

# German Rum Fest a worthy showcase

Vikram Achanta takes us on a tour of German Rum Fest which has seen enormous expansion since its inception five years ago.



This is the fifth year of the German Rum Fest (October 3-4), and Dirk Becker, the founder, is already looking ahead to the next year, as the festival has expanded by leaps and bounds. When I meet Becker, who is also German Rum Ambassador, he tells me that Germany is the largest rum market in the EU, and it makes sense for rum companies to be here. Becker's passion for rum takes him around the country (and the world).

The venue for the Rum Fest is Station Berlin, which as the name suggests is an old train station remodelled as an exhibition venue. The bulk of the Fest action happens in one large hall, which has a stage in the middle for larger format talks and tastings. On either side of the stage are two tasting rooms, located at levels above, for smaller tastings. At the

entrance, you are handed a programme guide, a tasting glass, and five tasting tokens. You are supposed to hand over a token for every tasting that you do, and pay directly for extra tastings. But only one of my tokens was actually taken by a stall. The rest of them just shrugged it off. There is also a rum shop at the entrance, selling the bulk of the rums, which are on exhibition.

## RUMS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Rum brands are gathered here from around the world, from Africa's Starr to the rums of the West Indies, Belize (Alfred's Trail), South America (Brazil with Cachaca, Costa Rica...), the Cayman Islands, USA and, as I discover, Japan! And, backing up the brands are in many cases global brand ambassadors like Marco De La Roche

from LeblonCachaca or brand owners like Nelson Walker of Seven Fathoms Rum, whose passion for rum has driven them to create new brands. Then there is Yoshihara Takeuchi of Nine Leaves rum from Japan, who during an engrossing tasting says, "I did not want to create another Japanese whisky; instead, I chose rum, which is very small in Japan".

I have a brief chat at the entrance with Christian Lehnert, who looks after Business Development at the Rum Fest. I seek his advice on the tasting sessions I should not miss. He refers me to the Don Pancho stall, where a single cask has been shipped over, and bottles are being filled with this rum.

My first port of halt is the Sailor Jerry stand, where I have a taste of their spiced rum. I tell the bartenders manning the stall that we are yet to see Sailor

Jerry in India, but I am hoping that the brand owners, William Grant and Sons, make it available soon. Sailor Jerry has only one variant so far, but they are due to launch an overproof version later in the year.

From Sailor Jerry, I walk across and meet Marco at the Leblon Cachaca stall, who tells me about the rise of small batch and artisanal Cachacas, which he hopes will follow a similar trend we have seen with sipping tequilas. I taste the Leblon Cachaca Clear, which is used more for cocktails, but the star is the Reserva, which is aged in new Limousin oak casks for two years, and tastes distinctly like Cognac! He also shares with me Cedilla, a liqueur made with

the Acai berry, whose base is Leblon Cachaca.

My next halt is at the Rums of Venezuela stall, where I find out that the excellent rum I know as Diplomatico, has to be renamed as Botucal for the German market due to copyright issues with another pre-existing brand in the German market. Botucal also has a large separate presence at the Fest, and I interact with Miguel Diaz, their branding co-ordinator. I inform Miguel about the tasting session we had organised for Diplomatico at the 7th Food and Grocery Forum in Mumbai, and he was pleasantly surprised. I taste the Reserva, which is aged for up to 12 years, and is excellent rum.

## RUMS AGEING AT THE SEA BOTTOM

"Which is the pirate's favourite letter?" asks Nelson Walker, the owner and founder of Seven Fathoms Rum (Cayman Islands), as he flags off his tasting session. Nelson is owner of a chain of liquor stores, and after years of selling other people's brands, decided to branch out into his own brand.

Products need a USP, especially rums launching from the Caribbean, and Nelson found his in ageing his rum in casks at the bottom of the sea, quite literally seven fathoms deep. The casks are tethered by ropes to the bottom of the sea, and the barrel agitation by the ocean, says Nelson, ensures that



Bailey Pryor (L) of Reid McCoy



Dirk Becker, founder, German Rum Fest



Yoshihara Takeuchi of Nine Leaves



Sailor Jerry



Filling from the Don Pancho Single Barrel



Grub Hub

two years underwater ageing is the equivalent of 5-7 years on land. He is also experimenting with ageing casks at greater depths, and friendly oceanic research vessels (no doubt paid in rum!) are dropping casks to as low as 20 fathoms!

The diving helmet is the big, bold logo you will see on Nelson's bottles, and whether the underwater ageing is a marketing gimmick or not, I don't know but the rum tastes delicious. I ask Nelson, what the equivalents of the Angels share is underwater, and it's ~4% a year he says. "Let's call it Neptune's Share," says he! The answer to the question he posed at the beginning of the talk? "C" :)

My friend, Ulric Nijs, brand ambassador for Gold Rums of Mauritius, is unfortunately indisposed and cannot be at the show. He has asked me to meet Susanne at the stand, and I drop in and say hi, as she gets me to taste a rum, which she knows Ulric would want me to try! For a break between the rums, I pick up a Dark and Stormy slushy made with Don Papa Rum. In the middle of the tasting floor, a promoter mans two large slushy tanks, one with an Atlantico Daiquiri and the other with the Dark and Stormy. For 3 Euros, it makes for a nice break between rums. And there are lots of comfy sofas scattered around for such a break.

The big brands are all well represented, with large stalls from

Bacardi and Havana Club, and a smaller one for Diageo's Ron Zacapa. Many stalls also are kitted out with cocktail essentials. By the evening, the mixologists, who until then had just been pouring tasting measures, could finally let loose their creative energies, and start mixing up some cocktails. Some of the stalls are quite imaginatively designed and Tres Hombres rum has a ship-shaped stall.

On the main stage in the middle, Bailey Pryor, film maker and also co-founder of the Real McCoy Rum, takes us back to the prohibition era, and how the goods supplied by a legendary bootlegger named Bill McCoy were so good (as in unadulterated), it gave rise to the popular phrase, "The Real McCoy", which now denotes something which is genuine. Bailey used this story as inspiration to create rum of the same name, and also went to great lengths to track down the legend and verify its authenticity. He found the graves of two of Bill's siblings on lands, but not Bill's, and came to the conclusion that Bill was buried at sea. I'd always thought that Bill McCoy was a fictional character, but Bailey has me nearly convinced!

**'SINCERELY MADE, RUM FROM JAPAN'**

I chose to end my stint at the Rum Fest with a fascinating talk by Takeuchi San, founder of Nine Leaves Rum from Japan. Takeuchi San makes his rum in the style

of whisky and double distils the rum, using pot stills (imported from Scotland). He has a micro-distillery, with a capacity of 6000 litres, and produces to order. All his ingredients are from Japan, with the sugarcane from Okinawa, spring water (water source is 50 metres underground) and special domestic yeast. He runs the distillery himself, which means that as he is currently in Berlin, the distillery is shut!

We start the tasting with white rum, made from 100% sugarcane, and which tastes like no other white rum I've tasted before. The second and third rum are both aged in oak barrels for six months, one in French oak barrels and the other in American oak barrels. As he says, when people ask him for what the difference is between the two, he says that the French oak one is "Madame" and the American oak one is "Mademoiselle"!

The last rum we taste has been aged for a year in red wine casks from Wente vineyards in Napa Valley and is slightly darker in colour than the 2nd and 3rd, which were fairly mild in taste. The name of the rum comes from his family crest, which features nine bamboo leaves. Earlier, Takeuchi San used to work in the automotive business and came to rum making out of a passion for spirits. As his brand tagline says, "Sincerely made, rum from Japan", the German Rum Fest is a worthy showcase to entrepreneurs like him, driven by passion to blaze new trails. ☺