is produced, distributed, consumed, and regulated … offers a key to the nature of a society and how it changes over time.

—JACK S. BLOCKER JR.,
JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, 2003

Rum makes a fine hot drink, a fine cold drink, and is not so bad from the neck of a bottle.

—FORTUNE MAGAZINE, 1933

I'm standing in front of the City Tavern Restaurant in Philadelphia's Old City. It's an austerely classical building, with tall stone steps rising from the sidewalk to a recessed door. At the top of the steps stands a young man with his hands behind his back. He has a sallow complexion and wears a short blue jacket with meringuelike ruffles about the neck. He has the air of a sentry, of someone with whom I must negotiate in order to get past the door.

People in period dress always unsettle me. I dread the moment they make eye contact, then snap into historic character and start speaking with a surplus of enunciatory gusto about an esteemed gentleman you've perhaps heard of by the name of Thomas Jefferson or some such thing. I understand some people enjoy this palaver. I am not one of them.

The tavern is a faithful reconstruction of the old tavern on the same spot, built from the ground up by the National Park Service in 1976. When the original tavern opened in 1773, it was arguably the finest in all the colonies and quickly became a social hub for the city and, in turn, for a young nation. Colonial representatives to the Continental Congress lodged and ate here during their deliberations, and through the tavern's doors passed such illustrious Americans as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Paul Revere, and John Adams, the last of whom called this “the most genteel tavern in America.”

They arrived here seeking to craft a new nation. I have come seeking an old drink.

Rum is the history of America in a glass. It was invented by New World colonists for New World colonists. In the early colonies, it was a vital part of the economic and cultural life of the cities and villages alike, and it soon became an actor in the political life. Hoping to briefly visit that lost world, I ascend the steps of the tavern.

At the doorway Mr. Ruffles happily spares me ye olde time banter. He escorts me through the Subscription Room, where a melancholy woman in a mobcap plays something funereal on the harpsichord. Just beyond is the tavern, which is dusky and furnished with several nicely worn tables and benches. I am shown a seat in a corner, and handed a menu of rustic colonial fare, which includes West Indies pepperpot soup, prime rib with a Yorkshire pancake, and turkey potpie.

The food sounds appealing if a little severe, but I'm only interested in ordering a rum shrub, a popular colonial-era drink. The unusual name comes from the Arabic word for drink, *shrab*. Colonists would chop up fruit or berries (or a strong spice like ginger), boil the pieces in vinegar, then let it steep for a day. The concoction then would be boiled again with sugar, resulting in a dense, intensely flavorful syrup that could preserve the pleasing bite of the fruit into winter and beyond.

A little shrub added to a glass of water would make it come alive with taste and glimmer with a light pastel hue, and the concoction could be further enlivened with rum or brandy, and often was. Vinegarbased cocktails may not be the trend of the moment, but I am told by my ponytailed waiter, Chris, who was not at risk of lapsing into any unprovoked hilarity, that they accounted for 60 percent of the wine and spirit sales at the City Tavern. Chris further informs me that shrub was once a popular drink because it provided vitamin C throughout the year. Never mind that vitamin C wasn't actually identified until the 1920s. I nod my head gravely and order up a shrub.

The barkeep is housed in a sort of wooden cage in a corner, like a war criminal waiting to testify at a tribunal. He sets to work on my drink, but I can't see much. Other waiters lean on the counter in front of him and chat about “deuces” and “four-tops,” which strikes my ear as pleasingly colonial. My shrub readied at last, Chris brings it over and sets it down. Pale pink and effervescent, the drink looks refreshing, and at the first sip I'm pleased to discover that not the slightest hint of

vinegar comes through. It's tart and sprightly, like a dilute fruit punch, and has the thirst-cutting precision of a gin and tonic.

This is no doubt an enjoyable introduction to rum's early history. Yet I despair slightly, for I am getting no closer to finding colonial rum. The rum in this shrub is Captain Morgan, which, despite the colonial name, tastes nothing like its ancestor. From a marketing point of view, this is probably not a bad thing. The old-fashioned rum Jefferson and Adams ordered would have been cloying, greasy, nasty-smelling stuff. Colonial rum, made with a crude pot still and seat-of-the-pants technology, would have been laden with impurities, and could have been whiffed a block away. This rum shrub had been gentrified, making the past more potable.

Nor was there much choice in rum drinks. Shrub was it. An actual eighteenth-century tavern would have had a small riot of rum concoctions, along with a taverner conversant with them. Rum was by far the most popular spirit of the era, and often the only spirit sold. Guests could have ordered up a mimbo, a sling, a bombo, a syllabub, a punch, a calibogus, a flip, a bellowstop, a sampson, or a stonewall. Colonial tavern keepers were every bit as imaginative as today's $12-a-cocktail bartender and would have added molasses and dried pumpkin and coarse sugar and water and a bit of citrus and whatever else was at hand to give the drink some depth—and, more to the point, to mask the rum's taste. Few ingredients were off limits in pursuit of this goal.

To drink a rum shrub made with Captain Morgan was to linger in comfort at a safe distance from the past. Learning about rum at the City Tavern, it turns out, was like learning about the habits of wild bears at Walt Disney World's Country Bear Jamboree.

My journey would take longer than I thought.

A short while later I walk two blocks north for a wholly different rum experience. Cuba Libre is a trendy two-story restaurant and rum bar that opened in late 2000. This Friday evening it's packed with well-manicured professionals in suits, and I wedge myself sidewise to get through the downstairs crowd to the overflow bar on the mezzanine. The interior was created by a company called Dynamic Imagineering, which themed the place to convince customers that they were dining in a courtyard of Old Havana. It's all tile work and stucco, wrought-iron balconies and heavy wooden doors. Diners sit under palm trees that flutter gently

under rattan ceiling fans; the songs of Ibrahim Ferrer float above the din. A huge photomural on one wall depicts a vintage American car with bulbous fenders.

Cuba Libre is one of a handful of destination rum bars that have blossomed around the nation. They're cropping up in the wake of martini bars and single-malt Scotch bars, small meccas of rum where the spirit is treated with unaccustomed deference. Much of the output of the West Indies and the Spanish Main is arrayed high and wide behind the bar, like heads on a trophy hunter's wall: rums from Haiti, Barbados, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia. Drinkers here select from sixtytwo different varieties, priced up to $44 per shot. The drink menu is a spiralbound minitextbook that includes a brief course on the history of rum and a list of the rum drinks on offer, which include the Cuba libre, the daiquiri, the dark and stormy, the caipirinha (a sort of rough Brazilian daiquiri), and two variations on the mojito: regular and watermelon.

The mojito emerged from nowhere and by the late 1990s it was suddenly everywhere. In 2004, the town of Richland, New Jersey, the home of a large mint farm, renamed itself Mojito for a few weeks as part of a publicity stunt funded by Bacardi. Bacardi chose Mojito as a town name, according to a marketing executive, because the drink out-Googled “appletini” by a margin of fifteen to one.

The mojito's popularity isn't solely due to marketing stunts. It happens to be a superb drink with a fine pedigree. It's uncommonly refreshing—it's basically a tall daiquiri with the addition of mint and club soda. (It's also been called a Cuban mint julep.) It's not all that difficult to make. It combines strata of sweet and tart, lightly complicated with mint. It is summer in a glass.

“All of our specialty cocktails are authentic,” boasts the Cuba Libre menu, and that's not far off the mark. The staff seems to take the same sort of pains crafting an authentic mojito as the design firm had in making an ersatz Cuba. The restaurant scouts produce markets for just the right kind of herba buena (spearmint is better than peppermint), and purchased an old sugarcane press to make its own guarapo—fresh sugarcane juice—to sweeten the drink. Two employees work nearly full-time to just support the local demand for mojitos—they clean and stem the mint, squeeze fresh limes, and crush the sugarcane daily. (Guarapo goes sour quickly and can't be stockpiled for future use.)

That workers are toiling so hard for authenticity amid a wholly artificial environment, meant to evoke another time and another place, causes my heart to

skip a beat in admiration of the utter complexity of American life.

Here is how history is invented and then reinvented, a mill in which simple products of the earth are forged into lasting symbols.

Rum's genius has always been its keen ability to make something from nothing. It begins with molasses, a by-product of sugar making that had virtually no value at the outset of the sugar industry. Rum has persistently been among the cheapest of liquors and thus often associated with the gutter. But through the alchemy of cocktail culture, it has turned into gold in recent years. Rum is reinvented every generation or two by different clans, ranging from poor immigrants who flocked from England to the West Indies, to Victorians enamored of pirates, to prohibitionists and abolitionists, right down to our modern marketing gurus, who tailor it day by day to capture the fickle attentions of consumers attracted to bright glimmerings of every passing fad.

I won't make the argument here, which has been made for so many everyday items in recent books, that rum was the item “that changed the world.” It certainly put its hand on the tiller of America's past now and again, but the value in examining it minutely lies elsewhere. A rum bottle serves better as a prism through which to see how America changed and developed from the arrival of the first European settlers to the present day. Rum didn't necessarily change history, but history certainly changed rum, and if you but look you can see all of us reflected in each variation.

Refracted through a bottle of rum, the world looks different: for instance, how the islands were once the central gateway to the colonial world, and the great mass of land that's now the United States was by and large the uninteresting backyard. Through that bottle you can see how pirates and the colonial slave trade and the domination of the Europeans over the native Americans actually happened, and how these episodes later became part of a national mythology.

To track rum to its source—back through the mojito craze, the Trader Vic interregnum, the Prohibition era, the grim slave epoch, the age of the pirates, and the first European settlement of North America—is to run to ground the story of America.

Rum, it turns out, is the most protean of American spirits. Like any liquid, it can change its form to fit its vessel. But unlike most liquids, it can also change its

whole character. Rum disproves the tired bromide put forth by F. Scott Fitzgerald that there are no second acts in American life. In fact, American life is made up of nothing but second acts, and rum sets a fine example.

Bourbon fanciers, who often claim for their tipple the title of “America's spirit,” drink one of the most regulated spirits known. To be labeled bourbon, it has to be made with a certain percentage of corn and aged in a certain kind of barrel. But excessive regulation is not the spirit of America. Unrestricted experimentation is. Rum embodies America's laissez-faire attitude: It is whatever it wants to be. There have never been strict guidelines for making it. There's no international oversight board, and its taste and production varies widely, leaving the market to sort out favorites. If sugarcane or its by-products are involved in the distillation process, you can call it rum. Rum is the melting pot of spirits—the only liquor available in clear, amber, or black variations.

Over the course of four centuries, rum has transformed itself from swill to swanky, and moved from the gutter to the great room. It began as the drink of the common man, the booze to guzzle when you turned up only lint and a few coins in your pockets. Through the wiles and persistence of its makers, rum has followed an upward trajectory and is now the drink of all classes. It's the great American story: the ne'er-do-well who overcame the unfortunate circumstances of its birth to be accepted in the more rarified world of the gentry.

Rum is a survivor. Its story is classically American in that it's a tale of a rise, a fall, and a comeback. Rum emerged out of the confusion of a freshly settled land, and its production became one of the dominant industries of the new economy. And then it all but disappeared, as if the knowledge of its manufacture had lapsed, not returning with any force for more than a century. And when it did, rum dusted itself off and, as it is wont to do, went looking for a party.

Rum has always had a distinctly American swagger. It is untutored and proud of it, raffish, often unkempt, and a little bit out of control. The history of rum tends toward the ignoble, many times pleasingly so. “Rum's early history is one long rap sheet,” wrote Hugh G. Foster in 1962. This is especially true when compared to snooty old gin and its dull marriage to the martini, or upstart vodka, for which quality is regularly confused with marketing. And whiskey is still fighting its tired, ancient battles—Scotch versus Irish, Canadian versus bourbon—like feudal lords grappling for control of empty moors. Rum is always willing to try something new

and sort out the consequences later. As the bon vivant James Beard put it in 1956, “Of all the spirits in your home, rum is the most romantic.”

Rum, in short, has been one of those rare objects in which America has invested its own image. Like moonglow, the life of America is reflected back in each incarnation of rum.

In this book, I've chosen to tell the story of rum through ten drinks. Each era of North American progress has had its own rum drink, ranging from the harsh kill-devil of the earliest colonial days to the pleasantly sophisticated mojito of today. In each chapter, I'll look at the political, economic, and cultural environment that allowed each drink to arise. More generally, this book strives to answer three broad questions about rum: How did it grow to become the most important spirit in the New World in the eighteenth century? How did it come to be eclipsed by other drinks in the nineteenth century? And how did it manage to find its way back?

For this book, I immersed myself in rum for more than three years—not quite literally, but not far from it. I've consumed it in quantities that were of grave concern to friends and family, traveled great distances to sample it, mixed it with things that were probably not meant to be mixed and, in general, tested the forbearance of a patient wife. I recall awakening on more than one morning to a dull and distant sort of pain, then finding in my pockets unintelligible notes in what appeared to be my own handwriting—“Tolstoy/war and peace, window scene rum” was one.

Then, of course, there was the parade of unsolicited testimony from those who heard of my project—invariably involving a teenage indiscretion, a bottle of inexpensive rum (often Bacardi), and a special intimacy with shrubberies. These tales were almost always followed by a solemn vow never to touch rum again. It is impressive how many people have actually maintained that vow. When I tell folks who have not touched rum for many years that this spirit has now become a drink of connoisseurs, their eyebrows arch and they inquire after it with a genuine solicitousness, as if hearing of an old high school classmate with whom they haven't been in touch since that unfortunate episode after the senior prom.

Among those who inspired me to start on this journey in search of rum was, of all people, Henry David Thoreau. He lived through the spirit's most vigorous repression, when the great temperance movement was hell-bent on driving the

demon rum not just out of the temple, but out of the home, the countryside, and the nation. In *Walden*, Thoreau wrote of a village near his New England home that was "famous for the pranks of a demon not distinctly named in old mythology, who has acted a prominent and astounding part in our New England life." This demon, he continued, "deserves, as much as any mythological character, to have his biography written one day."

I sense a wistfulness in his tone. He understood something important was going undocumented. With this book, I hope to begin to document the raucous life and times of rum. And along the way, I hope to tell a story about ourselves.

[RUM]

RUM shall be the spirit obtained only by *alcoholic fermentation* and *distillation* of the MOLASSES, SYRUPS, or CANE SUGAR of sugar cane juice.

Production must be carried out in such a way that the product has the *aroma* and *flavour* derived from the NATURAL VOLATILE ELEMENTS contained in the above materials or formed during the fermentation or distillation process of the named materials.

[RUM, as defined by Jamaica and Barbados, 1937]

chapter 1

[Kill-devil]

The people have a very generous fashion that if one come to a house to inquire the way to any place, they will make him drink, and if the traveler does deny to stay to drink they take it very unkindly of him.

—HENRY WHISTLER ON BARBADOS CUSTOMS, 1655

Rum—a spirit distilled from the juice of a sugarcane plant or its by-products—was first invented in the early seventeenth century on the British island colony of Barbados.

Or not. In which case it may have been invented on the Spanish islands of Hispaniola or Cuba (where it would have been called *aguadiente*, or "burning water"), or by Portuguese colonists on the coast of Brazil (where it would later be called *cachaça*). Or possibly it was first distilled by the French on one of their Caribbean island strongholds (where the poorer grades of rum were known as *tafia*). On the other hand, it may have been first concocted in the 1400s somewhere in Europe by secretive alchemists searching for the elixir of life and feeding through their retorts whatever fermentable matter they could get their hands on. Or just maybe it was invented even earlier by an anonymous chemist tinkering near the cane fields of coastal India.

The thing is, no one really knows when rum first appeared. If you want to know about the history of sugar, overflowing archives provide enough information to lead to mental obesity. But for rum, it's a starvation diet. The West Indian island of Barbados has long claimed that first Barbadians invented rum, and it's telling that no historians have roused themselves to seriously dispute this point. Some, like rum expert Edward Hamilton, have argued that rum was

first produced commercially in the Portuguese or Spanish colonies, probably in Brazil, and he has been rooting around for customs documents or ship manifests to back this up. He hasn't found anything yet. (And he guesses he may never: Rum exports from the colonies were prohibited by Spain and Portugal, which meant any rum produced was smuggled and undocumented. And even if it had been documented, the ports of the West Indies were laid waste by attackers with numbing regularity, so the archives of the earliest days are often nonexistent.)

This much at least is known about rum: Sometime around the middle of the seventeenth century, an outbreak of rum occurred almost everywhere the Dutch, Spanish, French, and English were engaged in their New World errand-running. The British sea captain John Josselyn wrote of a dinner held on a ship off the coast of present-day Maine in September 1639, at which another captain toasted him with a pint of rum. Laws controlling the sale of rum abruptly cropped up in different colonies, as a warden in pursuit of a persistent truant—in Bermuda in 1653, in Connecticut in 1654, in Massachusetts in 1657.

Then, sometime shortly before 1650, rum surfaced at an extravagant feast held at the Barbados estate of James Drax, the most important planter on Great Britain's most important island colony. For anyone curious about the cultural history of rum—or who wants to learn about the ancestry of that bottle of West Indian rum in the back of their liquor cabinet—I'd argue that this is as fine a place to begin the story as any.

Barbados is pear-shaped and just twenty-one miles long by fourteen miles wide—or about one-seventh the size of Rhode Island. On a map of the Caribbean, Barbados lies far to the east, like a wayward child refusing to stand in line with the rest of the Lesser Antilles, which sweep in a great arc from Puerto Rico to Trinidad. Adventurers from Portugal and Spain landed here in the sixteenth century, but finding no precious metals to mine nor Indians to enslave, they lingered only long enough to name the island “Los Barbados,” after the “bearded” fig trees. Barbados lay unmolested

until 1625, when a British sailing ship stopped off while heading home from Brazil. The captain claimed the island for the British throne and reported on its pleasing qualities to Sir William Courteen, the ship's owner. Courteen hastened to cobble together a syndicate, then dispatched a ship with supplies to support several dozen colonists. On February 20, 1627, eighty colonists—plus ten slaves captured along the way— disembarked near present-day Holetown on the island's west coast.

The mandate given the first settlers by Courteen was not complicated: Go forth and produce. Specifically, produce for export such things as were in demand in England. The colonists tried growing cotton, indigo, and fustic wood, the latter a sort of tropical mulberry useful in making yellow dye. These crops did not produce great fortunes. Taking a cue from the colony at Virginia, which had been settled two decades earlier, the islanders planted tobacco, which was then the most profitable agricultural staple in the colonies. But a glut in London soon undercut prices, and Barbados tobacco was hampered by another problem: It was “so earthy and worthless,” wrote one seventeenth-century island visitor, that it provided “little or no return from England.” A 1628 shipment was described as “foul, full of stalks, and evil colored.” Even the islanders wouldn't smoke it.

And then came sugar.

The species *Saccharum officinarum* (“sugar of the apothecaries”), a freakishly tall and sharp-edged grass, had first appeared around 4000 b.c. in Asia, most likely in Papua New Guinea, where primitive agriculturists had selected the sweetest canes for further breeding. These plants migrated eastward with traders, to India and on to the Mediterranean. In 325 b.c. a general under Alexander the Great came upon sugarcane for the first time and described it with wonder as a plant that “brings forth honey without the help of bees.”

Sugar soon became an essential crop in the colonial Atlantic islands off Africa, including Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Azores. It made the leap to the New World with Christopher Columbus, whose father-in-law was a Madeira sugar planter. On the

explorer's second trip across the Atlantic in 1493, he brought live sugarcane seedlings and oversaw their planting on Hispaniola. The sugar grew fabulously, and colonists were quick to establish plantations over the next two decades in Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. The Portuguese, demonstrating a flair for running complex businesses in difficult environments far from home, planted cane aggressively on the damp Brazilian coast and brought in sugar presses and copper boiling vats from home. The number of sugar refineries in Brazil grew from 5 in 1550 to 350 less than a century later. With great quantities of sugar now being produced in the New World, the price fell, and many of the sugar producers of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic islands were ruined. The New World sugar era was dawning.

Barbados made the most of it. In England, the demand for sugar soared as it quickly evolved from a luxury for aristocrats to a staple for the masses. It was in great demand for making sweets, masking the taste of rancid meat, and sweetening new beverages, including coffee (which arrived in Britain in 1650), chocolate (1657), and tea (1660). Between 1660 and 1700, the per capita consumption of sugar in England quadrupled, and then it doubled again in the next quarter century. The value of sugar shipped to England and Wales was worth twice that of tobacco by the end of the seventeenth century.

With reports filtering home of great fortunes being made, thousands of British colonists boarded ships for the West Indies. The well-off paid for their outbound trips and brought enough cash to acquire some acreage and build a sugar works or two. Those unable to afford the £6 trip traded passage and board by signing on as indentured servants, typically committing to seven years of labor on a plantation, after which they would be freed and given a small parcel of land. A third group washed ashore on the islands: thieves and petty criminals, who were exiled from England to the West Indies much as later undesirables would be shipped off to Australia. Slaves from Africa, too, were beginning to arrive in great numbers against their will, imported by the sugar planters to work the

expanding fields. The population of Barbados swelled from just 80 in 1627 to more than 75,000 by 1650.

James drax—later Sir James Drax—arrived on Barbados in 1627 among the first wave of settlers. He began by planting tobacco, then switched to sugarcane. He quickly amassed an estate of 850 acres, which yielded a torrent of cash. Drax was the first to build island windmills, which were expensive but more efficient and productive than cattle-powered mills. His wealth grew, and he had plenty of company. “It is seldom seen that the ingenious or the industrious fail of raising their fortunes in any part of the Indies,”wrote one planter to an acquaintance in England. Another noted in 1655 that Barbados was “one of the richest spots of ground in the world,” adding that the gentry there “live far better than ours do in England.”

In England, architects had been flirting with a hybrid style for British manor houses, mixing elements of Gothic and classic. The results were often eye-catching, although not always in a good way. The planters commissioned dozens of similarly grand homes of coral stone smoothed with plaster. Drax's great house was three stories and featured a carved mastic archway near a grand staircase, the whole pile capped with angular gables and studded with corner finials. Such homes were notably ill-suited for the tropical weather, and many were, oddly, built with fireplaces. One visitor marveled that the planters, who spent afternoons indoors drinking spirits and smoking pipes, did not spontaneously combust.

Just as the houses were ill-designed for the stifling heat, so, too, were colonial island fashions. Merchant ships laden with current London styles would arrive with jackets and gowns unsuitable for the oppressive tropics. Yet the fashionable were undaunted. “One may see men loaded and half melting under a ponderous coat and waistcoat,” noted an early visitor to Jamaica, another thriving British colony, “richly bedaubed with gold lace or embroidery on a hot day, scarcely able to bear them.”

Through happy circumstance, these planters inhabited one of those rare junctures of time and place when money seemingly tumbled out of the sky. Sugar was king, the source of instant fortunes, taking on the role that railroads, oil, and the Internet would later play in North America. In the mid-seventeenth century, Barbados was the wealthiest colony in the budding British empire, as well as its most populous. The free white men of the islands had a net worth several times that of even the most industrious colonists on the North American mainland. Barbados produced more sugar and employed more shippers than all the other British West Indian islands put together. The island's moment was to last for decades; as late as 1715, the value of exports from Barbados exceeded not only that of the other islands, but of all the other British North American colonies (island and mainland) combined. The city of Bridgetown in the seventeenth century was bigger and more prosperous than Manhattan.

The wealth that flowed back to England was immense. A writer in 1708 likened Barbados to a massive gold or silver mine being excavated for the benefit of the homeland and claimed that trade with the island supported sixty thousand people in England. The other British islands, like St. Christopher, Nevis, Jamaica, and Antigua, also contributed to the fortunes flowing back across the Atlantic, and the planters and their agents saw little that couldn't be improved with gilding. In one well-known encounter, King George III and his prime minister were riding near Weymouth, England, when they were all but forced off the road by an extravagant carriage accompanied by a great many outriders in flamboyant clothing. The king was informed that the procession was that of a sugar planter from Jamaica. “Sugar, sugar, hey? All *that* sugar!” said the king. “How are the duties, hey, Pitt, how are the duties?”

One of those attracted to Barbados was Richard Ligon, who arrived under circumstances not wholly of his own choosing. A British royalist who had lost his business during the convulsions of the English rebellion, Ligon set off for the island in June 1647 with five acquaintances. The group acquired and managed a sugar estate,

and Ligon remained on the island until 1650. His account is not only the chief source of information about early island life, but an enchanting chronicle, in large part because Ligon never lost his capacity to marvel in the face of great hardships. Barbados was in the throes of a yellow fever epidemic when he arrived, with the disease (by one accounting) killing six thousand inhabitants. Ligon, who nearly died of the fever three times himself, wrote that “the living were hardly able to bury the dead.”

Yet Ligon was endlessly enthusiastic about the island's charms, including the incomparable taste of pineapple juice (“certainly the Nectar which the Gods drunk”) and the succulence of the feral pigs descended from swine abandoned by early Portuguese mariners (“the sweetest flesh … and the loveliest to look on in a dish, either boyl'd, roasted, or bak'd”). Given his persistent good cheer, it's all the more striking that Ligon wrote *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (1657) while confined to an English debtor's prison, into which he was tossed upon his return from the West Indies. (Ligon's experience shows that not every colonist came home burdened with fortune.)

Historian Lowell Ragatz has written that new arrivals on the island were often astounded by the “gastronomic feats” performed at plantation feasts. “In violation of all rules of dietetics, huge quantities of heavy food and drink were disposed of,” Ragatz wrote.

Indeed, Drax hosted one such feast, where the offerings might have intimidated Falstaff. Ligon was there, and he reported that it began with a first course of fourteen beef dishes, featuring a cow especially fattened in a private pasture of abundant forage. Its breast, rump, and cheeks were variously roasted, boiled, and baked. The legs and head went into a spiced stew, and the tongue and tripe were made into a meat pie seasoned with currants and finely minced sweet herbs.

Then came the second course. It included a leg of pork and boiled chicken and shoulder of mutton and a young goat, its belly filled with a pudding. There was veal loin dressed with oranges, lemons, and limes, and a suckling pig served in a sauce of claret, sage,

nutmeg, and brains. (The pig was “the fattest, whitest, and sweetest in the world,” Ligon wrote.) Then came three turkeys and two capons and two hens (served with their own eggs) and four ducklings and three rabbits and eight turtledoves and, for good measure, Spanish bacon. And oysters and caviar and olives and a potato pudding and a piquant relish made of fish eggs. Sweets—which at the time were typically served alongside the main courses and not as a separate dessert—included custards and creams, cheesecakes, puffs, melons, pears, custard apples, breads served with banana preserves, pancakes rolled with fruits, tansy pudding, watermelon, and that esteemed local delicacy, the pineapple.

As for drink, there were all sorts of imported beverages, including claret, white wine, Rhenish wine, sherry, sack, Canary wines, and “all Spirits that come from England.” And Ligon noted another drink set out on the table, one with an odd name. It was a fiery spirit he called “kill-devil.”

Alcohol is created when a microscopic fungus called yeast attacks sugar and rearranges it into alcohol and carbon dioxide. So crushed grapes left alone turn to wine, and apple cider left untended turns hard. Fermentation will slow and eventually cease when a batch reaches between 6 and 12 percent alcohol by volume, the level at which yeast loses its appetite for sugar. To make a product with an alcoholic content higher than about 12 percent, technology and human ingenuity are required.

Distillation had been mentioned in passing by Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, and by a.d. 800 enterprising Egyptians were experimenting with crude distillation, although they appeared to be more interested in making perfumes than drink. The converting of wine into its more potent cousin, brandy (a corruption of the Dutch *brandewijn*, or “burned wine”), was not taken up with gusto until after the early alchemists appeared. They were not particularly interested in inebriation. They were more interested in not dying. Alchemists experimented with basic stills in search of a potion that

would extend human life, preferably forever. When they put meat and vegetables into the sharp-smelling liquid that emerged from those stills, they noted a small miracle: The food would not rot. Alcohol was the "quintessence"—*quinta essentia* in Latin, literally a fifth element, one that was neither fire, water, earth, nor air. It was like water, yet it burned, and left unattended it would turn quickly into vapor. It was mysterious and magical. No doubt it held the key to unlock the secret of everlasting life. Alchemists concluded, not unreasonably, that they were onto something vital.

"We call it *aqua vitae*, and this name is remarkably suitable, since it is really a water of immortality," wrote Arnauld de Villeneuve, a thirteenth-century professor in France. "It prolongs life, clears away ill-humors, revives the heart, and maintains youth." In France, the spirit was called *eau de vie;* in Scandinavia, *aquavit.*

The art of beverage distillation is generally credited to an Italian known as the "Master of Salerno," who regarded his experiments as important enough to record his results in a secret code. Brandy was initially the most common distillate, and word of its health-giving properties crossed the continent. A slug of brandy every morning was believed to ward off illness. A spoonful of brandy poured into the mouth of a dying person, it was also thought, would allow that person to utter a final word or two before taking his last breath.

The first whiskey—or "whisky," as the British prefer—may have appeared as early as the twelfth century, distilled from a coarse beer made of fermented grains mixed with malted barley—that is, barley that had been partially germinated and dried. Whiskey was most likely first produced in Ireland ("whiskey" is a corruption of *usquebaugh*, the Gaelic term for *aqua vitae*), although the first documented records don't surface until 1494 in Scotland. By the thirteenth century the frequent consumption of spirits had spread widely enough that laws had to be passed in central Europe to curb unruly *schnappssteufeln* ("schnapps fiends"), and the first known taxes on liquor were imposed. During the Black Death of 1348 and later plagues, alcohol was frequently (if ineffectively) prescribed as

a cure, and strong drink marched in the wake of wholesale death from the cities into the smaller towns of Europe.

Early distillation methods were rudimentary at best. One seventeenth-century text offered a simple brandy recipe for northern climates: Store Canary wine in “warm horse dung” for four months, then set it outdoors in the frigid air of winter for another month. Remove the congealed “phlegm” (or slushy ice) and enjoy what's left: the “true spirit of wine.” (This method would yield a drink of about 25 percent alcohol, if the ice were removed gingerly.)

A more practical way to make brandy was to heat the fermented low-alcohol mash in a sealed kettle with a single pipe for an outlet, from which the steam could be captured and condensed. Since alcohol is not only slower to freeze but faster to boil than water (about 173 degrees Fahrenheit compared to 212 degrees Fahrenheit for water), what first emerged from the condenser contained mostly alcohol, along with trace impurities that lent the spirit a distinctive taste.

Distillation concentrates and intensifies the subtle tastes found in the original low-alcohol product. Brandy has thus been called the distilled essence of wine, and whiskey the distilled essence of beer.

And rum? It is, as we shall see, the distilled essence of fermented industrial waste.

A SUCCESSFUL SUGAR planter needed many skills. He had to be a knowledgeable farmer and an efficient factory manager. He had to discipline slaves strictly to keep them in order, but not so harshly that they rebelled. He needed to know how to deal with agricultural diseases that blighted the cane and the human diseases that afflicted slaves and servants. He needed to know how to deal with the mechanics of the sugar works, as well as the mechanics of international politics to ensure a reliable overseas market. And he needed to be uncommonly knowledgeable about rats. Even when under control, rats often destroyed 5 percent of a sugar crop through incessant gnawing. The rats were wily, defeating even the

most clever efforts to eradicate them, which included extensive use of poisons, ferrets, trained dogs, and slave children delegated to the task of clubbing them. In one rat roundup on a single West Indian sugar estate, some thirty-nine thousand rats were killed in a six-month period.

There remained one other issue the planter had to master: what to do with the waste generated in the sugaring process.

Sugar wastes were considerable. A mass of useless scummings would be skimmed off the boiling cauldrons during the cane juice reduction. Once cane juice was boiled down to a nearly crystallized syrup, it was cooled and cured. The curing process involved storing the crystallizing sugar in clay pots with holes in their bases, which allowed the waste matter bound up between the sugar crystals to ooze out. What emerged was molasses—a dark, sticky, caramelized liquid that resisted crystallization or further refining. The amount produced during the curing process varied widely, but a frequently cited ratio was one pound of molasses for every two pounds of marketable sugar.

With the more refined sugars, that amount might rise to as much as three pounds of molasses for every four of sugar.

In the mid-seventeenth century, molasses was a nuisance: It was too bulky to ship economically, and there was no demand for it anyway. Some could be mixed with grain and fodder to feed the cows and pigs, and some could be fed to slaves to supplement their meager diets. Molasses could be mixed with lime (or eggshells), water, and horsehair to make a crude but serviceable mortar. Molasses was also blended with various nostrums and injected into the urethras of both men and women as a cure for syphilis. But more often, it was simply discarded. One traveler noted of molasses produced on sugar plantations in the French West Indies that it is “never esteemed more than Dung; for they used to throw it all away.” In the 1680s, the French were said to be discarding a half-million gallons of molasses each year. As late as 1665, molasses accounted for less than 1 percent of exports from Barbados.

Molasses was industrial waste, an effluent best gotten rid of by dumping it into the ocean.

But somewhere someone figured something out: The scummings and the molasses contained enough residual sugar to attract the attention of yeast. “As the use of the still was then known,” wrote Samuel Morewood in *An Essay on… Inebriating Liquors…* (1824), “it may be conjectured, that not long after this period the distillation of rum suggested itself, as the only means to compensate the planter for loss incurred in disposing of the scumming and molasses …”

Exactly where the distillation of rum first “suggested itself” is unknown. Medieval alchemists, busy with their search for an elixir of life, no doubt concocted a proto-rum from sugarcane juice or molasses. But since sugar was a scarce luxury at the time, it made little sense to continue to use sugar or molasses to manufacture spirits when more abundant and cheaper grapes and grain were available. If the alchemists invented rum, they just as quickly forgot it.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both extensive sugar cultivation and the knowledge of distillation made their way through the New World tropics, like seeds scattered across fertile land. At some point, the two came together and germinated, producing rum. No one yet knows where the first dram of New World rum dripped out of a still.

Yet an argument may be made for Barbados's cultural paternity. The first documented appearances of both the words *kill-devil* and *rum* surfaced in Barbados. In 1652, a visitor to the island observed that “the chief fuddling they make in the island is Rumbullion, alias Kill-Divil, and this is made of sugar canes …” A 1658 deed for the sale of the Three Houses Plantation included in the sale “four large mastrick cisterns for liquor for rum,” which is the first known official appearance of the word *rum* on any of the islands. (Laws governing liquor had previously been passed by the Barbadian assembly, but these referred only to “this country's spirits.”)

Barbados can also claim to be home to the oldest-known continuously produced rum—from the Mount Gay distillery. A sugar plantation has existed at the northern tip of the island since the earliest years of settlement, on land where the Mount Gay currently distills rum from both modern column stills and old-fashioned pot stills. Records suggest that a still house was producing rum here as early as 1663, but the first solid evidence dates to February 20, 1703. On this date, a deed listed equipment transferred in a sale to include “two stone windmills … one boiling house with seven coppers, one curing house and one still house.” (In comparison, the oldest continuously operating Scotch distillery is believed to date to the 1780s, and the oldest registered whiskey distillery in the United States to the 1860s.)

The island's immense sugar profits allowed planters to make extensive investments in up-to-date technology and production methods. By reducing operating costs through the building of windmills, planters could reap even more profit from sugar and then invest their gains in still houses that would wring out even more cash from the sugar fields. A still house was expensive; each cost about the same as constructing and outfitting a sugar-boiling house. But the money from rum paid for the investment and more. The economist Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that “a sugar planter expects that the rum and molasses would defray the whole expense of his cultivation”—the substantial sugar sales were almost entirely profit. Smith likened the situation to a farmer covering his cultivation costs through the sale of chaff and straw. Where you'd find a boiling house for sugar, a still house was probably not far away. A wellmanaged sugar estate of four hundred acres might have four stills in operation; smaller estates might have one or two.

Here's how an early rum distiller would turn industrial waste into cash. He began by mixing in a large cistern a liquid mess composed of three ingredients: the blackish scum that rose to the surface during

the sugar-boiling process; the dregs remaining in the still after a previous batch (called lees or dunder); and water used to clean out the sugar-boiling pots between batches. This mixture—called wash — was then left to stand in the tropical heat. Since it was contaminated with yeasty bits of stalks and dirt, the stew would begin to ferment and bubble. Once the first bubbles appeared, the distiller would feed the fermentation by mixing in six gallons of molasses for every one hundred gallons of wash. (These ratios were prescribed by the planter Samuel Martin, who wrote that the "judicious distiller" could profitably tinker with these measures.)

The wash would ferment for anywhere from several days to a week. The temperature of the wash had to be closely monitored, since fermentation would slow or cease if it grew too hot or too cold; windows in the still house were opened and closed to regulate the air temperature. Martin recommended that when the wash rose to near "blood-heat," pails of cold water be added to cool the fermentation's fever.

If the fermentation was cool and sluggish, pails of hot water could be added, or "a little hot, clean, sea-sand" to bring up the temperature.

Distillers could add lemons, tamarinds, or tartar if the wash was not acidic enough. If it was *too* acidic, live coals or "new-made Wood ashes" could help. George Smith, the author of *The Nature of Fermentation Explained…* (1729) also noted, "the same effect will be produc'd by an Onion dipped in strong Mustard; or a Ball made of quick Lime, Wheat Flower, and the White of an Egg beat up into a Paste." Carcasses of dead animals or dung could be tossed in the vats to kick-start a batch that resisted fermentation. On Jamaica, according to an account by John Taylor, other substances were added to the wash, but for other reasons: "Perhaps the overseer will empty his camberpot into it …to keep the Negroes from Drincking it."

When the wash temperature fell and the bubbling stopped after a few days, the mildly alcoholic brew was ready for distillation. The wash was conveyed to the still via taps placed several inches from

the bottom of the fermenting cisterns, a technique to leave the sediment behind. (“If the sediment passes into the still,” wrote Samuel Martin, “it will not only give the spirit extracted, a fetid smell and taste, but incrust the bottom of the still, and corrode the copper.”) A low and even fire was applied to the main vat of the pot still, and the steam generated would rise and progress through a bit of copper tubing called a worm. The worm had to be constantly cooled to get the steam to condense. If a stream flowing with cool water could be diverted around it, all the better. If not, as was the case on water-scarce Barbados, the steam-warmed water had to be refreshed with water cooled in the yard, a chore performed by slaves with pails or, later, by windpowered pumps.

The spirit that came out of that first distillation could be drunk as is or run through the still a second or even third time. Barbadians preferred the “spirit of the first extraction” and usually had their rum casked after just one pass, resulting in “a cooler spirit, more palatable and wholesome,” according to Martin. The island of Jamaica, which would overtake Barbados in rum production in the nineteenth century, produced a double-distilled rum, which was as strong as it was harsh. Martin noted that the Jamaican approach “seems more profitable for the London-market, because the buyers there approve of a fiery spirit which will bear most adulteration.” The higher-alcohol Jamaican rum contained more benders per cask, and thus was more efficient to ship overseas than single-distilled rum.

Production is only half a market; consumption makes up the other half. And in this the early residents of Barbados admirably filled a need. Planters could expand their estates, confident that the drinkers of Barbados would purchase what rum they produced. By 1655, an estimated 900,000 gallons a year of kill-devil was being produced on Barbados. Yet virtually no export market existed. Small amounts were shipped abroad as early as 1638, but distillers hadn't yet established any major outlets. As late as 1698, a mere 207 gallons of

rum were officially exported to England from Barbados. This figure is likely low, given smuggling to England and unrecorded sales to the crews of visiting ships. Even so, Barbadians drank something on the order of 10 gallons per person per year. That is a feat not to be underestimated.

Who made up this market? Ninety-four percent of those setting off for Barbados in 1635 from England were male, and most were young and poor. While the gentry did fabulously, the majority of islanders lived rough lives. In 1631, Henry Whistler described Barbados as “the dunghill whereon England doth cast forth its rubbish. Rogues and whores and such like people are those which are generally brought here. A rogue in England will hardly make a cheater here.”

Disappointment among early settlers was as endemic as smallpox. Those who came with a little cash hoping to start a small plantation soon discovered that they were too late—the land had been snapped up by larger landowners—and their dreams went unrealized. Indentured servants likewise found that the English promises of upward mobility were overblown at best. The small plots granted to freed servants were of use only to scratch out enough vegetables for a subsistence diet. Few other jobs were available; landowners had made the discovery that slaves imported from Africa could perform the work of sugarand rum-making more economically than hired workers. Although slaves initially cost twice as much as indentured servants, they needn't be freed in seven years and were less prone to tropical disease; and if slothfulness proved a problem, a whip could cure it.

For disheartened British settlers, quaffing rum provided relief from chronic disappointment. And those in need of a drink didn't need to look far. Captain Thomas Walduck in 1708 neatly summarized the development of the West Indies: “Upon all the new settlements the Spaniards make, the first thing they do is build a church, the first thing ye Dutch do upon a new colony is to build them a fort, but the first thing ye English do, be it in the most

remote part of ye world, or amongst the most barbarous Indians, is to set up a tavern or drinking house."

Tippling houses, as they were generally known in the West Indies, emerged as a social and political issue as early as 1652 when the Barbadian assembly first licensed them. (At the time, Bridgetown had roughly one tippling house for every twenty residents.) In 1668, an act was passed "preventing the selling of brandy and rum in Tippling Houses near broad-paths and highways." The legislation noted that on the Sabbath day, "many lewd, loose, and idle people do usually resort to such tippling-houses." The early British settlers had a fondness for drinking that was unmatched by any other nation, with the possible exception of the Dutch. As the historian Alison Games writes, "inebriation was hardly limited to Barbados, although all visitors there seemed thoroughly impressed by the island residents' commitment to drink."

Sir Henry Colt, who arrived on Barbados in 1631, was one such visitor. He noted he had long been accustomed to downing two or three drams of spirits daily in his native England. But his new companions on Barbados, he said, soon had him up to thirty drams daily. Had he remained on the island, he reported, he would no doubt be downing sixty. "Such great drunkards" was how another Barbadian settler described his new companions in 1640, noting that they would scratch up enough cash to "buy their drink all though they goe naked." A traveler, Thomas Verney, wrote home that Barbadians were often so potted that they passed out where they stood, and in their benighted state were savaged by the tiny land crabs that plagued the island."The people drink much of it,"echoed Richard Ligon,"indeed, too much; for it often layes them asleep on the ground, and this is accounted a very unwholesome lodging."

The islander's commitment to drink seems all the more impressive given the likely quality of the product. We can never know what exactly it tasted like, but it was no doubt a coarse and uneven liquor, varying widely from plantation to plantation and batch to batch. It might be agreed that early rum was horrid, but each batch

was horrid in its own way. The French priest Jean Baptiste Labat deemed killdevil “rough and disagreeable,”and an anonymous visitor to the West Indies in 1651 noted that kill-devil was “a hot, hellish, and terrible liquor.” Richard Ligon wrote that it was “not very pleasant in taste.” Indeed, no seventeenth-century account has surfaced that has anything nice to say about the taste of kill-devil.

No surprise, that. Distillers hadn't sorted out the variables, and the early technology didn't allow for any sort of precision in rum making. The quality of the cane, water, and fermentation would have played a secondary role in the quality of the output, and the taste would have been determined largely by the condition and oversight of the still. If the distiller were distracted for a few minutes, a batch could be irretrievably fouled. If the water cooling the worm were to evaporate, the rum would acquire “a burnt, disagreeable taste, not wholesome for those who drink it,” wrote Martin. But it was probably sold anyway and drunk eagerly.

Stills needed to be thoroughly cleaned between batches, lest the next batch take on a singed taste. Some have pointed out that this was not necessarily bad. Drinkers had discovered that rum distilled in Britain from imported molasses almost never tasted like rum from the West Indies. George Smith, in 1729, looked into this intriguing fact. He attributed part of the difference to the “newness and richness of the Molasses” used in the West Indies. But he put forth another theory: that the estate overseers and slaves who operated the island stills simply neglected to clean stills between batches, sometimes even for an entire distilling season. “As nothing is more viscous and adhesive than Molasses,” Smith wrote, “it cannot be expected but that a great quantity of the grosser matter must adhere to the sides and bottom of the still, and consequently burn thereto.” That slightly burned taste survived distillation, giving West Indian rum a caramelized flavor. Smith said that British distillers hoping to mimic the taste of imported rum “must not stand too much upon Niceties,” and he suggested they might adopt the indolent island practices when it came time for cleaning.

Aging was another way of improving the taste of rum, but this was another nicety that few distillers would have bothered with. Colonists knew that leaving rum in a cask or barrel for months or, better yet, years would dull the burrs of new rum and give it a richer, smoother taste. Rum shipped abroad was always better when it arrived. “All rum is improved by time in wooden casks, by exhalation of ether and absorption of oil,” explained Bryan Higgins in 1797. Later markets would demonstrate a preference for the aged spirit. New rum sold for seven shillings per gallon in the 1700s, whereas aged rum brought eighteen shillings. But early Barbados rum consumed on the island was almost certainly pure moonshine, raw and harsh.

And it was often toxic. Lead pipes were typically used in the early distillation process, which put the tippler at risk of a painful condition called “the dry gripes.” In 1745, Thomas Cadwalader wrote an essay on the dry gripes and its treatments, and noted among the symptoms “excessive griping pains in the pit of the stomach and bowels, which are much distended with wind … at other times there is a sensation, as if the bowels were drawn together by ropes.” In some cases, “the patient begins to break wind backwards, which is some times exceeding offensive.” (It strains the imagination to think of times this would not be “exceeding offensive.”) Other associated problems included paralysis of the limbs and, in dire cases, death. The supposed remedy was scarcely better than the dry gripes itself: A molasses enema was often prescribed.

All the same, rum drinking was just as often linked with good health as with illness. To drink to one's health was more than an idle phrase in the seventeenth century. Europeans who first explored the West Indian islands and the East Indian archipelagoes initially believed that the constant heat would eventually be fatal to those of northern constitutions, and that one could only stand so much heat before dropping dead in one's tracks. Theories of health at the time posited that a proper balance needed to be maintained between the four humors—blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile—and this

balance was determined by the climate in which one was raised. Venturing someplace with a radically different climate would upset that. In the tropics, yellow bile would predominate and unwellness and death would ensue. William Vaughan, a British writer on medical subjects, stated definitively in 1612 that a European transplanted to the tropics would perish in five years. In 1626, he revised his figure upward to fifteen years, presumably based on fresh evidence that colonists were not, in fact, dying of the heat in wholesale quantities.

In his *A Natural History of Barbados* (1750), Rev. Griffith Hughes detours for five folio pages from his inventory of the island's flora and fauna to expound on his intricate theories regarding tropical heat and blood. His own belief was that well-being stemmed from "an equal Motion of the Fluids and the Resistance of the Solids." In hot climates, he wrote, where sweating is constant, the blood loses its fluidity and becomes "more viscid, and Consequently the Circulation is more languid." Those with slow, turgid blood soon become less logical, and "overlook those Rules of Method and Connexion, that are observed by Europeans of a cooler and more regular Fancy." By way of example, Hughes notes that southern Spaniards tended toward the "pensive, melancholy, and revengeful." Fortunately, an easy antidote could be had. Viscous blood could be "counterbalanced by the daily Use of a great Quantity of Diluters of every kind," which included a punch made with rum.

Richard Ligon also dabbled in theories on blood and heat, although he believed that the blood of colonists was not more viscid, but rather "thinner and paler than in our own Countreys." Happily for the colonists, the remedy was the same: "Strong drinks are very requisite, where so much heat is," Ligon wrote, "for the spirits being exhausted with much sweating, the inner parts are left cold and faint, and shall need comforting, and reviving."

RUM'S APPEAL TO the rougher classes is suggested by what the first drinkers named this spirit. "Kill-devil" was for much of the midand

late seventeenth century the most common name for rum. It appeared not only in traveler's accounts, but in official bills of lading and other documents. It's a rather ambiguous name. Does it suggest that this spirit is potent enough to kill the devil? Or is it a product of the devil and thus lethal in its effect? Irish naturalist Hans Sloane appeared to back the latter; in 1707, after spending fifteen months in Jamaica, he wrote that “rum is well-called Kill-Devil, for perhaps no year passes without it having killed more than a thousand.” The term migrated over time from the English to the Danish, who called it *kiel-dyvel*, and to the French, who pronounced it *guildive*, a term that lives on today in Haiti. The origins of the word *rum* are no less a mystery. Rum is a blunt, simple word, and admirably Anglo-Saxon. In an 1824 essay about the name's derivation, Samuel Morewood suggested it might be from British slang for “the best,” as in having “a rum time.” Morewood writes, “As spirits, extracted from molasses, could not well be ranked under the name whiskey, brandy, arrack, &c. it was called rum, to denote its excellence or superior quality.” Given what was known about the taste of early rum, this is unlikely. Among those unconvinced by this argument was Morewood himself, who went on to suggest another possibility: that it was taken from the last syllable for the Latin word for sugar, *saccharum*, an explanation that is often heard today.

Other word detectives have mentioned the gypsy word *rum*, meaning “strong” or “potent.” Tantalizingly, this variation of rum has been linked to rumbooze (or rambooze) and rumfustian, both popular British drinks of the mid-seventeenth century. Unfortunately, neither of these drinks is made with rum, but rather with eggs, ale, wine, sugar, and various spices.

The most likely derivation is that *rum* is a truncated version of *rumbullion* or *rumbustion*. Rumbullion and rumbustion both first surfaced in the English language around the same time as *rum*, and both were British slang for “tumult” or “uproar.” This is a far more convincing explanation and brings to mind fractious islanders cracking one another over the head in rumbustious entanglements at island tippling houses. Nothing more need be said on the matter.

As product names go, modern marketing consultants would no doubt prefer *rum* over kill-devil—it's easier to rhyme, for starters, and has less unsavory associations. No matter what one called it, though, rum marked one of the more successful product introductions in history. It dominated life in the West Indian islands for several decades while the beverage and the colonists both gained their footing, but rum was soon ready to set sail. It had larger appointments to keep.

And so it began its voyage from the sugar islands to the larger world beyond. At the outset, it was more hitchhiker than paying passenger. Rum didn't have the luxury cachet of sugar. No one in Europe or the North American colonies was yet clamoring for the new and harsh liquor, for few had yet tried or even heard of it. But like a glass spilled across a tavern table, rum seeped slowly into the colonial world's small fissures, dribbling into large harbors and small coves alike. It found a particularly warm welcome in the northern colonies, where the colonists were starved for cheap diversion. A merchant captain in the mid-seventeenth century might load a cask or two aboard his vessel to buoy himself and his crew on their northward voyage. He would have shared the marvel of rum in distant ports as he chased trade and the winds. Colonists would ask the captain to bring back another cask or two when his ship next sailed from the Indies. Word of rum spread. Between 1650 and 1700, rum raised itself from an oddity of the islands to a respectable bulk cargo that was stored in increasing quantity in ships' holds alongside barrels of molasses, rough brown sugar, and indigo.

Rum still had to overcome many obstacles in finding a wider acceptance beyond the West Indies. It had to cross from the tropical islands to distant markets through unpoliced seas, and do this without attracting the attention of pirates, buccaneers, brigands, and others who took a keen interest in the colonies' burgeoning trade.

In this, as we shall see, rum was not terrifically successful.

[GROG]

Pour *two ounces* of RUM into an *eight-ounce* glass. Fill with WATER.

Add a touch of fresh LIME juice or BROWN SUGAR to taste.

chapter 2

[Grog]

Captain Morgan is a lot more than flavor…. It reflects an attitude. It's fun and adventurous. It has a real personality and an appealing proposition—good taste, good times, good fun.

—LAURA GOLDENBERG,
U.S. RUM CATEGORY MANAGER FOR SEAGRAM'S

Captain Henry Morgan was born in Wales in 1635, at the outset of the great British rush to the sugar islands. The son of a prosperous farmer, Morgan had no interest in harrows or furrows and instead went off to seek—in the words of a contemporary—"some other employ more suitable to his humour." The teenaged Morgan found himself at a Welsh port, where he boarded a ship bound for the West Indies. He eventually disembarked on Barbados, where accounts suggest he found employ as an indentured servant.

His career on the island was evidently short-lived. In 1655, a British fleet manned by some twenty-five hundred sailors and soldiers was dispatched across the Atlantic by Oliver Cromwell, with the aim of expanding the British presence in the islands. The fleet landed first at Barbados, where it took on some four thousand Barbadian colonists to supplement the fighting force. This included a number of indentured servants who were seized over the objections of the planters who had paid for their contracts. Morgan may have been among them; the historical record is sketchy. The fleet then sailed off with high purpose, intent on sacking the wealthy Spanish colony on Hispaniola. The attack did not go well; the British force was all but routed by the Spanish after blundering their assault on the city of Santo Domingo. The British fleet

withdrew, and the commanders hastily came up with another plan: strike and capture the lightly defended Spanish settlement on Jamaica, near present-day Kingston.

Here, the British prevailed. The great force scattered the hapless and outnumbered Spanish into the hills and easily took control of the settlement, and thus of the thinly populated island. Although the attack lacked heroism, it marked two historical milestones: It was the first state-financed naval operation by the British in the West Indies. And Henry Morgan had his formal coming out.

Young Morgan rapidly proved himself something of a prodigy in the art of combat. He led raids on Dutch settlements as second in command during the Anglo-Dutch War of 1665 to 1667. Soon after, at the age of thirty-two, Morgan was named head of the Brethren of the Coast, a loosely organized group of privateers. Privateers, unlike pirates, had the official blessing of their government to attack ships flying the flags of the enemy. Privateers weren't paid by the government but got to keep a generous percentage of the spoils. The arrangement was a good deal for everyone except those attacked. England got an extended navy without putting up any hard cash, and the more rapacious privateers earned far more than a sailor could hope to see in the standing navy. The distinction between privateer and pirate was often vague, since months might elapse between the signing of a truce and word of the peace getting to a captain on a mission of plunder. Even if that word did come through, privateers had little incentive to cease their marauding, since other ships were where the gold was.“To the buccaneers a treaty of peace meant merely a change from public employment to private enterprise,” as historians J. H. Parry and P. H. Sherlock put it.

Morgan was wildly successful in his engagements, being particularly drawn to Spanish ships and villages, since they were the richest. Since the early sixteenth century, the Spaniards had been wrenching gold from the mines of Mexico and Peru and carting it to welldefended ports to await the sailings of the Armada, which escorted the treasure back to Spain. Morgan built his reputation

through ruthless and audacious attacks, including one on well-defended Puerto Príncipe (now Camagüey) in Cuba, and others on several Spanish villages along Lake Maracaibo in present-day Venezuela. Between 1655 and 1671, Morgan sacked a total of eighteen cities, four towns, and thirty-five villages, and captured more than $100 million worth of gold, silver, and trade goods.

Two episodes transformed Morgan from mortal to legend, and both took place in Panama. With its three stout fortresses, Portobelo on Panama's Caribbean coast was among the best defended towns in New Spain, bettered only by Havana and Cartagena. Morgan knew enough not to attack these forts directly, so in 1668 he quietly landed his force of 460 men on a stretch of undefended coast some distance away. The troops marched overland by night, and then struck at dawn, catching guards by surprise and quickly overwhelming most of the town's citadels.

Morgan's appearance in the streets of Portobelo that morning was a surprise, but his reputation for brutality had no doubt preceded him. Coastal residents generally found it to be unwise to withhold information about hidden riches if Captain Morgan knocked on their doors. Those who did would be stretched on the rack, or have flaming sticks tied between their fingers, or a cord twisted around their heads so tightly that their eyeballs popped like grapes from their skins. Other recalcitrants would be hoisted by their wrists with weights tied to neck and feet while being burned with flaming branches. In Maracaibo, an elderly Portuguese man had been ratted out (falsely) by a neighbor as being from a wealthy family. While demanding to know the location of his supposed fortune, Morgan's men suspended him from the ground by tying his thumbs and big toes to four stakes, then placed a two-hundred-pound rock on his belly and hammered at the cords with clubs, all the while burning him with palm leaves. And he was one of the *lucky* ones. Some had their feet burned off while still alive; others were said to be suspended by their testicles and battered with sticks until a violent anatomical separation ensued.

In Portobelo, Morgan did little to dull his reputation for ruthlessness. He forced priests and nuns to serve as shields when his men advanced on a fortress that still held out. He calculated that the Spaniards were too pious to fire on their own clerics. He calculated wrongly, and the priests and nuns fell. Morgan still managed to overtake the redoubt and punished the resisters by herding them into a room, packing explosives under the floor, and blowing them into the sky. His demands for a gold ransom to spare the rest of the town were eventually met, and he sailed for Jamaica with a half-million pieces of eight and some three hundred slaves.

Two years later, Morgan outdid himself by sacking the capital of Panama City on the distant Pacific Coast. He assembled nearly two thousand men and thirty-six ships, sailed to Panama's Caribbean coast, and then left his fleet behind for a long and grueling march through the jungle. The expedition seemed doomed at times; at one point the men had to boil their shoes to stave off their hunger. Morgan would eventually lay waste to Panama City after a fierce, two-hour battle—the task considerably simplified by the panicked mayor, who torched his own town as Morgan arrived. Morgan made off with four hundred thousand pieces of eight, yet his triumph was bittersweet: He narrowly missed seizing a Spanish ship with five million pieces that had fled into the open Pacific as Morgan's men appeared at the gates.

What we know about Morgan's exploits is chiefly due to a remarkable account published by a Dutchman who wrote under the name of Alexander Exquemelin. He spent eight years with the pirates in the Caribbean, a large part of that with Morgan. His 1678 book, *De Americaensche Zee-rovers*, was translated into English and published in 1684 as *Bucaniers of America*, and proved as enduring as it was popular. Although riddled with inaccuracies and exaggerations, Exquemelin's lavish account is considered the best source of information on Captain Morgan and the habits of pirates. The detail in Exquemelin's book is so rich and so lavish that it grieves me slightly to make one observation. At no time is rum ever mentioned.

TODAY, CAPTAIN MORGAN serves as something of a mascot to the rum industry, thanks to the continuing success of Captain Morgan rum, which accounts for about one-third of the billion-dollar premium rum market in the United States. It was introduced in 1945 on Jamaica, where the Seagram Company decided to market a high-end rum made by blending rums from other distillers. In the fall of 1949, Captain Morgan rum was imported for the first time to the United States amid great marketing hullabaloo; in New York, it was touted in newspaper ads with an illustration of a statuesque pirate wearing a malicious grin in front of the Manhattan skyline, as if about to set out in search of Wall Street bankers to hang by the testicles.

The brand caught on. In 1953, Seagram acquired its own rum distillery in Jamaica to supply the growing demand. Captain Morgan rum was then a light rum designed for mixing. (“Lighter, cleaner,” boasted the first ads, “especially designed for the American taste.”) When Americans drifted off in favor of even lighter white wine spritzers and light beer in the 1980s, Seagram set about tinkering with the brand, adding spices and flavorings and reinventing Captain Morgan as a spiced rum. Today, it's produced and sold by Diageo, the world's largest producer of liquor.

Although rum and pirates are like smoke and fire (you rarely find one without the other), the marriage was actually the product of the Victorian era (about which more later). The spectacular plunderings of the real Captain Henry Morgan would not have involved rum for a simple reason: It wasn't a common spirit in the Spanish colonies he raided. While the Spanish did have sugar plantations and a surplus of waste molasses, rum hadn't taken off as it had on the British islands, because Spanish winemakers and brandy distillers made sure that it didn't. Afraid of competition from cheap rum, they prevailed upon the Spanish crown to ban spirits exports from the islands. So when buccaneers sacked villages, they found Madeira and Canary wines and brandy in the cellars and storehouses, but little rum. Being pirates and not terribly picky, they were happy to guzzle it down.

After they sacked a village and tortured or sent its inhabitants into flight, Morgan's men broke into the storerooms and drank with gusto. Following the conquest of Portobelo, Exquemelin wrote, the men “fell to eating and drinking, after their usual manner—that is to say, committing in both these things all manner of debauchery and excess.” The spectacle of drink and mayhem lasted two full weeks. Exquemelin conjectured that a Spanish contingent of “fifty courageous men” could have routed the besotted pirates, who numbered nearly ten times as many. The beleaguered Spanish mustered no such force.

During the long march to Panama City, “fifteen or sixteen jars of Peruvian wine”were uncovered in one village along the way. The men fell upon it “with rapacity” and consumed it without pause. No sooner was the wine emptied than the drinkers began vomiting copiously. Suspecting that the wine had been poisoned, the soldiers sat back moaning and awaited their grim fate. Remarkably, no one died. Exquemelin suspected that the reaction was from drinking too hastily on very empty stomachs.

As the planters of the sugar islands planted more cane and built more windmills to meet the clamor for sugar in Europe, they scrambled to find an outlet for their growing rum surplus. Rum was consumed eagerly and prolifically by islanders, but local consumption couldn't absorb all of it, nor did local imbibing provide useful hard currency to pay off overseas debts and expand trade. Moreover, sugar planters had devoted nearly every acre of arable land to sugarcane and produced virtually no food to feed themselves or their slaves. They were much in need of anything edible. So livestock and produce sailed south from the northern colonies, and rum, in turn, began to sail north. “Good Rume and Mallasces … is most vendable heare,” wrote a Newport, Rhode Island, merchant to his Barbados agent in the 1660s.

Demand for rum grew steadily. By 1699, the British writer Edward Ward noted that “rum, alias Kill Devil, is as much ador'd by the American English…. This is held as the Comforter of their Souls, the Preserver of their Bodys, the Remover of their Cares, and

Promoter of their Mirth; and is a Sovereign Remedy against the Grumbling of the Guts, a Kibe-heel [chilblains on the heel], or a Wounded Conscience, which are three Epidemical Distempers that afflict the Country."

By the early eighteenth century, the most popular West Indian destinations for northern colonial merchant ships were Antigua or Barbados, since rum was most easily obtained in trade there. In 1738, Philadelphia merchant Robert Ellis instructed the captain of the *Sarah and Elizabeth* to consider selling his cargo at St. Kitts if a good price could be had for his cargo, but added he would "rather yould dispose of it at Antigua for you'll be more likely to get rum there." More than 90 percent of rum exported from Barbados and Antigua headed to mainland North America; on other islands, rum exports to the northern colonies were often 100 percent, since no market had yet emerged in England or Europe. Export figures from 1726 to 1730 show that the most important rum exporter was Barbados, which shipped 680,269 gallons of rum to the northern colonies; this was followed by Antigua with 235,966 gallons, and St. Kitts and Montserrat, which together shipped about 14,000 gallons of rum. Benjamin Franklin, the publisher of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, printed up 228 words and phrases that were slang for being drunk. These included "cock'd," "juicy," "fuzl'd," "stiff," "wamble crop'd," "crumpfooted," "staggerish," and one other: "Been to Barbados."

The pirates, increasingly disappointed by the spoils of the waning Spanish empire, gradually moved north to harass British traders. When they found rum, they consumed it with gusto. After the pirate George Lowther captured a ship in 1722 en route from Barbados to Boston, he took pains to inventory his haul: five barrels of sugar, six slaves, a box of English goods, and thirteen hogsheads of good rum.

As the eighteenth century progressed, rum came to displace wine in accounts of pirate debauchery—and to be associated with disorder and mayhem on the seas.

"I soon found that any death was preferable to being linked with such a vile crew of miscreants," wrote Philip Ashton, a ship's captain captured by pirates in 1724. "Monstrous cursing and swearing,

hideous blasphemies, and open defiance of Heaven" appalled him deeply, as did one other bad habit: "prodigious drinking."

Captain George Roberts of London was overtaken by the Boston pirate Ned Low. The psychopathic Low was precisely the person you would prefer not to meet on the high seas; he reportedly forced one captive to eat his own ears freshly sliced from his head and another to eat the fresh-plucked heart of a fellow sailor. Low evidently took a small liking to Roberts. Not only did he not force him to eat his own organs, he served him claret and a rum punch mixed up in a twogallon silver bowl.

Roberts's account of the ordeal suggests an uncommon interest in rum on the part of his pirate captors. They passed their idle time boasting, then "drinking and carousing merrily, both before and after dinner, which they eat in a very disorderly manner, more like a kennel of hounds, than like men, snatching and catching the victuals from one another." At night, after Low had turned in, Roberts stayed up drinking with the other men to maintain their good favor. "We took a dram of rum,"Roberts reported,"and enter'd into discourse with one another, on different subjects; for as a tavern or alehouse-keeper endeavors to promote his trade, by conforming to the humours of every customer, so was I forc'd to be pleasant with every one, and bear a bob with them in almost all their sorts of discourse, tho' never so contrary and disagreeable to my own inclinations; otherwise I should have fallen under an odium with them, and when once that happens to be the case with any poor man, the lord have mercy upon him, for then every rascally fellow will let loose his brutal fancy upon him … artificially raised by drinking, passion, & c." Low kept Roberts captive ten days before setting him adrift in a boat.

Pirate life wasn't all anarchy and the snatching of food. Pirates were often bound by charters they signed when they joined a crew — miniature constitutions that governed life aboard the ship and dictated the distribution of the spoils. Some of these even codified the rules of drinking. The charter of Bartholomew Roberts, better known as Black Bart, had a provision stating that each man "has

equal title to the fresh provisions or strong liquores at any time seized, and may use them at pleasure unless a scarcity make it necessary for the food of all to vote a retrenchment." (Curiously, Roberts himself was a teetotaler, and his ship's charter also prohibited drinking below deck after eight o'clock in the evening. His sobriety may have helped his career; he captured some four hundred vessels and is generally regarded as one of the most successful of pirates.) During one string of attacks in the West Indies in 1720, Roberts and his crew captured so much liquor that an observer wrote that "it was esteemed a crime against Providence not to be continually drunk." Two of his crew members were noted to be particularly dissolute; Robert Devins was always in his cups and scarcely fit for any duty, as was reported at his trial after he was captured. And crewman Robert Johnson became so thoroughly incapacitated that at one point block and tackle had to be employed to remove him from the ship like a sack of yams.

The de facto capital of the British pirate world was Port Royal, Jamaica's chief port, situated across the harbor from present-day Kingston. After the British vanquished the Spanish in 1655, enterprising colonists established a makeshift town on a long sandspit at the mouth of the harbor. Jamaica would eventually become a sugar superpower, but the island economy was founded on trade, much of it illegal, with Port Royal serving as an entrepôt for contraband goods and treasure seized by privateers and pirates.

Port Royal made an especially appealing base for pirates since island governors were happy to turn a blind eye to their activities. The pirates were a useful nuisance. They brought in gold and silver to buoy the local economy—so much that the notion of establishing a British mint was considered in 1662—and served as an ad hoc naval defense force at no cost to the governor. With its abundance of captured gold, Jamaica was an inviting target for French or Spanish marauders. But a harbor teeming with heavily armed pirate

ships manned by predatory seamen greatly reduced the odds of such an attack.

After his raids, Captain Morgan and his men would sail to Port Royal to whore and drink and spend their money. The more carelessly they could rid themselves of their gold, the happier they were. “Wine and Women drained their Wealth to such a Degree that in a little time some of them became reduced to Beggary,” reported pirate chronicler Charles Leslie. “They have been known to spend 2 or 3000 Pieces of Eight in one Night; and one of them gave a Strumpet 500 to see her naked.” Morgan “found many of his chief officers and soldiers reduced to their former state of indigence through their immoderate vices and debauchery.” Then they would pester him to get up a new fleet for further raids, “thereby to get something to expend anew in wine and strumpets.”

The port was ungoverned at the outset, and in short order became ungovernable. Literate visitors engaged in a sort of informal competition to best describe the sheer hellishness of the place. It was the “most wicked and sinful city in the world,” wrote one British man of the cloth. Another English clergyman, eager to begin the Lord's work in reforming the city, instantly abandoned his hopes of salvation. “This town is the Sodom of the New World,” he wrote, and “the majority of its population consists of pirates, cutthroats, whores, and some of the vilest persons in the whole of the world.” He left aboard the same ship that brought him.

Edward Ward took the prize for the most colorful description, describing Port Royal as “the Dunghill of the Universe, the Refuse of the whole Creation, the Clippings of the Elements, a shapeless Pile of Rubbish confused'ly jumbl'd in to an Emblem of Chaos, neglected by Omnipotence when he form'd the World into its admirable Order…. The Receptacle of Vagabonds, the Sanctuary of Bankrupts, and a Close-Stool for the Purges of our Prisons. As Sickly as a Hospital, as Dangerous as the Plague, as Hot as Hell, and as Wicked as the Devil.”

Port Royal had a density of taverns that made the tippling houses of Barbados appear woefully inadequate. Even discounting the

unlicensed and undocumented rumshops—of which there were surely many—Port Royal had one legal tavern for every ten male residents. In one month—July 1661—the local council granted forty licenses for new taverns and punch houses. A governor of Jamaica noted that the Spanish often wondered why the British were always suffering from extravagant illness, “until they knew the strength of their drinks, but then wondered more that they were not all dead.”

All sorts of liquor could be had in Port Royal. The reasonably well off drank Madeira wine, and the “servants and the inferior kind of people”—wrote one visitor in a letter in 1664—drank rum. Another visitor wrote that kill-devil was the “main drink sold in the taverns,” but other popular pirate drinks included bumboo or bombo, a mix of rum, water, sugar, and a bit of nutmeg.

(Modern archaeology has done little to contradict the idea that Port Royal residents lived in a state of constant pottedness. In the early 1970s, the archaeologist Robert Marx excavated a portion of Port Royal now underwater. A thick mantle of silt covered everything, but he uncovered hundreds of “onion bottles,” so called because they consisted of a round bulbous bottom attached to a long tapering neck and were traditionally used for putting up rum. Sadly, no potable rum was recovered.)

Port Royal offered sanctuary to Captain Morgan between his raids in the late seventeenth century, and in retirement it became his home. After he quit attacking the Spanish, he was lionized as a hero in England. Knighted, he returned to Jamaica as lieutenant governor and acquired a plantation in the nearby parish of St. Mary, eventually amassing twelve hundred acres. Now nostalgic for the Welsh countryside he was once eager to leave, Morgan named his estate after his old home, Llanrumney. He constructed a handsome house atop a hill, equipping it with stout stone walls and shutters thick enough to repel bullets. Morgan had acquired many enemies, and for them he was ready.

After giving up his post in 1682, Morgan mounted a vigorous defense of his sullied name. He sued two English publishing houses for libel when Exquemelin's account of his exploits was translated

into English, collecting just £410 but winning the retractions he sought. One publisher, William Crooke, wrote that Morgan did not torture a fool on the rack, did not torture a rich Portuguese citizen, did not force a Negro to kill several prisoners, and did not engage in “the hanging up of any person by the testicles.”

Most of all, retirement meant that Morgan could now frequent the rumshops more often, regaling all with tales of his past adventures. But soon his health declined, and even visits to the rumshops became too taxing for him. He was confined to his estate, where he spent his days drinking with the few friends who hadn't abandoned him. Each morning began with a bout of vomiting. His legs were so swollen that he couldn't walk. He was unable to urinate and often weak from diarrhea. The naturalist Hans Sloane described him as “lean, sallowcolored, his eyes a little yellowish and Belly jutting out or prominent.” Captain Morgan's later life goes unmentioned in the marketing material for his namesake rum.

On August 25, 1688, Captain Henry Morgan died at age fiftythree. He was given a state funeral and a twenty-one-gun salute; a brief amnesty was declared in Port Royal to allow outlaws to surface and pay their final respects. Morgan was buried in the Port Royal cemetery.

Four years later, on the morning of June 7, 1692, the first of three fierce earthquakes hit Port Royal. In a matter of minutes, 90 percent of the city was destroyed, most of it gulped down by an unstable earth. Houses that once lined cobblestone lanes were suddenly below water as the ground opened up and swallowed whole city blocks. A tsunami followed, sweeping the ships into the rubble of the city. Washed up on the ruins like little arks, grounded ships served as sanctuaries in the coming weeks, until the port could begin to rebuild. About two thousand people were killed in the first moments after the quake; the fresh dead floated in the harbor with the old dead, as cemeteries opened and disgorged corpses. Captain Morgan's remains may have been among them. Just as his life began with mystery, so, too, it concluded.

Pirate activity in the Atlantic peaked around 1720, when some fifteen hundred to two thousand pirates were estimated to be plying the waters between New England and the West Indies. Pirates were not viewed as colorful outlaws but a worrisome drag on the expanding commerce trade between the mainland colonies and the islands. Pirates went from the hunters to the hunted. Some sailed off to ransack ships in the Indian Ocean, with Madagascar the new Port Royal. Those who remained were hunted down by fleets commissioned by colonial governors, then hanged in mass executions.

Between 1716 and 1726, an estimated four hundred to six hundred Anglo-American pirates went to the gallows. In 1718, eight pirates “swang off” at one hanging in the Bahamas. In July 1723, twenty-six pirates were hanged in Newport, Rhode Island, on a single day. England passed a law that harshly punished even passing contact with pirates, making it a capital offense. Six turtle fishermen were hanged in 1720 when they had the misfortune of being caught sharing a rum punch with the pirate John Rackham.

Captured pirates ascending to the noose were offered a last chance to repent their wayward life, and some experienced gallows conversions. Before being executed in 1724, John Archer said that the “one wickedness that has led me as much as any, to all the rest, has been my brutish drunkenness. By strong drink I have been heated and hardened into the crimes that are now more bitter than death unto me.” John Browne, hanged at Newport in 1723, instructed all youth to obey their parents, to “beware the abominable Sin of Uncleanliness,” and, above all, “to not let yourselves be overcome with strong drink.” (These deathbed entreaties have the whiff of the temperance movement about them, and one suspects the heavy hand of an editor.)

Others, no doubt a majority, failed to experience such conversions, demanding another dram of rum up until the moment the rope went taut. William Lewis, who was hanged in the Bahamas, bedecked himself in red ribbons for the occasion and “scorn'd to shew any Fear to dye but heartily desired Liquors enough to drink

with his fellow sufferers…and with the Standers by." Captain William Kidd—who was either a pirate or privateer, depending on whom you believe— asserted his innocence until hanging day. Few reports of Kidd's execution fail to mention he was much inebriated as he was marched through teeming crowds to the gallows at the Execution Dock in London. Drunk, Kidd dropped through the hatch, whereupon the rope broke. Dazed and befuddled, he sprawled on the ground, then was marched up the steps again and fitted with a new rope. This time the rope held. When the twitching stopped, Kidd's corpse was taken down and hung along the Thames to be pecked at by crows, a warning to those considering a similar path.

The pirate most associated with rum was undoubtedly Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard. A privateer during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), he turned pirate and harassed merchant ships plying the seas between Virginia and the Caribbean. Already tall and muscular, Blackbeard further cultivated his appearance to give fright. He had eyebrows like small shrubs, and in a time when beards weren't common, he let his grow and would braid it and tie it up with colorful ribbons, which he would "turn about his ears." As a final flourish, he would tuck slow-burning, smoky fuses made of hemp cord, saltpeter, and lime under his hat, and ignite them during battle, moving about in a wreath of acrid smoke, like an emissary from the underworld. In one eighteen-month period, he captured some twenty ships.

Blackbeard's fondness for rum was legendary. He and his crew would make stops on islands between harrying raids for feasting and indulging in massive quantities of drink. "Rum was never his master," wrote his biographer, Robert Lee. "He could handle it as no other man of his day, and he was never known to pass out from an excess." Among his cocktails was a potion of gunpowder mixed with rum, which he would ignite and swill while it flamed and popped.

Blackbeard's career ended, as pirate careers often did, with extravagant bloodshed. He had set himself up in November 1718 along the Outer Banks of North Carolina, using Ocracoke Island as a base for his ship, the *Adventure Galley*. Governor Alexander

Spotswood of Virginia found the harassment of traders increasingly intolerable and sent out a pair of naval sloops, the *Pearl* and the *Lyme*, to put an end to it. On the evening of November 21, the two ships came upon the *Adventure Galley* at anchor with Blackbeard and about two dozen of his men aboard. The sloops dropped anchor as the sun set and prepared for a morning engagement.

Blackbeard and his men readied for battle the way they knew best: They drank heartily. Some days earlier, Blackbeard had written of a melancholy predicament in his ship's log: “Such a day, rum all out:—Our company somewhat sober:—A damned confusion among us!” He overheard talk of insurrection among his men, and at length, succeeded in sacking a ship with “a great deal of liquor on board, so kept the company hot, damned hot; then all things went well again.”

At first, all went well on the morning of November 22. The dawn encounter began with missteps by the Virginia sloops, which ran aground on sandbars that Blackbeard knew to avoid. Freed after tossing ballast and water casks overboard, the government sloops resumed pursuit and caught up with the *Adventure Galley*.

Blackbeard fought with his accustomed vigor, firing volleys of shot and old iron from a cannon, which killed the captain of the *Lyme* and dismasted the ship. The crew of the *Pearl*, undaunted, closed in on Blackbeard. According to newspaper accounts, the pirate taunted the sloop as it neared, calling the crews “cowardly puppies,” then hoisted aloft a drinking glass (of “liquor” in some accounts, “wine” in others) to Lieutenant Robert Maynard of the *Pearl*, yelling,“Damnation seize my Soul if I give you Quarter, or take any from you.” Maynard hollered back that he expected no quarter, nor would he give any.

Blackbeard leaped aboard Maynard's ship with ten of his men, assuming that his volleys had decimated the crew. He was in for a surprise. All but two of Maynard's men were hiding beneath the decks with weapons readied; when they swarmed onto the deck, Blackbeard and his men found themselves outnumbered. They fought fiercely. Maynard's fingers were wounded by a slash from

Blackbeard; his men swarmed to his aid. One of Maynard's men, a stout Scottish Highlander, landed a blow that sliced Blackbeard on the neck. At this, the pirate called out,“Well done, lad!”The Scotsman wasn't finished. According to the account in the *Boston News Letter*, the Highlander replied,“If it not be well done, I'll do it better.”With that, he gave him a second blow, which cut off his head, “laying it flat on his shoulder.” Blackbeard went down not only headless and lacerated with horrific gashes, but with five bullets in him.

Blackbeard's head was suspended from the bowsprit of the captured *Adventure Galley*, which Maynard sailed back to Williamsburg, Virginia. He turned over the head, the sloop, and the pirate's effects to his commander.

That wasn't the end of Blackbeard's head. After serving as an ornament suspended from a tall pole at the entrance to Hampton River, a grisly memo to would-be pirates, the head was taken down. The skull, it's been widely reported, was later adorned with silver plate and crafted into the base for a bowl from which rum punch was served at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg. People still claim they know of people who knew of other people who once drank from it, but no one really knows what, at last, came of Blackbeard's head.

If you come across a pirate and he bellows for “grog,” he is, in all likelihood, not a real pirate. Grog was invented well after the decline and fall of piracy, becoming an improbable symbol of order, rather than disorder, on the high seas. To understand how this happened, we must switch to the other side: the British navy ships that were the bane of pirates.

Rum was first officially doled out to British navy sailors in 1655, during the triumphant British assault on Jamaica. We do not know why, but we can surmise. Drinking water was exceedingly difficult to store on long ocean voyages, especially in the tropics: It would became algae-ridden and musty in its casks. Beer was a reasonable

alternative: The modest alcohol content kept it from fouling, but the taste tended to go off, and sailors commonly groused about "stinking beer." French brandy and Spanish wines, especially rosolio and mistela, were popular. (Sailors took to calling the latter "Miss Taylor.") But these were difficult to provision with any consistency to ships stationed in the West Indies.

Then there was rum. This new spirit was increasingly abundant on the islands, especially in Antigua and Barbados, as more sugar planters imported stills to convert their waste molasses into a marketable commodity. Rum had the merit of remaining sweet almost indefinitely in a cask and improving in flavor over time as the wood of the cask tempered the harsher qualities of the sharp-edged distillate. It also had the advantage of being more potent than beer or wine and so required less room for storage than its lower-alcohol kin.

Another push to distribute rum aboard British navy ships came from the island planters, who envisioned the growing British navy as a lucrative market. By 1769, the Society of West India Merchants had organized themselves sufficiently to commission the writing and printing of three thousand copies of a booklet entitled *An Essay on Spirituous Liquors, with Regard to Their Effects on Health, in Which the Comparative Wholesomeness of Rum and Brandy Are Particularly Considered.* Rum, it should come as no surprise to hear, was found the more wholesome. A decade later, the naval provisioning office was officially authorized to contract for West Indian rum to replace brandy in ship stores. It was among the earliest, but by no means the last, instance of the sugar and rum industry organizing to ensure its economic good health. Island plantation owners could cooperate when need be, and they would do so most effectively in ensuring their own interests at the expense of the northern colonies in the run-up to the American Revolution.

An overly fertile imagination is not needed to understand the broader appeal of a midday dram of rum to the common seaman. The naval sailor was typically in his mid-twenties (the average age in the early eighteenth century was twenty-seven), and he was likely

from a poor family, for the well-off tended not to embrace the great risks and endless unpleasantries of life at sea. The life of an eighteenth-century mariner could be appallingly bleak—stuck in cramped quarters with unhygienic men, many of whom no doubt suffered from ailments of the lower gastrointestinal tract. A sailor's private quarters consisted of just enough space below decks in which to sling a hammock, plus a small trunk in which to stash possessions. As Marcus Rediker has pointed out in his study of eighteenth-century seaman, life at sea was rarely a matter of man against nature. It was man against man aboard floating prisons. “Their isolation was communal,” he wrote. “They could escape neither their loneliness nor each other.”

Drink offered brief escape. The officers and crew would drink to relieve the tedium of shipboard life and to smooth over tensions. They drank to forget life between the decks, to warm up to their fellow crewmen, and to toast to the king, their wives, their mistresses. One seaman wrote in 1723 that he “never had any great fancy for fuddling,” but tippled more “for the love of my company than for the drink.” Also, rum was safe and relatively palatable, whereas the food on board was neither. “Good liquor to sailors,” wrote Woodes Rogers, an English privateer and later governor of the Bahamas, “is preferable to clothing.” In Tobias Smollett's novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), rum was called “Necessity.” Nothing rang better in a sailor's ear than the call to “splice the main brace”—the euphemism for doling out rum. This is attributed to the hard work needed to repair a parted main brace, or the stoutest of the running rigging, and seamen who accomplished the task were typically rewarded with a double ration of rum.

For a captain stationed in the West Indies in the early eighteenth century, balancing morale and discipline was made all the more difficult by the distribution of rum rations. Tipsy sailors were more likely to be injured—it's difficult enough to scramble about the rigging in a galloping swell or blustery wind when stone sober, never mind while drunk. And rum could inflame the passions and cause smoldering frictions between seamen to combust.

Rum-induced crises did not go unnoticed by Admiral Edward Vernon of the British Royal Navy. The admiral was well educated, much admired by his men, and possessed of an uncommon competence. (Lawrence Washington, George Washington's half brother, named his Virginia estate after him, and George kept the name Mount Vernon when he inherited the plantation.) Vernon served in the West Indies between 1698 and 1712, commanding a sixty-gun ship, and by 1739 had been elevated to vice admiral. That happened to be the year that England declared war on Spain—the so-called War of Jenkins' Ear—which was triggered when the master of a British merchant vessel had his ear cut off by a vengeful Spanish captain.

Vernon regarded rum as a competitor for his men's affections, noting that its charms often led to men permanently abandoning their posts. Vernon wrote in a letter to the Admiralty that some five hundred seamen had vanished from Jamaica “since being in my command; which I believe to have all been seduced out and gone home with the homeward bound trade, through the temptations of high wages and 30 gallons of rum, and being generally conveyed drunk onboard their ships from the punch houses where they are seduced.”

Vernon assailed the “pernicious custom of the seamen drinking their allowance of rum in drams, and often at once.” This resulted in “many fatal effects to their morals as well as their health, which are visibly impaired thereby.” What's more, rum, quaffed straight, caused a “stupefying [of] their rational qualities, which makes them heedlessly slaves to every passion.” Distributing copious amounts of potent rum, Vernon realized, was not a formula for building a navy that would dominate the maritime world.

The alcoholic content of early rum is unknown to us because it was unknown to those who consumed it. Not until 1816 was the Sikes hydrometer invented, which made it possible to measure the percentage of alcohol in liquor. Before that, alcohol content was determined by mixing the spirit with a few grains of gunpowder and then subjecting the concoction to the focused rays of the sun under

a magnifier. If the gunpowder managed to ignite but the liquid didn't flare up, this was said to be “proof” of its proper alcoholic content.

What was Vernon to do? Eliminating the rum ration would likely give rise to mutinies or, at the least, a sullen crankiness among seamen who had learned to live from tot to tot. So Vernon fashioned an alternative strategy: He would dilute the rum.

In an order issued at Port Royal in 1740, Vernon called for rum served to naval crews to be “mixed with the proportion of a quart of water to every half pint of rum,”resulting in a concoction that was one part rum to four parts water. To ensure that the effects on the men would be reduced, Vernon decreed that this diluted rum was to be served over two sessions daily, rather than at once, as had been the custom. Between ten in the morning and noon, the first tot was to be ladled out, and the second between four and six in the afternoon. Because the mixing of rum and water left itself open to shortchanging by dishonest pursers—and the general belief among seamen was that every purser was dishonest—Vernon's edict required that mixing occur on deck, “and in the presence of the Lieutenant of the Watch, who is to take particular care to see that the men are not defrauded in having their full allowance of rum.” (The writer Edward Ward reserved a special wrath for the purser: “The worser Liquor he keeps, the more he brews his own Profit,” Ward groused, and “he shall draw more Gain from wretched gripe-gut Stuff, in one Forenoon, than a Dozen Ale-wives from all their Taps, on a Day of Thanksgiving.”)

The order for diluted rum was circulated throughout the fleet, and the new drink made its way from the West India station throughout the Royal Navy over the next two decades. By 1756, the daily distribution of watered rum was codified in the Admiralty's naval code.

The new, less-potent ration needed a name. It was no longer rum, and it no longer had the kick to be called kill-devil. An ingenious solution presented itself to some anonymous seaman. Vernon had a fondness for wearing a coat made of a material called “grogram,” a

woven fabric stiffened and weatherproofed with gum. Vernon's nickname among sailors was “Old Grogram,” and so his new rum was dubbed “grog.” The name stuck.

In grog, one also finds evidence of a proto–West Indian cocktail, an early precursor to the daiquiri and the mojito. Vernon's 1740 order to distribute grog rather than “neat” rum included a provision that allowed crewmen to exchange their salt and bread allotment for “sugar and limes to make [grog] more palatable to them.” Although the order was likely issued with the sailor's palate, rather than his health, in mind, it had an unexpectedly tonic effect. Scurvy had been devastating sailors for years with bleeding gums, sore joints, loose teeth, and a slow healing of wounds, but it was still a great medical mystery. Rum was issued as a preventative, but later experiments, starting in 1747, identified the cause as a deficiency of ascorbic acid—found in citrus fruit, among other things. By 1753, the Scottish surgeon James Lind had proved that a regimen of juices from lemons, limes, or oranges would keep scurvy away. Two years later, the naval regulations called for a half-ounce of lemon or lime juice per day “to be mixed with grog or wine.” English sailors became known as limeys. And so Vernon, by luck or instinct, was well ahead of the movement toward citrus.

Over time, the dispensing of grog became more fixed and ceremonial. The pseudonymous Jack Nastyface (a common nickname for a cook's assistant) wrote in 1805 that the time around noon was “the pleasantest … of the day,” since that's when the “piper is called to play *Nancy Dawson* or some other lively tune, a well known signal that the grog is ready to be served out.” The purser would haul to the open deck a premeasured portion, with each of the crew allotted onehalf cup of rum per session. The mixing water would be tested to ensure it wasn't salty. If it passed muster, the grog would be blended and promptly doled out, often to the cook, who would in turn distribute it to his messmates below decks. The ritual would be repeated in the late afternoon.

Even diluted, the grog ration was still equivalent to about five cocktails per day, assuming an ounce and a half of rum per cocktail.

That's an agreeable amount by any standard. Perhaps too agreeable. As the navy became more professional and the temperance movement gained a foothold, grog rations fell further into disfavor. In 1823, the ration was cut in half, and then halved again in 1850—effectively slashing the rum allotment by three-quarters in less than three decades. The nineteenth-century writer and sailor Richard Dana, author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, groused that cutting back rations was a curious way to promote the idea that "temperance is their friend," since it "takes from them what they always had, and gives them nothing in place." In fact, the navy did provide some compensatory reward, often greater rations of tea, cocoa, and meat, as well as a token increase in pay.

And there was other good news: As the quantity of rum diminished, its quality improved. The navy's longtime blender and supplier of rum, E D & F Man, decided to appeal to the more discerning tastes of officers, and British naval rum developed an almost cultish following among navy men. The exact blend codified by the Admiralty in 1810 was a highly guarded secret. (It was, broadly, a blend of heavy rums from Guyana and Trinidad, leavened with three lighter rums.)

The British custom of serving up daily tots persisted into the twentieth century, a feral habit that resisted eradication even as it fell out of favor with crewmen. By the 1950s, only about a third of a hundred thousand British sailors opted for their daily grog rations. As navy operations become more complex and computers and advanced weapons systems demanded more mental acuity than hauling tar buckets, questions surfaced about the wisdom of distributing rum to sailors on duty. The advent of the Breathalyzer didn't help: A British newspaper unsportingly pointed out that sailors could be legally drunk after consuming their allotted grog rations.

By 1970, it was hard to ignore the clamor to eliminate the Royal Navy's daily rum ration. The House of Commons debated the matter; the secretary of the navy, sensing a looming defeat, lobbied for just compensation. In lieu of rum rations, a lump sum of £2.7 million

was donated to the Sailor's Fund, which paid for such things as excursions for sailors in foreign ports and improved equipment for discotheques on naval bases.

July 31, 1970, is known in British naval circles as Black Tot Day — that last day rum was officially rationed out to sailors. On British navy ships around the globe, sailors wore black armbands and attended mock funerals. Among the more elaborate affairs was a ceremony aboard the HMS *Fife*, a guided-missile destroyer then in port at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. It was the closest ship to the international date line and thus the last in the Royal Navy to serve rum. The crewmen mustered on the top deck, tossed back their rations, and heaved their glasses overboard, along with the whole rum barrel. The historic moment was marked with a twenty-one-gun salute. And so ended a 325- year tradition.

Naval rum had a second, somewhat debased life. In 1980, the Admiralty Board voted to release the secret formula for the blend to Charles Tobias, an American entrepreneur who believed that it would find a ready market among retired sailors and a public intrigued by its lore. In exchange, Tobias pledged to pay ongoing royalties from rum sales into the Sailor's Fund. The rum was called Pusser's, slang for “purser.” This heavy, flavorful spirit is still manufactured and sold throughout much of the world.

There is one further matter to address. Where did the most famous rum-related phrase come from, and what does it mean? You know the one: “Yo-ho-ho and …” Well, if you don't know how it goes, flip to the cover of this book. The phrase goes back to at least August 1881, the month that a thirty-one-year-old writer settled in with his young family at a holiday cottage in Braemar, Scotland. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson, and his fame at the time had as much to do with his family— noted lighthouse keepers—as for anything he had written. One stormy, rain-lashed afternoon, Stevenson came upon his twelve-year-old stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, drawing a fanciful map of a make-believe island to pass the hours. Stevenson

scribbled some place-names and wrote “Treasure Island” in an upper corner. The map seemed to call for more elaboration, so he set about composing a story to go with it, reading it aloud in the evenings over the following two weeks. The dull parts were edited out by Lloyd, who, like any sensible twelveyear-old, was interested only in untimely deaths, the discovery of duplicity, or both. Stevenson later described the process as “not writing, just drive along as the words come and the pen will scratch.”

A houseguest suggested Stevenson send the story to *Young Folks*, a magazine for boys. The editor bought it for £30 and published it as a serial in the fall and winter of 1881 and 1882 under the pseudonym of Capt. George North. The tale didn't attract much attention until it was republished in book form in 1883 and became one of the bestselling books of all time.

Treasure Island shaped the public perception of pirates, and so did the American artist N.C. Wyeth, who illustrated a popular edition of it. In 1904, Stevenson's countryman, James Matthew Barrie, created Captain Hook in *Peter Pan.* Pirates would no longer be portrayed as murderous bandits who forced innocents to eat their own offal. They became figures of romance: one-legged scoundrels with foppish hats, squawking parrots, and hooks instead of hands. They became caricatures, and caricatures they would remain.

Rum didn't make its literary debut in *Treasure Island*— Robinson Crusoe discovered “three large runlets” of it on his fictional island in 1719. But Stevenson uses it as a motif. The pirate Billy Bones displays an abiding fondness for the stuff. (“I lived on rum,” he tells the young protagonist, Jim. “It's been meat and drink, and man and wife, to me.”) It's a predilection shared by other pirates, among them the unfortunate Captain Flint, who died on the gallows in Savannah bellowing for rum, not unlike Captain Kidd.

But the most defining appearance of rum is the nonsensical ditty first muttered by Billy Bones and repeated (and repeated) by the other pirates:

> *“Fifteen men on the dead man's chest*

Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!

Drink and the Devil had done for the rest

Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!”

It's a dark and odd little rhyme, evidently composed by the author—although some have speculated that it was based on a traditional sea chantey, now lost. Although it doesn't make much sense, it fired the public imagination, becoming the nineteenth-century equivalent of an Abba song, something that becomes lodged in one's brain quite against one's will. Ten years later, Young E. Allison, the American editor of a trade journal called the *Insurance Field*, stretched those lines out into a much longer narrative poem entitled “On Board the Derelict.” A decade after that, Allison's poem became the basis of a Broadway play and anchored itself in the popular imagination. To this day if you say “yo-ho-ho” to any native English speaker, the odds are that they'll complete it.

Pirates and rum would never be separated again.

[FLIP]

Mix *one cup* BEER (a stout like Guinness works best), *two tablespoons* of MOLASSES, and *one ounce* Jamaican-style RUM into *mug* or *tankard.* Heat *loggerhead* to red hot in an open fire (a fireplace poker knocked clean of ashes will do), then thrust into drink. Keep loggerhead in place *until foaming and sputtering ceases.* Drink hot.

chapter 3

[Flip]

Have been genteely treated and am now going to be drunk. This is the first time.

[November 30, 1775]

All of us got most feloniously drunk.

[January 6, 1776]

Went to bed about two o'clock in the afternoon, stupidly drunk.

[January 7, 1776]

Spent evening at the Tavern…. A confounded mad frolic.

[February 19, 1776]

Got most feloniously drunk. This is a bad preface to the new volume of my diary.

[October 1, 1776]

A very mad frolic this evening. Set the house on fire three times and broke Mr. Dream's leg… got drunk and committed a number of foolish actions.

[November 19, 1776]

—From the journals of

Nicholas Cresswell, a British traveler

in the North American colonies

Dr. alexander hamilton—not to be confused with Mr. Alexander Hamilton of the $10 bill—was faring poorly in late 1743. A Scottish physician who had left cosmopolitan Edinburgh for the more rustic colonial life of Annapolis, Maryland, Hamilton had been plagued by “fevers and bloody spitting” and “an Incessant cough,”

and had nearly died from consumption. But by early 1744, his health was on the rebound. To complete his cure, Hamilton prescribed for himself an outsized dose of fresh air. So off he went on a four-month, sixteen-hundred-mile journey through the northern colonies, traveling as far as the province of Maine (then part of Massachusetts) before heading home. He spent most of his time in the cultural citadels of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, traveling between them by horse and boat, and laying over at taverns in smaller towns and along rural byways. Hamilton's detailed journals capture a colorful slice of mid-eighteenth-century tavern life.

Shortly after he set off, Hamilton wrote of arriving at a Maryland tavern called Treadway's, where he found a drinking club concluding its order of business. “Most of them had got upon their horses and were seated in an oblique situation,” he wrote, “deviating much from a perpendicular to the horizontal plane, a posture quite necessary for keeping the center of gravity within its proper base for the support of the superstructure; hence we deduce the true physical reason why our heads overloaded with liquor become too ponderous for our heels. Their discourse was … an inarticulate sound like Rabelais' frozen words athawing, interlaced with hiccupings and belchings.” The tavern's landlord offered some excuses for the rowdy behavior of his guests. “While he spoke thus,” Hamilton continued, “our Bacchanalians, finding no more rum in play, rid off helter skelter as if the devil had possessed them, every man sitting his horse in a see-saw manner like a bunch of rags tyed upon the saddle.”

Hamilton discovered on his tour what most colonists well knew: The British North American colonies had become a Republic of Rum. Starting about 1700, the colonial taste for home-brewed beer and hard cider began to fade and was displaced by an abiding thirst for stronger liquors. Rum turned up everywhere, in homes and doctor's offices, in clattering seaports and rough-edged inland villages. With its arrival came a fundamental shift in the colony's political, economic, and social alignments. If grog was an emblem of

the triumph of order over disorder on the open seas, rum—especially in the form of a popular drink called “flip”—was a symbol of the new order displacing the old in the colonies.

The first puritans to settle the northern colonies brought not only a thirst for drink, but the drink itself. When the Pilgrims arrived in New England in 1620, beer was among their supplies. When they exhausted it, they started brewing it. It was a story repeated throughout the colonies, as settlers from England, Holland, France, Sweden, and Germany arrived with their Old World tastes intact. The beer favored in many northern colonies was typically 6 percent alcohol, heavy and dark, and probably tasted rather like modern-day stouts or porters. Enterprising colonists loath to sacrifice good grain made beer from Indian corn and pumpkin, sometimes flavoring it with birch or spruce bark.

Also found in the better colonial cabinets were imported wines, especially Madeira, which could be shipped directly from the Portuguese islands off the coast of Africa without roundabout routing or fraudulent paperwork. (Trade with most wine-producing nations was prohibited by the British Navigation Acts; an exception was made for the Atlantic islands.) The Madeira was not of the highest quality—it wasn't fortified to develop its distinctive flavor until later in the eighteenth century—but it was still a welcome luxury, and one that most of those who were eking out a life in the colonies could ill afford.

Hard cider was the most popular drink among the settlers, at least from the apple-growing regions of Virginia northward. It could be made with almost no effort or investment. A single tree could produce enough apples for five or six barrels of cider, and then a farmer needed only patience for it to ferment. Even without a still, cider could be made into higher-proof applejack in winter just by leaving it outdoors to freeze, then skimming off the watery slush. Hard cider was versatile: A mug served warm in winter chased away the chill, and in summer could be diluted and flavored with nutmeg.

But cider was less than ideal: It caused gastric distress if consumed too early, and was vinegary if drunk too late. And as Israel Acrelius wrote in his 1753 history of Swedish settlements in North America, some colonists believed that cider "produces rust and verdigris, and frightens some from its use, by fear that it may have the same effect in the body."

Alcohol's appeal was enhanced by the colonists' deep-seated distrust of water. This apprehension had been imported from Europe, where crowded, contaminated cities made free-flowing water unfit to drink. The pristine lakes and tumbling rivers of the New World were regarded with a similarly dark suspicion—concerns not eased by stories of the first Virginia settlers in 1607. "They have nothing but bread of maize, with fish; nor do they drink anything but water," wrote one appalled visitor. As a result, "the majority [were] sick and badly treated."Once the long-suffering colonists in Virginia started to import alcoholic beverages, their health improved markedly. Water, it was thought, was suitable for hogs and cows, but for human consumption only in dire emergencies.

The leaders of the early colonies, including the famously dour Puritan elders, gave their stamp of approval to the drinking of fermented beverages, and regarded beer, cider, and wine, like sunshine and apples, as gifts to be revered. "Drink is in itself a creature of God," said minister Increase Mather in 1673, "and to be received with thankfulness."

And then came rum.

Various strong spirits had arrived in the northern colonies before rum. When John Winthrop sailed aboard the Puritan ship *Arbella* in 1630, he groused that "a Common fault in our yonge people [is] that they gave themselves to drink hot waters very immoderately." (He failed to specify what those spirits were.) A crude whiskey made out of the leavings of fermented beer was distilled by a Dutchman near Manhattan as early as 1640. And primitive backyard stills, called "lembics," were not uncommon in the colonies; they were useful for

making spirits out of fermented honey and pears and, in the southern colonies, from peaches.

But this petty dabbling in strong drink did little to prepare colonial society for the arrival of the vast merchant fleets trafficking with the sugar islands. Barrels of rum soon clattered through teeming colonial ports of Boston, Philadelphia, and Newport, shipped in from the West Indies in great wooden casks from which storekeepers and taverners could dispense smaller quantities by jug or mug. The cost of imported Barbados rum fell by about a third between 1673 and 1687 as the supply soared, then rose slightly before leveling off. In current dollars, a fifth of rum cost about $4 in 1700, or half the price of a bottle of inexpensive rum today. Cotton Mather, the son of Increase Mather, lamented that it took but “a penny or two”to get drunk on rum.

Almost overnight, rum found its way into nearly every aspect of colonial life. A colonist would toss back a dram in the morning to shake off the night chills and to launch the day in proper form. Steeplejacks would clamber down from their labors for dinner at midday and, in the words of Rev. Elijah Kellogg, “would partake of rum, saltfish, and crackers.” During the bleak northern winters, alcohol provided tinder to warm one's insides, and in the sweltering southern summers rum aided in perspiration and cooling. In the evenings, a dram of rum helped with digestion at supper, and afterward a few rounds of rum cemented the bonds of friendship at a local tavern. Rum was not just a diversion; it was nutritionally vital to colonists who labored to coax a meager sustenance out of a rocky, stump-filled landscape and cold seas. Alcohol has fewer calories per ounce than straight fat but about the same as butter. It's five times more caloric than lean meat, and has ten times the calories of whole milk. A bottle of rum squirreled away in a Grand Banks fishing dory provided the energy to haul nets and aided in choking down hardtack and salt cod. Farmers, timber cutters, coopers, and shipbuilders soon learned that a dram of rum made a long day shorter.

Rum was embraced in sickness and in health, and for better or worse. Rum was the first remedy when feeling punky and was taken liberally as a restorative. Leaves of the tansy plant were steeped in rum to create tansy bitters, which was a popular cure-all in colonial homes. Children were given rum to cure minor ailments, and rum was employed to soothe the chills and fevers from malaria in the southern colonies. A colonial diarist wrote that following an illness his doctor told him to drink “a little more Rum than I did before I was sick” and warned him that “being too abstemious” was likely the cause of his problems. Swedish traveler Peter Kalm noted that by 1750 rum had come to be considered far healthier among English North American colonists than spirits distilled from grain or wine: “In confirmation of this opinion they say that if you put a piece of fresh meat into rum and another into brandy, and leave them there for a few months, that in the rum will keep as it was, but that in the brandy will be eaten full of holes.”

Rum was always on hand for emergencies. Published instructions for reviving victims of drowning in Massachusetts called for blowing tobacco smoke up the victim's rectum (machines were built specifically for this purpose) while bathing the victim's breast with hot rum. If rum failed to restore you to life, it would be served to those who attended your funeral, even if you were poorly off, since the purchase of spirits for a final send-off had priority over paying off your creditors.

Rum ingrained itself in the emerging civic culture of the colonies. A major public building project always meant drinking, and rum was doled out liberally to citizens who helped raise a barn or meetinghouse. It was also widely accepted as currency in cash-poor colonies, swapped for insurance premiums, for the construction of new buildings, and used to tip workers for services well done. Employers budgeted for rum and molasses; hires expected it both as payment and as a liquid enticement to remain on task. A 1645 law in Massachusetts sought to forbid colonists from paying workers with drink, but the decree was ignored. When the economist Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, he noted that ship

carpenters earned “ten shillings and sixpence currency, with a pint of rum worth sixpence sterling.” And the records show that in the mid-eighteenth century, Paul Revere's mother, recently widowed, paid her rent with a mix of cash, rum, and a silver thimble.

If shipments of rum overwhelmed the local market and contributed to a brief price drop, merchants could warehouse it; not only was it not perishable, but it also improved—and could be sold for more— with age. The larger peril was receiving a shipment of rum so bad that no one would take it. Certain islands developed reputations, some favorable and some not. Rums from Barbados, Antigua, Montserrat, and Grenada, and increasingly from Jamaica, were considered among the finest, and commanded higher prices in the colonial seaports. Rums from Tobago were regarded as reasonably palatable. Rums to be avoided included those from St. Vincent, Dominica, and Nevis, islands that were known to cheat their customers by shortchanging their fermentation tanks of molasses. (If a distiller used less than one gallon of molasses to make one gallon of rum, it was thought to result in a more wretched product.)

Merchants trusted their onboard masters sailing abroad to contract for the best quality rum, although fraud and bait-and-switch gambits were endemic. George Moore, an eighteenth-century trader on England's Isle of Man, larded his letters with references to being swindled. One batch was “deficient in every of the known qualities of Barbados rum.” After a Scotsman sold him five thousand gallons of “good Barbados,” Moore found that he ended up with “very bad, not merchantable Barbados rum.” Poor-quality rum lingered in the shops and taverns and could be sold only for less than the merchant had paid for it.

Rum came, and rum went, often alighting only briefly in Boston or Newport before being shipped to other coastal colonies. Among the more popular destinations were the British fishing villages that ringed the island of Newfoundland (where cold, damp fishermen

eagerly swapped rum for dried cod) and the tobacco plantations of Virginia (whose owners were notorious for promising payments that would never be made). Rum also moved inland to the frontier and far from the thin coastal veneer of European colonial society. Some colonists packed rum to keep warm while hunting and trapping. But an increasing number discovered it more profitable to cart casks of rum to remote forts and trading posts, where it could be traded to great advantage with the Indians.

The first European settlers found much to fault in the appearance, manners, and morals of the natives they first encountered along North American shores. But what may have irked them most was their stubborn lack of interest in becoming consumers. The eastern woodland Indians simply didn't have vast needs—they made what they wore and hunted or grew what they ate.

The Indians were tremendously skillful hunters, able to amass great stocks of beaver and mink pelts that colonial traders coveted. Furs in the seventeenth century were, like sugar, a luxury item reserved for noblemen who sought to convey their lofty social status. Indians were at first willing to swap pelts for trifles like beads, glass, mirrors, woven blankets, combs, and kettles. But the thrill of gazing at one's neatly parted hair in a mirror evidently wore off quickly, and the demand for baubles dried up. Traders needed something else to exchange for furs, something easy to obtain that would create its own demand.

Rum would be the ticket. Tribes in southwestern North America—parts of Mexico and what would become the southwestern United States—were passingly familiar with alcohol even before the great overland Spanish expeditions lumbered through with their brandy. Many knew how to brew a drink of fermented corn, which was used chiefly in ceremonies. The eastern Indians, on the other hand, had no tradition or truck with any sort of alcohol. Fiery rum, like wine and beer, was as bizarre as it was magical, and the first sip must have been as startling and powerful as hearing the first report of a rifle. New words had to be invented to describe it and the behavior it provoked.

At prevailing rates of exchange, a trader might be able to double his money by trading furs for blankets or cookware. Rum was far more profitable—it could be traded for at least four times what it cost. Even better margins could be had by watering it down—a keg could be diluted by one-third without raising a fuss. Traders so clamored for rum that for years it cost more in New York, a major base for fur traders heading up the Hudson, than it did in Boston or Philadelphia.

In the late seventeenth century, rum dribbled into the mountains and woodlands, but by early the next century it had swelled into a torrent. A glass of rum would open negotiations between traders and Indians as a sign of friendship and good faith, and it would close negotiations to seal the deal. Rum also was often consumed during the business at hand, if for no other reason than the Indians asked for it, and the traders—having dispensed with the friendship and good faith part of the transaction—preferred to barter with someone whose power of reasoning was compromised. (John Lederer, in his 1672 account of trade with the Indians, boasted that with liquor one could "dispose them to a humour of giving you ten times the value of your commodity.") Rum was also brought out for feasts and toasts: Indian traders were often happy to toast to King George, whomever he might be. An agent to the Choctaws estimated that liquor accounted for four-fifths of trade with the natives in 1770, and superintendent of Indian affairs in the southeast estimated in 1776 that ten thousand gallons of rum was moving in trade to the Indians *every month.* Most was exchanged for furs, but traders often held back a few bottles for buying sex with young "trading girls," the exact cost of which was negotiated with the tribal leader.

For their part, shrewder Indians tried to bargain for goods other than rum, but the colonial traders often proved adept at convincing them to settle for spirits. "When our people come from Hunting to the Town or Plantations and acquaint the traders & People that we want Powder and Shot & Clothing, they first give us a large cup of Rum," complained Aupaumut, a Mohican, to the governor of New

York in 1722. As a result, “all the Beaver & Peltry we have hunted goes for drink, and we are left destitute either of Clothing or ammunition.” In 1754, Governor Arthur Dobbs of North Carolina hosted eleven hundred Indians at a trading session, and provided them with meat and abundant liquor. “By repeated presents and liquor,” the governor reported, the Cherokees were persuaded to relinquish their claims on lands toward the Mississippi to the British Crown.

Rum also served broader strategic purposes, underwriting the equivalent of a Great Wall that arced from northern New England down the Appalachian Mountains. The wall protected the British from the meddlesome French, who had settled along the St. Lawrence River in present-day Canada and moved freely on the west side of the Appalachian Mountains. By providing the Indians with rum, the British diverted them from allying with the French, who were proving increasingly deft in their incursions on British settlements. Without the free flow of rum, Indians might have turned to the French for brandy. Some historians have suggested that a general preference for the taste of rum over brandy actually kept some tribes from defecting to the French.

As a weapon, rum came up short in one major respect: It tore apart the Indian civilization it sought to recruit. In his history of South Carolina and Georgia (1779), Alexander Hewatt noted that the downfall of the impressive Indian nation was due to many colliding forces: capture and enslavement to the West Indies; smallpox infection; denying access to coastal lands and fertile soils; and warfare with other tribes after Europeans forced them to share ever-shrinking territory. “But of all the causes,” Hewatt continued, “the introduction of spirituous liquors among them, for which they discovered an amazing fondness, has proved the most destructive.”

Few of those who encountered eastern Indians in the colonial era failed to remark on the effect of alcohol. Intoxicated Indians were variously likened to “mad foaming bears, “many raging devils,” and “a gang of devils that had broke loose from hell.” Nicholas Cresswell wrote in his journal during travels in Ohio and Indiana in 1775 that

the Indians he encountered were “inclined much to silence, except when in liquor which they are very fond of, and then they are very loquacious committing the greatest outrages upon each other.” In the early 1770s, a British official visiting the Choctaws reported that he “saw nothing but Rum Drinking and Women Crying over the Dead bodies of their relations who have died by Rum.”

What's likely the most quoted account of Indians and alcohol was written by Benjamin Franklin, who was among those negotiating a treaty with a large delegation in Pennsylvania. The Indians asked for rum during the negotiations; Franklin resisted, believing that they would become “very quarrelsome and disorderly” and derail the talks. But Franklin assured them after business was concluded, they'd have “plenty of rum.” He was good to his word. As he recalled in his autobiography, they

> claim'd and receiv'd the rum; this was in the afternoon; they were near one hundred men, women, and children, and were lodg'd in temporary cabins, built in the form of a square, just without the town. In the evening, hearing a great noise among them, the commissioners walk'd out to see what was the matter. We found they had made a great bonfire in the middle of the square; they were all drunk, men and women, quarreling and fighting. Their dark-colour'd bodies, half naked, seen only by the gloomy light of the bonfire, running after and beating one another with firebrands, accompanied by their horrid yellings, form'd a scene the most resembling our ideas of hell that could well be imagin'd; there was no appeasing the tumult, and we retired to our lodging. At midnight a number of them came thundering at our door, demanding more rum, of which we took no notice.

Some colonists could not ignore the wrenching effect of rum on the tribes and tried to restrict the trade. This was less altruism than self-defense—colonists believed that rum-sodden Indians were more likely than sober Indians to attack settlements. In 1772, an agent to the tribes reported to his superintendent, “Unless there is a stop to sending Rum in such large quantities amongst the Indians no man will be safe among them.”

The tribes themselves also pushed to ban the rum trade. “Rum,” said Shawnee chief Benewisco in 1768, “is the thing that makes us Indians poor & foolish.” Another Shawnee chief wrote that the white people “come and bring rum into our towns, offer it to the Indians, and say, drink; this they will do until they become quite beside themselves and act as though they were out of their heads…. The white people [then] stand, point at them with their fingers, laugh at them and say to one another, see what great fools the Shawanose are. But who makes them so foolish, who is at fault?”

Efforts to curb the trade started early. Trading liquor with Indians was made illegal in Massachusetts in the 1630s, in New Hampshire in the 1640s, and in New Netherland in 1643. (The ban did not sit well with Dutch traders, who thought that “to prohibit all strong liquor to [the Indians] seems very hard and very Turkish. Rum doth as little hurt as the Frenchman's Brandie, and on the whole is much more wholesome.”) Rhode Island banned the trade in 1654, Pennsylvania in the 1680s. South Carolina banned the sale of liquor to Indians on their own lands in 1691, and banned rum trade to all Indians in 1707, in an “Act Regulating the Indian Trade and Making it Safe to the Publick.” Indians were also banned from taverns throughout the colonies.

Although they varied from colony to colony, the restrictions were dealt with in a uniform manner: They were revoked, watered down, or simply ignored. The interests of the merchants, traders, and settlers in the remote regions outweighed concerns about intoxicated rampages or the destruction of Indian culture.

“Little Turtle petitioned me to prohibit rum to be sold to his nation for a very good reason,” wrote former president John Adams to a friend in 1811. “He said, I had lost three thousand of my Indian children in his nation in one year by it. Sermons, moral discourses, philanthropic dissertations, are all lost upon this subject. Nothing but making the commodity scarce and dear will have any effect.” Adams was shrewd enough to know that steep prohibitory taxes on liquor would go nowhere, and critics “would say that I was a canting Puritan, a profound hypocrite, setting up standards of

morality, economy, temperance, simplicity, and sobriety that I knew the age was incapable of." Rum continued to flow. And the eastern native cultures were weakened to the point of collapse, and then beyond.

Rum had a profound if less final impact on European colonial life. By the late eighteenth century (based on imprecise figures), the *average* American over fifteen years of age consumed slightly under six gallons of *absolute* alcohol each year—the equivalent of about seventyfive fifths of rum at 80 proof, or about five shots of rum per day. (Historian John McCusker more generously estimates consumption at about seven per day.) "If the ancients drank wine as our people drink rum and cider," wrote John Adams, "it is no wonder we hear of so many possessed with devils."

Tavern account books indicated a preference for rum over all other drinks. In 1728, a group of backcountry surveyors in North Carolina reported finding rum nearly every place they ventured and marveled that some settlers even used it in the cooking of bacon. One tavern keeper's books for 1774 in North Carolina showed that of 221 customers, some 165 had ordered rum by itself, and another 41 ordered drinks that contained rum. In Philadelphia, the sales at the One Tun tavern for five months in 1770 show that drinks made with rum, including toddy, grog, and punch, outsold beer and wine combined.

Rum's chief channel of distribution was the tavern. Taverns were an established part of the American landscape from the late seventeenth century through the nineteenth century, when hotel bars displaced them. Few villages were without a public house, where travelers and locals alike could find a meal, a bed, a dram of rum, a place by the fire in winter, and drinking companions year-round.

In 1656, Massachusetts made it mandatory for every town to have a licensed tavern. This ensured judges riding the circuit a place to sleep and dine. (In New York and Maryland, laws required that

some of the rooms have “good feather beds,” presumably to accommodate the magistrates.) Throughout the colonies, taverns could be found near virtually every courthouse, and court sessions in winter were often held inside the taverns, since they were nicely preheated. Taverns could always be found near ferry landings, where they provided a place to eat and drink while awaiting the ferryman.

Taverns occupied a motley array of buildings, ranging from establishments that were almost regal (like the Blue Anchor in Boston), to crude wooden shacks with swaybacked benches in the hinterlands of the Carolinas. Tavern account books suggest that an average tavern was a converted twoor three-story home that looked not unlike nearby private homes; not until after the American Revolution was it usual to construct a building specifically for drinking. They were typically run by men, but widows were often granted licenses to convert their homes to profit-making enterprises, in large part to keep them from burdening the town with requests for charity.

Almost every aspect of tavern keeping was subject to regulation. A taverner needed a license. The vessels in which drinks were served had to be branded with its actual capacity—a tradition still seen on glasses in British pubs but long since lost in the United States. Prices for drinks were set by local officials and had to be prominently displayed in a common room. In Pennsylvania, justices of the peace set “reasonable rates”four times each year, and these were proclaimed by the town crier and then posted on the courthouse door. Local jurisdictions could be even more restrictive. The liquor license granted by the Massachusetts Bay colony to one vendor noted he could “sell strongwater at retail only to his own fishermen.” In South Carolina, tavern keepers were permitted to sell strong drink to seaman for just one hour out of any twenty-four.

Since prices were tightly regulated, ambitious tavern keepers striving to increase their income had to make their establishments more enticing than the one next door. Some hosted freak shows, with traveling curiosities paraded out for the astonishment of locals.

In 1796, a “great curiosity” was paraded at “Mr. Buddy's” tavern in Philadelphia—“a man born entirely black” and who at age thirtyeight started to become white. (“His wool is coming off his hands, face, and arms, and long hair growing in place similar to that of white persons.”) A two-foot-tall “satyr” was put on display in Philadelphia (“like a human being, observable to anyone with a shilling”). Exotic animals also made for popular diversions, and for a penny or two taverngoers might gape at moose, lions, cougars, polar bears, eightlegged and two-tailed cats, or a camel. (“It is impossible to describe the creature …,”read a newspaper advertisement for the latter. “A Curiosity never before seen, and very likely never again.”) Drinking contests were not unknown. At the Red Lion in Philadelphia, a man named Thomas Apty bet other customers that he could suck down twelve pints of fortified cider in a half hour. He won, but failed to collect his winnings, as he promptly keeled over stone dead.

Another tavern attraction, traveling waxworks, became a small mania. Popular figures included the royal family, the bishop of New York, George Washington, and a mechanized figure of a madwoman named Moll who attempted to strike those who neared her. Perhaps most famous of the mechanized waxworks was one that depicted grisly scenes from the French Revolution. As described by one newspaper, after the waxen king lays his head on the guillotine, the blade drops, “the head falls into a basket, and the lips which are at first red, turn blue. The whole is performed to life by an invisible mechanism.”

Tavern keepers had one other way to distinguish themselves. They concocted unique drinks that attracted a devoted following.

The Swedish clergyman Israel Acrelius arrived in the colonies in 1749 as provost of the Swedish congregations. He traveled widely and published his observations in 1759, after his return to Sweden. What he observed was drinking. He cataloged forty-five different

drinks, noting them as carefully as a naturalist enumerating beetles. Of these, eighteen were made of rum.

The modern cocktail is often said to owe its lineage to the nineteenth century and Jerry Thomas, regarded as the nation's first notable bartender. (He wrote the first American bar guide.) While Thomas deserves to be recognized, his lionization gives short shrift to the remarkable creativity of the colonial tavern keeper, who had access to great amounts of rum, many interesting ingredients to employ as mixers, and vast amounts of time in which to experiment.

Rum was often consumed straight up, followed by a chaser of water. It could be diluted with three parts water to one of rum to make the grog familiar to seamen, and two parts water to one of rum to make a sling. With shavings from a sugarloaf, rum and water were transformed into mimbo, a drink that was especially popular in Pennsylvania. With molasses instead of sugar, it was called bombo, named for obscure reasons after English admiral John Benbow.

Tavern account books inventory casks of various flavorings. Lime juice was perhaps the most common, then as now, but there was also cinnamon water, clove water, and mint water, the last of which when mixed with rum was believed to strengthen one's stomach. (Mint had long been used in Europe to treat various maladies.) Rum with cherry juice was cherry bounce, and when mixed with bilberries (similar to blueberries) it was called a bilberry dram. Warmed rum flavored with juniper berries was served at funerals in some middle colonies.

Little was considered off limits in mixers. Rum with milk, sugar, and nutmeg was regarded as a refreshing summer drink, which Acrelius reported was “good for dysentery and loose bowels.” Warm milk with rum and spices was syllabub. Sweetened vinegars, called beveridge, switchel, or shrub, date back to the Roman army and mixed with rum to good effect. Rum went well with hard cider; a warmed combination of the two was called a sampson. Rum mixed with a little molasses was a blackstrap.

Rum added to small beer made a drink called manatham. Spruce beer mixed with rum was a calibogus, a drink especially popular in Newfoundland and aboard ships. This could be further doctored by adding egg and sugar (to make an Egg Calli), or heated up (a King's Calli). On Captain Cook's voyage around the world, the crew made a drink similar to spruce beer from ingredients harvested at the Cape of Good Hope. To this beer they mixed rum and sugar, and reported that it tasted “rather like champagne.” They called it Kallebogus after the North American drink.

But perhaps the most famous early American rum drink was flip. The first references crop up around 1690, and by 1704 an almanac published this paean:

> *The days are short, the weather's cold*
>
> *By tavern fires tales are told.*
>
> *Some ask for dram when first come in.*
>
> *Others with flip and bounce begin.*

After two decades, flip's popularity bordered on a mania and would remain in demand for more than a century.

To make the drink, a tavern keeper started with a large earthenware pitcher or an oversized pewter mug. This would be filled about two-thirds with strong beer, to which was added some sort of sweetener—molasses, loaf sugar, dried pumpkin, or whatever else was at hand. Then came five ounces of rum, neither stirred nor shaken but mixed with a device called a loggerhead—a narrow piece of iron about three feet long with a slightly bulbous head the size of a small onion. It was originally created for heating tar or pitch, with the bulb buried in the glowing coals until it blazed red-hot, then quickly withdrawn and plunged into the pitch to make it pliable. The instrument served a similar heating function when plunged red-hot into a beer-rum-and-molasses concoction. The whole mess would foam and hiss and send up a mighty head. This alcoholic porridge was then decanted into smaller flip tumblers,

which could hold as much as a gallon each, a measure that attested to the great thirst of the early settlers.

The searing loggerhead gave flip a bitter, slightly burned taste, which was much esteemed among the colonists. (This also distinguished it from the British variation of flip, which was made by heating the mixture in a saucepan, and which failed to develop a similar cult.) There were nearly as many variations of flip as there were taverns. It was sometimes made with cider rather than beer, and often a fresh egg would be added, in which case it was called bellowstop or battered flip. Several Massachussetts taverns, including Danforth's in Cambridge and Abbott's in Holden, were famous for their flip concoctions and became popular stage stops. The best-known flip, though, was made in Canton, Massachusetts, where the tavern keeper distinguished himself from the great mass of flip pretenders. He beat together a batch of cream, eggs, and sugar, which he would ladle into the pitcher with the other ingredients. Fans reported that this gave his flip a much vaunted creaminess.

The loggerhead was sometimes called a flip-dog or a hottle. Through repeated reheatings it sometimes broke and had to be repaired by a blacksmith. The cost of the repair, we know from one Massachusetts tavern ledger, was ten ounces of West Indian rum. A person who was slightly dim would be referred to as a loggerhead—like comparing someone's intellect today to a soap dish. (“I'm sure you never heard me say such a word to such a loggerhead as you,” muttered Captain Kidd, the accused pirate, to a former shipmate who had testified against him.) Loggerheads made convenient weapons during tavern brawls, when men in their cups would grab the lethal instruments and whale away at one another, often with bloody results. While flip has wholly vanished from today's bar scene (and shouldn't be confused with a more modern drink called flip), the drink lingers in ghostly fashion each time someone speaks of adversaries being “at loggerheads.”

“It comes rolling in, hogshead after hogshead!” groused Rev. Samuel Niles of Braintree, Massachusetts, in his 1761 screed against the rise of rum and the proliferation of taverns. His was only one voice among many—although it would not be until the next century that they would all coalesce into the more organized temperance movement. In the eighteenth century, these attacks reflected the more narrow concerns of the ministry. Rum, it seemed, was quietly reshaping colonial society, and it was the ministers who had the most to lose.

The rise of strong liquors in colonial America wasn't an isolated phenomenon. Across the Atlantic in England, French brandy was coming ashore in record amounts (liquor imports would peak in England in 1733). When it was banned after an outbreak of hostilities between the nations, gin from Holland filled the gap and launched an enduring craze, with the demand soon met by British distillers. Cheap gin rampaged through the poorest urban neighborhoods, and the besotted state of London's slums was captured most famously in the series of Gin Lane etchings by William Hogarth. Between 1729 and 1751, England struggled to stem the craze, passing a series of strict laws to limit gin sales and at last gaining some control over unbridled drinking.

Rum was the gin of the New World. But it was more than a quick ticket to a fast drunk. Rum's rise marked a rite of passage for the struggling colonists. Merely by drinking it, they effectively announced a change in their role on the global stage. They were no longer a people who made do with crude and rustic beverages concocted in their own kitchens. They could now pay for valued goods with the sweat of their labor. Rum not only appealed to the colonists' love of speedy inebriation, but also brought a measure of status and suggested the first steps toward cultural independence.

It also marked an increasing independence from the old order. While the “good creature” alcohol was a friend of the clergy in the form of beer, cider, and wine, it morphed into a formidable adversary when transformed into rum. The debauchery resulting from rum drinking in taverns was a challenge to the existing social

order, perhaps nowhere as strikingly as in Puritan Massachusetts. By the early 1700s, ministers had already seen their stature begin to erode. Younger, native-born colonists were less mindful of the religious suppression that had prompted their elders to flee England and were more interested in bettering their own lives materially. They aspired not to the parsonage at the crossroads, but to the mansion near the docks. Merchants were building ostentatious homes that vastly outshone the humble houses of the ministry, and a growing number of ministers were forced to tend their own vegetable gardens in order to survive. They couldn't have afforded to enjoy rum in the taverns even if they had been so inclined.

Of course, few were so inclined. Rum was the enemy. Rum drinking, the ministers came to believe, led not only to a slackening of morals, but bred indolence and idleness, two afflictions that Puritans greeted as warmly as gout and consumption. “Idleness, the parent of every vice, has been introduced by the fatal and pernicious use of foreign spirits,” fumed a Connecticut resident in a letter to a newspaper in 1769. “Not one extravagance, among the numerous follies we have been guilty of, has been more destructive to our interests than tavern haunting, and gratifying our appetites with intoxicating liquors.” The harmless conviviality bred by beer, cider, and wine was supplanted by rum's more intractable sullenness and addiction. Rum was the snake in the garden.

The more devout led a campaign to encourage settlers to abandon rum and return to beer and cider. This, they hoped, would reverse the drift into dispiriting (if spirited) secularism and would roll back the clock to the allegedly more wholesome and industrious time of the forefathers. In the first book printed by Benjamin Franklin, in 1725, Francis Rawle complained that because of “the Depravity and Viciousness of our Palates and the so frequent use of Spirits, there has not been due Care in the Brewing of beer.”He called for higher duties on imported liquor, and the elimination of all taxes on beer and cider, thereby encouraging a return to that imaginary period of pastoral grace.

Cities like Boston actively encouraged brewers and cider makers to offer an alternative to rum. But such measures were too late. The old order had been deposed. The tavern keepers, the de facto governors of the Republic of Rum, had no intention of relinquishing their power.

A taverngoer in the early eighteenth century had to endure a great many inconveniences—rancid meat, surly company, and (if overnighting) thin straw mattresses filled with biting insects. A more insidious hazard was getting caught up in endless rounds of toast making.

The practice of toasting the health of one's king, host, or mistress — or even a stranger who has just walked through the door— apparently dates back to Elizabethan England. The origins are murky, as is the case with many rituals associated with drinking. Toasts were so popular in the late seventeenth century in England that they provoked a backlash: Pamphlets were printed attacking the practice as sacrilegious. “How can any man drink another's health,” asked one, quite sensibly, in 1682, and “by what new kind of transubstantiation can his health be converted into a glass of liquor?” The pamphlet went on to describe more than one hundred instances in which health drinkers suffered from the wrath of a put-upon God, including one group who toasted “in a strange manner” and soon after all died mysteriously.

Among the short-lived tavern regulations was one to outlaw toasts. But like the bans against rum sales to Indians, it was blithely ignored. A late-eighteenth-century French visitor to Philadelphia lamented the “absurd and truly barbarous practice, the first time you drink and at the beginning of dinner to call out successively to each individual, to let him know you drink his health.”As a result, before the toast is concluded, the person with glass held aloft is “sometimes ready to die with thirst.” Another traveler noted that dining room doors might be bolted to prevent guests from fleeing during toasts.

According to tavern historian Peter Thompson, toasts were an effort to draw all present into an agreeable fellowship, whether they wanted to be drawn in or not. At its best, the practice knitted together people from different classes into a comity of good cheer. At worst, they actually sowed conflicts by prompting those who disagreed to insult the others present by not raising a glass.

Whether taverngoers of different classes managed to bond, the early taverns were relatively egalitarian. Since regulations prevented raising prices to discourage riffraff, tavern owners sought to boost their sales by encouraging any and all to drink. As the traveling physician Alexander Hamilton learned, there was no telling who you'd find yourself sitting next to in a tavern. Congregationalists drank with Anglicans, and blacksmiths with attorneys. (One group was notably absent: women. Those who were present were mostly travelers in search of lodging.)

The tippling rooms at taverns tended to be cozy, with privacy at a minimum. As such, the business of one was the business of all. Taverns were cramped places, often low-ceilinged, and smoky from pipes and fireplace backdrafts. They became a place for the spread of pestilence, like yellow fever, which swept through the colonies with deadly regularity. But the taverns were also places in which new ideas were fermented—ideas for a new republic, in which no person should be subject to “taxation without representation.”

Despite the nostalgic portraits of some historians, taverns weren't all bonhomie and genteel discussion. They were more often a place of constant low-grade conflict, where wildly clashing ideas ricocheted around the room. Colonists learned when to keep quiet, when to speak up, when to go along for the sake of consensus, and when to make a stand and defend it—with loggerheads, if needed. The taverns, in short, offered training in policy debate and the grooming of future leaders. “Commerce and politics were so inextricably mingled that rum and liberty were but different liquors from the same still,” wrote historian Frederick Bernays Wiener in 1930.

Into these mini maelstroms, aspiring politicians and budding revolutionaries mingled, increasingly riled by the tone-deaf actions of the British Crown. John Adams was a young lawyer in the coastal Massachusetts town of Braintree in the 1760s. He launched an early and abortive crusade against taverns, of which there were a dozen in Braintree. “Few things have deviated so far from the first design of their institution, are so fruitful of destructive evils, or so needful of a speedy regulation, as licensed houses,”he groused, siding with ministers who wanted tighter reins on the rum sellers. But as Adams's prominence grew, he came to realize that taverns were a habitat in which those in search of influence could thrive. “You will find the [tavern] full of people, drinking drams, phlip, toddy,”Adams wrote. A leader had to learn to “mix with the crowd in the tavern” and develop his popularity by “agreeable assistance in the tittle-tattle of the hour.” Influence or elective office was not automatically granted those with breeding, religion, education, or connections, but by entering into the rummy world of the tavern and showing what stuff you were made of. As the Hessian mercenary Baron Friedrich Adolph Riedesel noted, “New Englanders all want to be politicians, and love, therefore, the tavern and the grog bowl, behind the latter of which they transact business, drinking from morning till night.”

As conflict with Britain loomed, a new wave of tavern reformer briefly appeared on the political landscape—those who wished to fan the flames of armed rebellion against England but were fearful that rum-addled colonists would be ill-prepared to stand up against King George. They agitated vainly to shutter the taverns to ensure a sober fighting force that was ready for resistance.

As it turned out, they had no cause to worry. Rum would prove to be the spirit of '76.

[BOMBO]

In short glass, pour *two ounces* RUM and *two ounces* fresh WATER. Add *one-half teaspoon* MOLASSES. Dust with NUTMEG.

chapter 4

[Medford Rum]

> *I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses were an essential ingredient in American independence. Many great events have proceeded from much smaller causes.*
>
> —President John Adams

Paul revere was late. “He's always late,” said Thomas Convery. Convery was eating a Danish as he peered out on the street from behind a curtain inside the Gaffey Funeral Home in Medford, Massachusetts. It was Monday, April 21, Patriot's Day, and the morning was sunny, windless, and sixty degrees. Some dozen members of the Medford High School marching band in mailbox-blue uniforms were playing “Louie, Louie” on the sidewalk with more enthusiasm than expertise. The crowd numbered about 250. Parents in baseball caps and windbreakers held small video cameras and instructed their kids to keep a respectful distance from the yellow plastic tape, which held a space open in front of the funeral home. Two or three cell phones rang out, followed by shouts to friends: Paul Revere was crossing the bridge and in a few minutes would gallop into town.

“Crowds are getting thinner every year,” Convery said. “When I was in high school, the band had one hundred and one pieces. And we *always* celebrated Patriot's Day on April 19. Not two days after, but on the nineteenth. Now it's the twentieth, the twenty-first, whenever.” His voice trailed off, as if creeping Monday-ism was a sad and incurable disease. Convery, who was seventy-eight years old, likes tradition. He was wearing his VFW hat studded with a great many pins, and had written two forthrightly titled books of

local history: *When I Was a Kid* and *I Remember When.* Convery is the one to talk to if you need to know anything about Medford As She Was.

I had called Convery a few weeks earlier to ask about the account in several history books that Paul Revere, partway into his famous midnight ride, had stopped at Isaac Hall's home and downed a dram or two of rum to fortify him on his mission to Lexington. H. F. Willkie, the brother of former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, wrote that the rum Revere drank in Medford was strong enough to make “a rabbit bite a bulldog.” In 1944, the fact-checkers of *The New Yorker* magazine signed off on a story that reported “Paul Revere had a stiff snort before starting on his midnight ride.” Another account claimed that Revere lingered long enough for “several stirrup-cups of rich, tawny Old Medford Rum,” which imparts an image of Revere making favorable comments to his host about the richly caramelized hues before mounting up and galloping off to the first battle of the American Revolution. These accounts notwithstanding, for someone as famously in a hurry as Paul Revere, it seemed an odd time for a social drink. Was it true? Convery said I should come to Medford on Patriot's Day and see for myself.

At the former home of Captain Isaac Hall, where all traces of his residency had long since been hidden under the beige carpets and acoustic tile ceilings of funeral homes everywhere, I heard footsteps treading lightly upstairs. Convery pointed toward the ceiling with his half-eaten Danish. I walked to the top of the stairway. An elderly man stood by the window, wearing a white dressing gown and a white nightcap. From my perch on the landing, I could see his brown trousers and business shoes sticking out from underneath. He was peering out the window, awaiting his cue. This was Captain Isaac Hall. Like us, he was waiting for Paul Revere.

Revere's original visit, late on the night of April 18, 1775, was wholly by accident. Revere never intended to pass through Medford. On that much everyone agrees. He was one of two messengers on that fateful night dispatched from Boston to Lexington to warn of British regulars amassing outside the city, with the intention of

confiscating colonial militia arms and seizing rebel troublemakers Sam Adams and John Hancock. The British soldiers were hoping for a surprise attack, so they planned to cross the Charles River by boat, then approach the town along a more lightly traveled route. This was the famous “two if by sea” route, with a signal sent by posting two lanterns high in Boston's North Church. Another messenger, William Dawes, was sent overland via the more heavily traveled main road. As a backup in the event Dawes was captured, Revere was dispatched across the Charles River, his oarlocks muffled with a petticoat so as not to attract the attention of sentries. Once across the river, Revere set off on a borrowed horse, galloping along a direct route from Charlestown toward Lexington.

Revere later recalled it was a “very pleasant” night, with a bright moon lighting the way. Not far outside of Charlestown, however, he stumbled upon a pair of redcoats on horseback. He quickly reversed course, the patrollers in pursuit. He outrode one; the other mired down in a muddy swale as he sought to cut off Revere's retreat. Revere then struck out on an alternate route, beating a northward arc through the village of Medford. When he arrived, accounts concur, he rapped on the door of Captain Hall, the head of the Medford minutemen. As soon as he left, Hall sent instructions to set off the calls to muster. Supporters fired guns, beat drums, and rang bells.

Did Revere really down a dram of rum while at Isaac Hall's to stiffen his resolve for the long ride? “Yes, he had a bit of the grog,” Convery told me with conviction. The evidence? Convery thought for a moment, then noted that he himself had played Captain Isaac Hall some years back, and had personally served Revere a shot of rum.“It was like paint thinner,”he said.“It made you ride to the nearest toilet.” A shot of rum had always been a local tradition for the reenactment—sometimes more than a shot. “When I was a kid,” he said, “I remember Paul getting a leg up, then going right over the top of the horse. But it's usually softer stuff today.”

How about historical evidence? Convery eyed me askance, as if I were more than a little simpleminded. “It was the only drink they

had!” he said, throwing up his hands. “If you're going to stop by the house of the distiller, you're going to get rum. They're not going to give you a Pepsi-Cola.”

The sound of sirens filled the front hall of the funeral home. Police on motorcycles arrived first, followed by a green pickup truck pulling a horse trailer. Then Paul Revere came into view, his tricornered hat bobbing up and down above the crowd. Revere, played by a reenactor named Matthew Johnson, had left Boston earlier that morning, and he had a loud, clarion call that carried over the sirens and the rising applause and hoots of the crowd. “The regulars are out! Captain, the regulars are out!” he hollered up to the second-floor window as he reined to a halt in front of Isaac Hall's house. Captain Hall hit his cue precisely, and stuck his head out the window. “Come on in,” he hollered out, then thudded down the steps.

Revere walked in, huffing and a bit flushed. “A little warm out there,” he said. He was followed by several city councilmen, the mayor, and a U.S. congressman. The group stood awkwardly in a semicircle around the pile of doughnuts and pastries on a folding table, nobody saying or eating much. “Doughnut for the ride, Paul?” someone asked. Paul eyed the pile, then demurred.

“Do you want something to drink?” Convery asked. Paul nodded, and said,“I might take a water.”He went to the cooler, uncapped a bottle of Poland Spring, and guzzled it down. “Do you want anything else?” Convery asked, expectantly.

“No, thanks,” Revere said. Then he unfastened his cape and went off to find a toilet.

Questions persist about Revere's ride, but this is known for sure: Isaac Hall made rum—a lot of it. He was one of dozens of distillers who thrived in the northern colonies and produced millions of gallons in the seven decades prior to the American Revolution.

Rum didn't just fill the holds of merchant ships returning from the West Indies. It was also one of the first mass-market products manufactured in America. By the time of the Revolution, more than half the rum consumed in the northern colonies was produced by local distillers. Indeed, rum distilling was the second most important manufacturing industry at the time, trailing only shipbuilding.

Like every grammar school student, I learned that the American Revolution was the story of thirteen aggrieved colonies rising up as one against an oppressive throne. But the rebellion was more interesting and complex than that. England actually had twenty-six colonies in the New World. Only half rose up in rebellion. To understand why, one needs to start with molasses.

The first distillery producing of any kind of liquor in the northern colonies dates to about 1640—roughly the same time rum was first produced in the West Indies. It was on Staten Island and was operated by William Kieft, a director of the Dutch colony of New Netherland. Kieft restricted the sale of wines and liquor to those sold at his tavern, the first such establishment in Manhattan. It's likely Kieft distilled brandy, and probably a coarse whiskey made of the dregs from beer making—a not uncommon way to wring extra profits from a brewery. But grain was scarce, and colonists lived in the shadow of hunger. In 1676, twelve years after the British assumed control of the colony, the governor sharply limited grain available for brewing and distilling.

What to use to make spirits? Molasses—a trash product—remained astoundingly cheap in the West Indies. This was especially true in newly settled British island colonies like Jamaica, where a rum industry hadn't been established. But island planters—who had dedicated virtually every acre of arable land to sugar cultivation—needed to import all manner of food and provisions to feed themselves and their slaves. So timber, rope, livestock, dried cod, and fresh produce sailed south. Molasses, in turn, sailed north.

Reports of rum distilling surface in Providence, Rhode Island, as early as 1684. But not until the first years of the eighteenth century did colonial rum hit its stride. Growth in rum distilling was aided by

the immigration of experienced distillers to the colonies, both from England, where competition and high taxation made liquor profits hard to come by, and from Barbados and other British West Indian islands, where freed indentured servants found themselves displaced from the scarce land and the demand for their labor greatly lessened by the new reliance on African slaves. Of those servants who sailed north, many were well versed in the craft of rum making.

Distilleries were built wherever molasses could be unloaded and stored, often by merchants who comprehended that a still or two, while an expensive investment, had a very agreeable effect on the value of imported molasses. It was modern-day alchemy—through distillation, the dull, treacly dross of molasses was converted into the gold of rum.

A colonist referring to rum prior to 1700 was likely talking about imported rum; by the first decade of the eighteenth century, he would just as likely be referring to the domestically distilled stuff. With its great trading fleet, Boston quickly moved to the forefront of the continental rum industry. Records show that in just six months of 1688, Massachusetts imported 156,000 gallons of molasses from the British West Indies, of which about half was converted into rum and the other half used for flavoring such staples as baked beans and brown bread. By 1717, a customs officer in Boston reported that the colony was producing 200,000 gallons of rum annually, which is almost certainly an underestimate. Boston had at least twenty-five distilleries operating within the city by 1750; at least another ten distilleries were producing rum in other settlements of the Massachusetts Bay colony.

Massachusetts didn't have a monopoly on the rum industry. Rhode Island was home to 20 rum distilleries, New York to 17, and Philadelphia to 14. (A merchant with the splendid name of Peacock Bigger built successful distilleries in both Philadelphia and Charlestown, Maryland.) The smell of fermenting molasses could also be detected in New Hampshire (3 distilleries), Connecticut (5), and Maryland (4). The southern colonies, with their tobacco plantation economy, didn't have as active a merchant class. But even

there 4 rum distilleries were built (in the Carolinas and Virginia). In 1763, by some estimates, New England alone had a total of 159 distilleries producing rum. (A more conservative tally finds maybe half that number in New England, but around 140 distilleries on the continent as a whole.) In any event, by 1770, the North American colonists were importing some 6.5 million gallons of molasses from the islands, which was distilled into about 5 million gallons of rum.

The New England merchants who took up distilling were not rum connoisseurs. They bought molasses cheap and sold the rum equally cheaply. “New England rum” was widely regarded as a lowpriced, low-quality version of better-regarded West Indian product. (Domestic rum typically cost one-half to two-thirds the price of rum imported from the West Indies.) One Baltimore merchant, William Lux, noted that “people seem to be more inclin'd to encourage the [local] country rum as it is so much cheaper,” so he sensibly changed his trade from rum importer to rum distiller.

The quality of the rum was determined by the whims of the market. Rising demand for molasses to make rum led to periodic shortages. Distillers could make do by using less in the fermentation process, but this resulted in a harsher rum.(Connecticut banned such hurried distillation, noting that “by said practice molasses is made scarce and dear, and the spirits drawn off …are usually very unwholesome, and of little value.”) In flush times, the price of rum would drop and likewise create an incentive to reduce costs by cutting back on the molasses.

Such economy was not uncommon. One visitor wrote that New England distillers were “more famous for the quantity and cheapness than for the excellency of their rum.” There were even efforts to doctor domestic rum to make it pass for imported. One eighteenthcentury advertisement promised to teach “the invaluable secret of changing the quality of Philadelphia and New-England rum to that of West India … at the trifling expense of only your honour and veracity …” Philadelphia merchant Isaac Norris wrote to a companion in 1702 that the local rum “only wants to age to taste

well,”but lamented that his customers could not be persuaded to pay more for it, as it lacked “the right rum stink.”

As BOSTON GREW and became more costly, industries migrated to communities with large tracts of cheap land: shipbuilding to Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Newburyport, Massachusetts; and elsewhere; butchers and tanners to Lynn, Massachusetts. Newport absorbed much of Boston's rum business, the profits from which it used in part to finance slave-trading voyages to Africa. A distillery was built on the island of Nantucket, whose experienced ship captains were well positioned to benefit from the Newfoundland trade. A former Bostonian moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and there erected a “large distillery works,”putting it in good position to divert much of the rum trade in the Maritimes.

Boston also lost business closer to home. Watertown, Haverhill, Salem, and Charlestown soon were home to thriving distilleries. But only one town rose to uncommon prominence in the rum world: the riverside village of Medford, the fourth oldest in Massachusetts, founded in 1630.

You could go hunting for traces of Medford's once-bustling distillery industry today—as I recently did—but you would find little. A couple of copper kettles gather dust atop a tall shelf at the local historical society. And what's quaintly called Distiller's Row in downtown Medford—where a half-dozen distilleries once filled the air with the aroma of casked rum and fermenting molasses—you'll now find a parking garage and a charmless strip of shops that includes the Wound Healing Center, a CVS drugstore, and a Korean restaurant. The city's Web site notes, with commendable candor, that today “Medford is probably the most untalked about city in the United States.”

Yet at its peak in the mid-eighteenth century, Medford was very much talked about. The rum industry first took root sometime between 1715 and 1720, when John Hall constructed a still near the village spring, which bubbled up with sweet, abundant water. Other