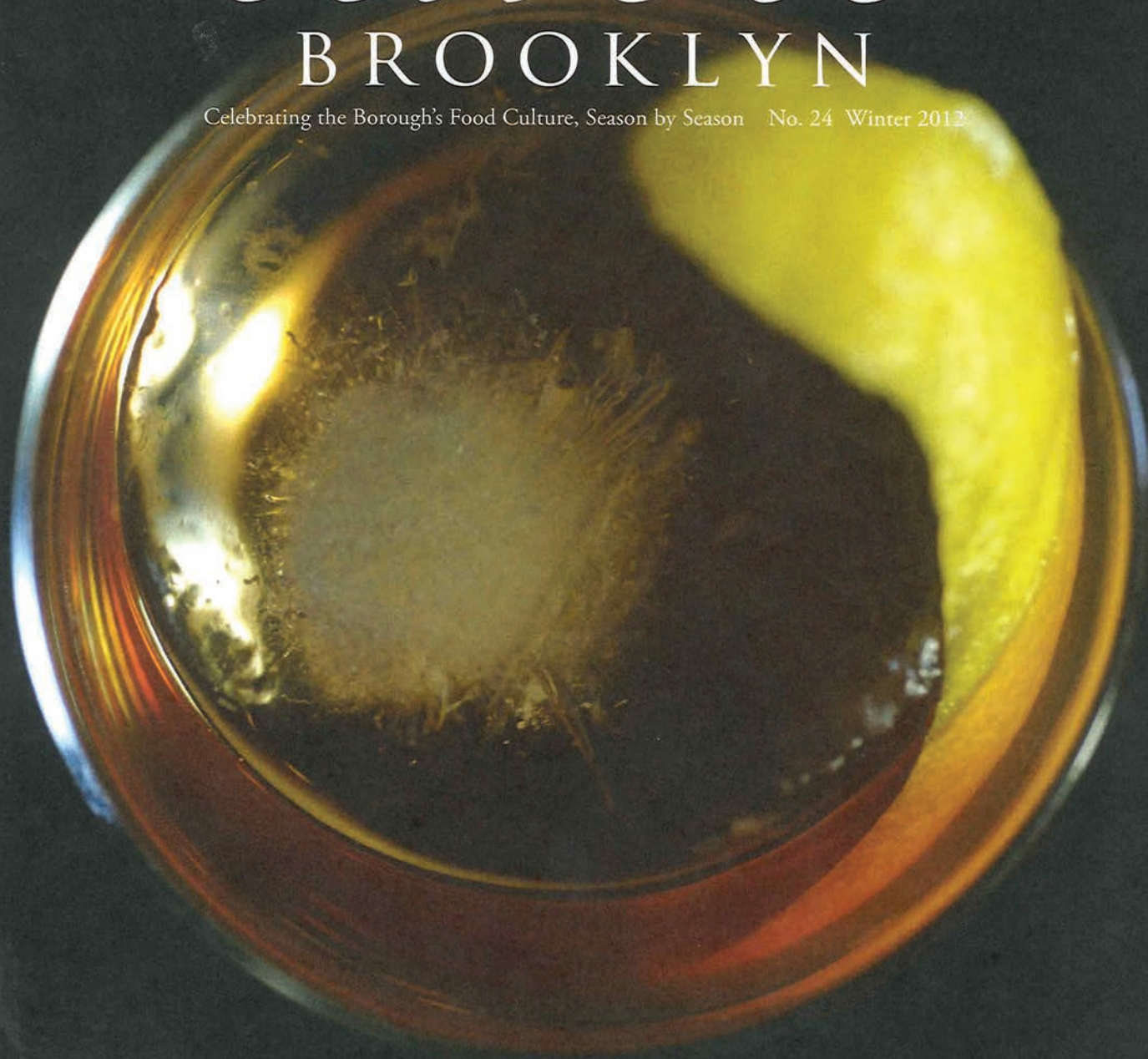


# *edible* BROOKLYN

Celebrating the Borough's Food Culture, Season by Season No. 24 Winter 2012



## THE ALCOHOL ISSUE

SPIRIT OF THE SUGARCANE • BASH IN BUSHWICK  
SOLSTICE CELEBRATION • DEFINING NATURAL WINE  
LIMONCELLO'S LEGACY

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## BEHIND THE BOTTLE

# MADE IN MARTINIQUE, IMBIBED IN BROOKLYN

*Mixologists are sweet on rhum agricole, a spirit made from fresh sugarcane.*

BY NANCY DAVIDSON

"The fermentation has to be started right away," Benjamin Mélin-Jones explained over Ti' Punch at the Richardson, a celebrated speakeasy in Williamsburg. "Rhum agricole is produced from fresh sugarcane juice immediately upon harvest—that's what makes it so delicious."

He ought to know—and not only because he's the U.S. representative for two of the best-known brands of the spirit, but also because he's a fourth-generation descendent of Homère Clément, who is credited with inventing it.

Rhum Agricole AOC is made only on Martinique, the tiny French island in the West Indies with a tropical climate, volcanic soil and laid-back lifestyle. But in 2005, it started showing up in Brooklyn. Bartenders here embraced it as a delicious alternative to traditional rums—albeit for entirely different reasons than those which originally inspired its development 125 years ago.

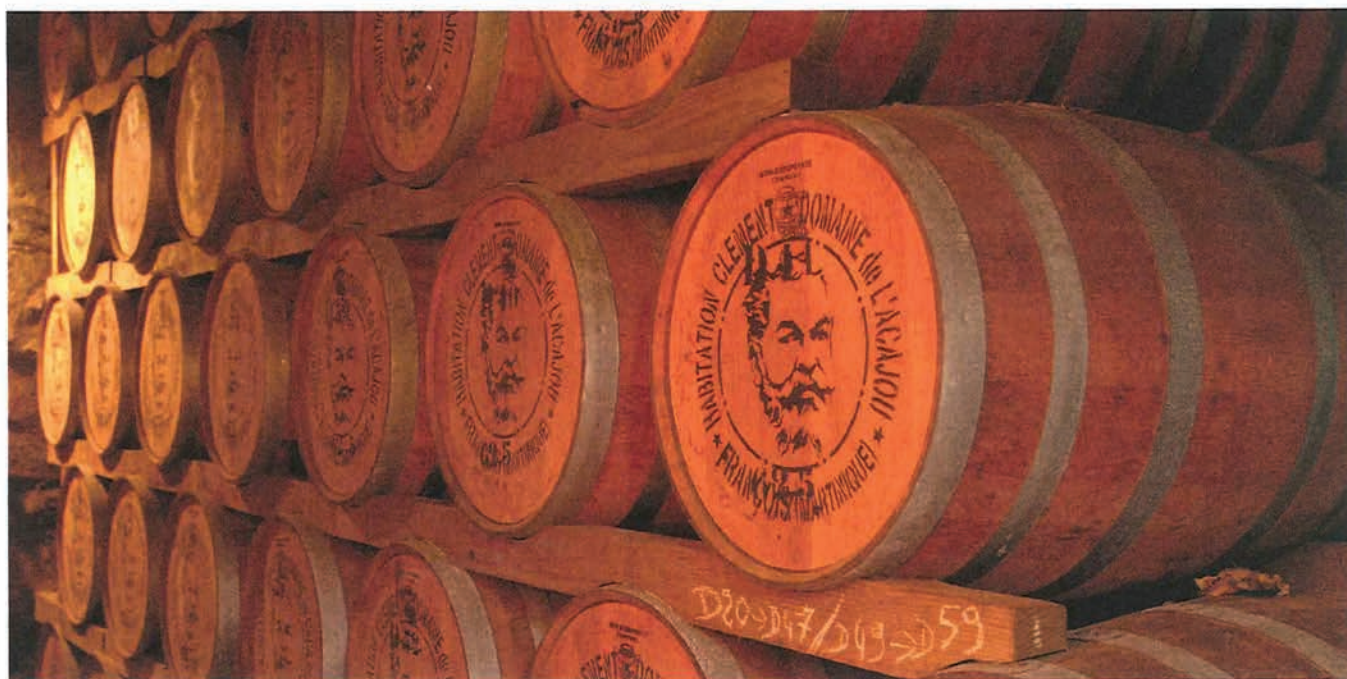
As you likely know, molasses is a byproduct of sugar production. The sticky sweet substance was typically tossed, until someone discovered that it could be fermented and distilled into a not unpleasant alcohol: rum. Hence Wayne Curtis's frank explanation in his book *And a Bottle of Rum*, that if brandy is the distilled essence of

wine and whiskey the distilled essence of beer, rum is "the distilled essence of industrial waste."

In the late 1880s, competition from cheap sugar made from beets shook the Caribbean sugarcane-based economy. In 1887, Homère Clément, the mayor of Le François in Martinique and Mélin-Jones's artisan-minded ancestor, had the revolutionary idea of making the crop directly into a new kind of rum. Rather than starting with molasses, he used something he now had in utter abundance: fresh sugarcane. Following the procedures for producing Armagnac, he fermented fresh sugarcane juice into a free-run wine and then distilled it in a single-column copper still. Over a century later, the artisan spirit is still made in much the same way.

Known in French as *rhum agricole*—to distinguish it from *rhum industrielle*, made in large quantities from molasses—the spirit is made throughout the French West Indies, including Martinique, Guadeloupe and St. Barts. But the spirit distilled in Martinique,

**Skip the Molasses.** French speakers in the West Indies call the drink *rhum agricole*—not to be confused with *rhum industrielle*, which is made in large quantities from sugar's sticky by-product.



Photograph: Courtesy Habitation Clément





Photograph: Courtesy Habitation Clément

where production first began, has long been regarded as the finest, and distillers there sought to have its provenance protected. In 1996, rum agricole from Martinique received the AOC (*Appellation d'origine contrôlée*) designation in France, subject to rigid standards like those for Cognac and Champagne. Indeed the *rum vieux* (aged rum), stored from 3 to 10 years or more, ranges in color from light amber to translucent mahogany. The flavor can be nutty, spicy, caramel, buttery with a velvet texture, reminiscent of French brandies.

In 2005 two importers brought rum agricole to the attention of discriminating American mixologists and imbibers. Benjamin Mélin-Jones began representing Rhum Clément and Rhum J. M. in the United States, and Edward Hamilton (author of *ministryofrum.com*) began importing brands of rum agricole including Neissen and La Favorite.

They received a warm welcome. Mélin-Jones says Brooklyn bartenders especially took to rum agricole's unique, pure flavor and vegetal and floral notes—as did connoisseurs of small-batch bourbons, single malts and fine tequilas. “The Cognac drinker, used to paying \$50 or more for a bottle, for the same money can buy aged rums that are over-delivering in value, with a complex and sophisticated flavor profile,” he said.

One of the finest incarnations is Rhum J. M., named for Jean-Marie Martin, who owned the sugar-plantation-turned-rhumerie over a century ago. In 1845, he was already famous as a great rum distiller. Today they distill a single-domain rum agricole AOC, made only from their own sugarcane (think farmstead cheese).

“The result,” explained Jones, who also represents Rhum J. M., “is a rum agricole that is cream of the crop, coming from a very unique microclimate, growing on the face of the volcano, ultra concentrated. At a higher elevation, there's a contrast in temperatures between morning and evening and more exposure to tropical sea breezes. It's very hot and humid and also very lush. There's usually a cloud cover that blocks the sun a bit and slows down the maturation, and the sugarcane flourishes there.”

“The fact that J. M. grows and harvests all of their own sugar-



Photograph: Max Flatow

**Cane to cocktail.** “The fact that J. M. grows all of their own sugarcane has always been impressive to me,” said Joel Lee Kulp, owner of The Richardson, shown bottom right and left on facing page. Fellow converts include Karl Wurst at the Brooklyn Wine Exchange, top left, and Maxwell Britten at Masion Premiere, top right.

cane has always been impressive to me,” said Joel Lee Kulp, owner and general manager of the Richardson and an unrepentant rum agricole enthusiast. Because Rhum J. M. is single domain, the production is limited, typically to between 60,000 and 65,000 liters a





Photographs: Max Flatow





Photograph: Max Flatow

Joel Lee Kulp, owner of The Richardson, says the spirit has little in common with its commercial cousin. “And at 100-proof,” he laughs, “it goes down waaaay too easy.”

season, including blanc (raw, white rum), paille (gold rum), VSOP (a blend of 4- and 5-year-old rums) and Millesime (Vintage 1997 rum), bottled at 10 years (cask strength).

Hotel Delmano in Williamsburg says one client is particularly enamored of Rhum J. M. VSOP. “We have this one girl who always comes in by herself and orders a Rhum J. M. VSOP neat and is always reading Kafka or something like that. She is a total babe and all the guys at the bar have a crush on her,” said the bar’s booze buyer, Andy Simmons.

Kulp says rhum agricole has little in common with its commercial cousin: “The fresh, bright, grassy quality of the sugarcane shines through the high alcohol content, making it truly something special,” he said. “I honestly don’t really even view rhum agricole as ‘rum,’ but rather a category all unto itself.”

Delmano’s Simmons prefers rhum agricole in a classic daiquiri. What does the spirit add to the cocktail? “Magic,” he said. “Most rum can seem one-noted in a cocktail. Rhum agricole is layered, elegant and can stand up to just about anything you can throw in a mixing glass.”

Kulp agrees: “If you substitute a rhum agricole for traditional

white rum in any classic cocktail, you get a *completely* different drink. For instance, a traditional daiquiri will, indeed, be a wonderful drink when made with a rhum agricole, but it changes the flavor profile of the drink so drastically, I believe you haven’t made a traditional daiquiri at all. And this is a good thing!”

He also favors the liquor in a Cuba Libre, again admitting it needs a new name. “Perhaps we should call it ‘Vive La Martinique?’” Whatever it goes by, he mixes White Rhum J. M., fresh lime juice, Angostura bitters and cola. “And at 100 proof,” he laughs, “it goes down waaaay too easy.”

Julie Reiner, owner of Lani Kai, the Flatiron Lounge and the Clover Club (see p. 69), has at least one rhum agricole cocktail on the list at each location at any time. “Niessen is my favorite brand,” she said recently. “It has a funk to it that really gives the cocktail so much more depth and flavor than a white rum.”

Ingredient-driven eaters might not be surprised that such qualities are found in a spirit that started as a fresh crop, rather than industrial waste. “Within one hour, the sugarcane is crushed and fermentation is started,” says Mélin-Jones. “This is the way to get all the natural flavors.” ☺