Chapter I

[KILL-DEVIL]

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 agua-diente, or "burning water"), or by Portuguese colonists on the coast of Brazil (where it would later be called cachaca). Or possibly it was first distilled by the French on one of their Caribbean island strongholds (where the poorer grades of mm 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 tinkerer 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 mm: 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 Joselynn 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 fastened 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 fusdie 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 £50 trip traded passage and hoard 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 DUX — 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 171.5, 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
crushed grapes left alone turn to wine, and apple cider left untended turns hard. Fermentation will slow and eventually cease when a hatch 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 schnapssteufeln ("schnaps fiends"), and the first known taxes on liquor were imposed. During the Black Death of 1348 and later plagues, alcohol was Cequently (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
And a Bottle of Rum

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 scumings 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 pounds 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 scumings 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 scumings 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 wailable. 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 marrick 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 distiller. 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 well-managed 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 seed 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 produced 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 cistern, 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.") Allow and even tire 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 wind-powered 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...
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diet. Few other jobs were available; landowners had made the discovery that slaves imported from Africa could perform the work of sugar and 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, qualifying 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 ou 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 be-nighted 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 kill-devil “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 now imported molasses almost nowhere 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 burnished 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 burls 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 1791. 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 sippler 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 mixture 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 archipelagos 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 balance.

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 Arab 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 devours 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 viscous, 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 he 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 viscous, but rather "thinner and paler than in our own countries." 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 mid- and 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 killdyvel, and to the French, who pronounced it guioldive, 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 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 rumbhooze (or rambhooze) 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 hulk 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.