



2017-08

Making Rum

In the colonial era, the production of rum happened primarily in the Caribbean using sugar cane juice. As the demand in the American colonies grew an increasing amount of product occurred in New England using imported molasses.

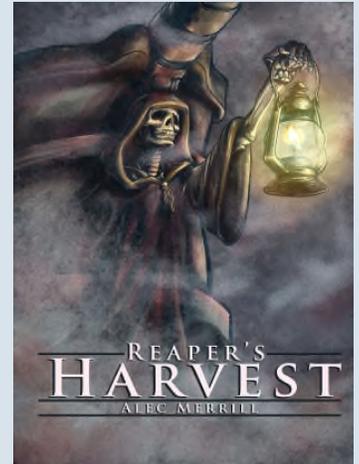
Step 1 in the process is the requirement to obtain sugar cane juice. This was accomplished by harvesting sugar cane by hand using a machete. It was hard work in the moist heat of the West Indies. Finding men willing to do this work was difficult, so plantation owners increasingly relied on slave labour. Once harvested, the cane went to a mill for crushing to extract the juice from the sugar cane stalks. Once extracted, the juice was immediately processed. The residual crushed pulp was often used as fuel in the distilling process.

Step 2 involves a decision of what to do with the juice. Plantation owners could immediately use the juice in the production of rum, or they could cook down and concentrate the sugar cane juice into syrup. There was a subtle difference between the two, because the juice required rapid processing of some sort before spoiling. At the time of harvest a large volume of juice meant rushed fermentation and distilling, whereas the syrup allowed fermentation and distillation whenever the plantation owner wished. The plantation owner also had the option of processing the juice into molasses or crystallized sugar. The sugar was sold as a sweetener. The molasses had several uses for cooking and could be fermented at a later time to make rum.

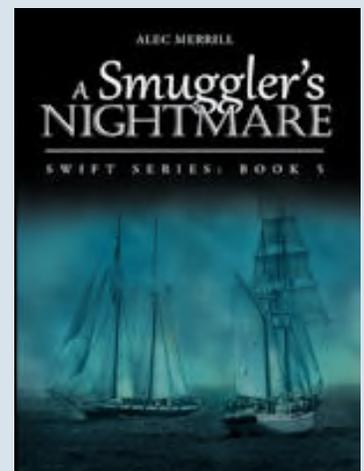
Step 3 involves the fermentation of the product. Each plantation owner or distillery had their own unique way of fermenting the product. The duration of fermentation varies from several hours to two weeks. The fermentation might range from "natural" which allowed the product to naturally ferment in open vats to the insertion of various yeast cultures to stimulate the fermentation. The type and duration of fermentation has a significant impact on the amount of alcohol content and taste to some degree. The taste is also altered by the type of fermentation completed. Rum made directly from fermented sugar cane juice is much different from rum made using fermented molasses. Hence many people paid a premium for Jamaican rum compared to New England rum.

Step 4 involves the distilling of the product. The fermented liquid is heated in a sealed vessel to approximately 175 degrees Fahrenheit, evaporating the alcohols from the liquid. The alcohols are then re-condensed and collected, yielding the raw spirit. This tends to be the critical stage of the process as success depends on a number of factors.

Step 5 is the production of the raw spirit into a marketable product. Depending upon the distillation process used, the raw spirit contains between 70% to 95% alcohol by volume. The distiller might bottle and sell the product in that state. Others may age the rum for some time. Different batches of rum might be blended together or have herbs, spices or fruits blended in to alter the taste although this was rare in colonial ages. Water was also added to dilute the rum and increase the volume which meant more barrels were shipped.



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